

**IMMEDIACY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD
WITTGENSTEIN, THE PROBLEM OF LIFE
AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE “PROBLEMATIC”**

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*Here one can only describe and say:
this is what human life is
Ludwig Wittgenstein
(Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough)¹*

ABSTRACT: The paper intends to clarify the use that Wittgenstein makes, in various moments and contexts, of the adjective “problematic” and of the adjective-used-as-a-noun “the problematic”, as well as to demonstrate that this clarification may teach a lot on the aims and spirit of Wittgenstein’s philosophical method. Particularly, the paper drives at exposing (a) that what Wittgenstein names “the disappearing of the problematic” is, at one and the same time, his primary ethical goal and the main purpose of his philosophic method; (b) that referring to this purpose, both ethical and philosophical, one can better understand some peculiar aspects of his philosophical method, in particular his repetitive claim of immediacy, which shall be identified with the invitation that covers his entire philosophy: “to regard what appears so obviously incomplete, as something complete”.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; philosophical method; problem; ethics; immediacy

Premise

The scholarly literature on Wittgenstein rarely points out the use that – at different times and places in his writings – he makes of the adjective “problematic” (*problematisch*) and of the adjective-used-as-a-noun “the problematic” (*das Problematische*). In this essay, I would like to amend this (partial) inattention,² particularly believing that a clarification of this use can teach a lot, both in general and in detail, on the aims and spirit of Wittgenstein’s philosophical method.

More in depth, in the first two sections I would like to demonstrate that (1) it is exactly the disappearing of the problematic which constitutes the principal aim of

(his) philosophical method, while at the same time the disappearing of the problematic is (his) principal ethical aim too; an aim that – may one be a professional philosopher or not – is fulfilled when one is “in agreement with the world” (Wittgenstein 1979, 75; 8 July 1916),³ that is, when one lives what another passage of the *Notebooks 1914-1916* calls “the life of knowledge”;⁴ in the last section I shall show (2) that it is precisely this aim (the disappearing of the problematic) that may clarify why it is philosophically so important to Wittgenstein (a) to reject that “contemptuous attitude⁵ towards the particular case” which, in his analysis, stems from the idea that the particular case is incomplete (Wittgenstein 1969a, 18-19) and (b) to renounce – as difficult as it may be – all theory in order “to regard what appears so obviously incomplete, as something complete” (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §723).

Wittgenstein’s philosophy, if regarded from the perspective of its method, contains – we may say or maintain synthetically – a kind of peculiar call to immediacy: immediate is what we look at as complete, although incomplete (“obviously incomplete”) it may seem, if considered from the perspective of theory (of science or of metaphysics; that is, of philosophy as a science). To the scientist or the metaphysicist that

³ “In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what ‘being happy’ means” (Wittgenstein 1979, 75; 8 July 1916). “I am in agreement with the world” means, in the language of religion, “I am doing the will of God”. (Wittgenstein 1979, 75).

⁴ “The good conscience is the happiness that the life of knowledge preserves. / The life of knowledge is the life that is happy in spite of the misery of the world. / The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world. / To it the amenities of the world are so many graces of fate” (Wittgenstein 1979, 81; 13 August 1916). The knowledge implied in the expression “the life of knowledge” isn’t, evidently, scientific knowledge. Let’s recall here that, according to the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, “[p]hilosophy is not one of the natural science”; indeed, “[p]hilosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity” whose aim is “the logical clarification of thoughts” (Wittgenstein 1974, 4.111 and 4.112).

⁵ It is by no means irrelevant that, in order to describe the philosophical behaviour he wants to resist, Wittgenstein makes use of an adjective (“contemptuous”) and a noun (“contempt”), which are markedly ethical.

¹ Wittgenstein 1993, 121.

² With regard to the Wittgensteinian notion of (philosophical) problem see Kuusela 2008.

affirm: If you don't complete it, you won't understand it, indeed Wittgenstein wants to reply and induces us to rebuke: “If you complete it, you falsify it” (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §257). Hence, that of Wittgenstein is not a philosophy of immediacy, even though a call to immediacy is one means of his philosophical method.

Wittgenstein and the problem of life

As far as our aim is concerned, the first occurrence of the adjective “problematic” is in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, more precisely in an annotation of July 6, 1916. In this context the adjective “problematic”, referred to life and its meaning,⁶ appears in a question that is almost the *Leitmotiv* of many annotations in these difficult months of Wittgenstein's life:⁷ “But is it possible for one so to live that life stops being problematic?” (Wittgenstein 1979, 74).⁸ As becomes clear in the subsequent annotation, to ask whether it is possible to live as if life ceased to be problematic means for Wittgenstein to ask if (and how) it may be possible to live “in eternity and not in time” (Wittgenstein 1979, 74). However, we ourselves could ask, why a life in time should be problematic? And in what respect and what for a life in eternity would be any different from a life in time? And what does it mean to live in eternity?

⁶ In this regard, see also the annotation of June 11, 1916: “What do I know about God and the purpose of life? / I know that this world exists. / [...] / That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning (*Sinn*)” (Wittgenstein 1979, 72-73).

⁷ We should keep in mind that already in August 1914, that is, at the outbreak of World War I, Wittgenstein volunteered in the Austrian–Hungarian army and that since then he had actively taken part to the warfare on the Eastern front, often in difficult and dangerous conditions. With regard to Wittgenstein's war experience and the meaning it may hold see McGuinness 1988, 204-266.

⁸ It deserves to be noted that this question resonates in a famous paragraph of the *Philosophical Investigations*, although this time with regard to philosophy and not to life: “The real discovery [in philosophy] is the one [...] that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §133).

The answer between the lines of the *Notebooks 1914-1916* is that someone definitely lives in time, when oscillating with regard to the meaning of life, between “not anymore” and “not yet”, between nostalgia of a supposedly lost meaning and hope of a meaning yet to be discovered.⁹ In any case, what appears relevant to notice is that the solution to the problem of life – both for the one who looks back at the origin and for the one that observes the future – is (supposing it is) never in the life that we are *now* living. It may be clear, then, why living “in eternity” or living “eternally” are the same to Wittgenstein as living “in the present”, of course “[i]f by eternity is understood non infinite temporal duration but non-temporality” (Wittgenstein 1979, 75); but it may even be possible to understand how he could write, in an annotation a month earlier, that there is only one way to become “independent of the world – and so in a certain sense master it – by renouncing any influence on happenings (*auf die Geschehnisse*)” (Wittgenstein 1979, 73; June 1916).¹⁰ As a matter of fact, those who try to influence the events necessarily live in time; that is, between the hope that events shall correspond to their desires and that they shall serve to fulfil their projects, and the fear that these events may miss the former and fail the latter. After all, as pointed out by the *Tractatus* in

⁹ Both nostalgia as well as hope are accompanied by fear: the fear of a permanent loss of that sense or the fear that sense will never be discovered. It is indeed for this reason that “[w]hoever lives in the present lives without fear and hope” (Wittgenstein 1979, 76; 14 July 1916).

¹⁰ This annotation recalls other annotations which date back to the late Summer of 1914 and are now published in the so-called *Geheimene Tagebücher*: “Nur eines ist nötig: Alles, was einem geschieht, betrachten”; “Habe mir gestern Vorgenommen, *keinen Widerstand zu leisten*”; “Mein Vorhaben der vollkommenen Passivität habe ich noch nicht recht ausgeführt”; “Zur vollkommenen Passivität habe ich mich noch nicht entschlossen” [“Just one thing is necessary: To observe everything, that happens to someone”; “Obliged myself yesterday, *not to make any resistance*”; “Did not yet carry out my plan of absolute passivity”; “I did not yet make up my mind to absolute passivity”] (Wittgenstein 1991, annotations of August 25, 26 and 29 and of September 6, 1914).

one of its most suggestive passages, "[e]ven if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.374).¹¹ Desires, one should say, are merely prayers.

A second occurrence of the adjective "problematic" as well as of the adjective-used-as-a-noun "the problematic" can be found in a remark now published in *Culture and Value*. The first three paragraphs of this remark, dated 27 August 1937, read as follows:

Slept a bit better. Vivid dreams. A bit depressed; weather & state of health. / The solution of the problem you see in life is a way of living which makes what is problematic disappear. / The fact that life is problematic means that your life does not fit life's shape (*die Form des Lebens*). So you must change your life, & once it fits the shape, what is problematic (*das Problematische*) will disappear (Wittgenstein 2006, 31).

As in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, here too Wittgenstein deals with the problem of life,¹² although the diagnosis is – at least partially – different:¹³ in 1916, problematic is the life of those who live "in time"; in 1931, problematic becomes – so it seems – the life that "does not fit life's shape". However, there is the same belief that life's problem is not of a scientific or cognitive nature¹⁴ and

¹¹ Indeed, Wittgenstein continues saying, "there is no logical connexion between the will and the world, which could guarantee it, and the supposed physical connexion itself is surely not something that we could will" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.374). Proposition 6.374 is a comment on proposition 6.37: "There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is *logical necessity*".

¹² Obviously the circumstances differed a lot. In 1931 Wittgenstein was in Cambridge with a fellowship, thus in a condition which – at least at an outward look – was very different from the one he found himself in 1916. With regard to this period of Wittgenstein's life, see Monk 1991, 255-280.

¹³ Even the formulation is slightly different: "the problem of life" becomes here "the problem you see in life".

¹⁴ "It is certainly not the solution of any problems of natural science that is required" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.4312). "The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.4321).

the certainty that its solution does not depend on a major or better knowledge of facts, be they physical, biological, psychological, historical etc. Hence, life is not a problem because we still don't know enough or because we ignore many things yet, about ourselves, nature, history etc. Indeed, as can be found in the *Tractatus*, "[h]ow things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.432).¹⁵ It is thus by no means a chance that in these annotations of 1931 Wittgenstein reiterates – almost to the letter – what he maintained already in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* (Wittgenstein 1979, 74) and later in the *Tractatus*, that is that "[t]he solution of the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of this problem" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.521).¹⁶

One still needs to ask, though, how life should change according to Wittgenstein in order for the problematic to disappear. At a first glance we may think he is recalling – in a slightly Platonic or Platonist manner – a sort of conflict between ideal and real, as if he intended that such a life is problematic, which is not how it should be and, thus, is not entirely or in its deepest sense life. However, there are various reasons to hold this interpretation implausible. Primarily the reason is the divide between ideal and real, as with other divides – for instance the one between interior and exterior¹⁷ – always was a main critical target of Wittgenstein. Coherently, according to this stance, we shouldn't say life is a problem since it doesn't correspond to its ideal, but rather that those who live life as a problem produce

¹⁵ The continuation of proposition 6.432 ("God does not reveal himself *in* the world") suggests one should consider "what is higher" (*das Höhere*) and "God" as synonyms; however, we must not forget that in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* Wittgenstein wrote "The meaning of life, i.e. the meaning of the world, we can call God" (Wittgenstein 1979, 73; 11 June 1916).

¹⁶ "Is not this the reason – observes Wittgenstein in brackets – why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?" (Wittgenstein 1974, 6.521).

¹⁷ On Wittgenstein's attitude toward the inner-outer divide see, for instance, ter Hark 2001.

– so to speak – the split between real and ideal. Even disguised as a discovery or vision, here the ideal is nothing but a need or requirement generated by our own dissatisfaction towards life; and this dissatisfaction eventually and simply grows, as Wittgenstein clearly demonstrates in the *Philosophical Investigations*, when addressing that conviction that logic has to do with an ideal language “supposed to be something pure and clear-cut”, instead of our actual language. (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §105). Here he writes, thinking also but not exclusively of the *Tractatus*:

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” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §107).¹⁸

The life which, through change, fits its shape cannot thus be the life which is finally in accordance with the ideal, but the life that – so to speak – is in accordance with itself; that is, the life which again according to the *Notebooks 1914-1916* “no longer needs to have any purpose except to live” (Wittgenstein 1979, 73; 6 July 1916).

With regard to life as well as to language, hence, Platonism with its divide between ideal and real is but a symptom, perhaps even a cause of the problem, and hardly ever (only) the beginning of the solution. It is by no means a chance that Wittgenstein thought precisely of Socrates when he was trying to understand why; in the years of the *Tractatus*, in addressing the problems of logic he was experiencing what Russell felt (as he often did in their conversations) when exclaiming “Logic’s hell”, “namely their immense difficulty. Their hardness –

¹⁸ The paragraph continues as follows: “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!” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §107).

their hard & *slippery* texture” (Wittgenstein 2006, 35; 1 October 1937). Wittgenstein seemingly maintains that at the origin of their mutual experience was the fact “that each new phenomenon of language that *they* might retrospectively think of could show *their* earlier explanation to be unworkable” (Wittgenstein 2006, 35). This is precisely the moment when Socrates comes in.

But that – he writes – is the difficulty Socrates gets caught up when he tries to give the definition of a concept. Again and again an application of word emerges that seems not to be compatible with the concept to which other application have led us. We say but that *isn’t* how it is! – it *is* like that though! – & all we can do is keep repeating these antitheses” (Wittgenstein 2006, 35).

It isn’t difficult to imagine the reader’s objections at the first few paragraphs of the annotations dated August 27, 1937, which are being scrutinised. One could object, for instance, that the life from which the problematic eventually disappears is the life that settles for how it always lived or the life of whom, instead of living, is being lived. According to political language, this person would be a conservative bourgeois; someone who substituted “status” with “life” and of whom could be said what Wittgenstein observed on Frank Ramsey; that is, “[t]he idea that this state might not be the only possible one partly disquieted him and partly bored him” (Wittgenstein 2006, 24).¹⁹ Wittgenstein was absolutely conscious of this possible or even very predictable reaction; a reaction he was not insensitive to, as the two questions following the aforementioned paragraphs demonstrate:

¹⁹ Wittgenstein begins this annotation on November 11, 1931, defining Ramsey “a bourgeois thinker” (Wittgenstein 1979, 24). The topic of the relationship and reciprocal influence between Ramsey and Wittgenstein is such an interesting one, as much as it is a complex one which, in any case, goes far beyond our brief quote, further involving the more general question of Wittgenstein’s relationship to pragmatism. Many useful indications may now be found in Misak 2016.

But don't we have the feeling that someone who doesn't see a problem there [in his or her life] is blind to something important, indeed to what is most important of all? / Wouldn't I like to say he is living aimlessly – just blindly like a mole as it were; & if he could only see, he would see the problem? (Wittgenstein 2006, 31).

In reading this passage, it almost appears there is no alternative between seeing the problem and living "blindly like a mole". Hence, since no one fancies to be blind like a mole, it seems we must accept living life like a problem. With due caution,²⁰ Wittgenstein attempts though to offer an escape that consists in distinguishing between two modes of experiencing the problem of life; he observes that it can be lived "as sorrow", as a sort of "murky background", that is "as a problem", but that some may even live it "as joy", that is "as a bright halo round his life". Only one who "lives rightly", Wittgenstein suggests, experiments the problem as joy and, thus, "not after all as a problem" (Wittgenstein 2006, 31).

The fact that life is a problem doesn't implicate that it shall also be that it is a problem that life is a problem. The problem of life, one could say, is a first order problem that needs to be separated from that second order problem, which is the problem that life is a problem. Only those who are capable to do this – that is, not to live as if the problem of life was a problem – live the problem as joy, meaning they live it as a *part* of life and not as sorrow, not as something that brings life itself into in question.²¹

An annotation that follows slightly after may help us to focus better the point, when Wittgenstein observes that today's situation is such "that ordinary common sense no longer suffices to meet the strange demands life makes". Indeed, while in the past (for instance in traditional societies) it sufficed "to be able to play the game well", today "the question is again and again: what

sort of game is to be played now anyway?" (Wittgenstein 2006, 31). This is the problem we have now; living this problem as joy means thus living it as a part of the life we are living, acknowledging there is no way to live this life and, together, deny the question: "what sort of game is to be played now anyway?". One could say that those who live this problem as joy accept life and, thus, accept its problem, while those who live it as sorrow find in this problem something besetting and threatening, like "a murky background". In a language reminiscent of Nietzsche, we could say that the first ones say yes to life, while the second ones say no instead. Or less emphatically, that one thing are the problems in life and another one is life as a problem.

From the problem of life to the method of philosophy

What connects though these observations of Wittgenstein on the problem of life to the way of intending and practising philosophy? A first hint can be found in an annotation of June 29, 1930, which was also collected in *Culture and Value*. The annotation is made of two long sentences, the first one being very similar in tone and content to the previously scrutinised remarks. This is what they maintain, in fact:

If anyone should think he has solved the problem of life & feels like telling himself everything is quite easy now, he need only tell himself, in order to see that he is wrong, that there was a time when "this" solution had not been discovered; but it must have been possible to live *then* too & the solution which has now been discovered appears in relation to how things were then like an accident (Wittgenstein 2006, 6).

Here Wittgenstein dispenses a sort of test to anyone who thinks he or she eventually found the solution to the problem of life; a test that can be easily explained with an example. Indeed, we could compare the solution to the problem of life to the invention of the car. Obviously, before the car was invented, humans did not travel by car, although they travelled over lands and sea,

²⁰ This last paragraph begins, in fact, with a cautious "Or shouldn't I say" (Wittgenstein 2006, 31).

²¹ For this formulation, see the passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* quoted in footnote 8.

and they surely lived before the supposed solution to the problem of life was discovered. This demonstrates that maintaining that one really lives only once the discovery is made, is like asserting that humans really travelled only after the car was invented and that before their travelling wasn't a real travel. To whom should anyway say so, in fact, it could be pointed out that – as far as travelling in the past is concerned – the invention of the car appears “like an accident”. In conclusion, in order to travel, humans did not wait for the invention of the car, although this invention affected and even deeply changed their way of travelling.

I dare say, in Wittgenstein's eyes those who believe they have solved the problem of life are essentially – perhaps even unaware – Platonists that reject into appearance all life before this discovery and believe that they can say anyone who lived before this discovery didn't live or did so only in appearance.

Then, in the second sentence of this annotation, Wittgenstein extends these considerations to logic (to philosophy) observing that what he said on the problem of life is true even for the idea that there is a “solution to the problems of logic (philosophy)” or, to put it differently, for the idea that logical (philosophical) problems were identical or, at least, similar to those of science:

And it is the same for us in logic too. If there were a “solution to a problems of logic (philosophy)” we should only have to caution ourselves that there was a time when they had not been solved (and then too it must have been possible to live and think) – (Wittgenstein 2006, 6).

Here Wittgenstein is expressing a belief that animates his philosophising, from the beginning to the end. For instance, in the *Philosophical Remarks* written in the same period there is a passage in which clearly this spirit shines through:

How strange if logic were concerned with an ‘ideal’ language and not with *ours*. / [...] Logical analysis is the analysis of something we have, not of something we don't have. Therefore it is the analysis of propositions *as they stand*. (It would be odd if the human race had been speaking all this time without even putting together a genuine proposition.) (Wittgenstein 1975, §3).²²

Let's reiterate: the solution to a logical (philosophical) problem is not like a scientific discovery or invention. Surely, only after the invention of the telephone one could communicate to a friend in New York, while being at home in Milan; however, we definitely don't have to wait until all problems of logic are solved to finally put a genuine proposition together. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the *Philosophical Investigations* maintain “[t]he name ‘philosophy’ might [...] be given to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §126).

The last occurrence of the expression “das Problematische” that we will analyse is to be found, in fact, in the *Philosophical Investigations* and it belongs to an observation not explicitly pertaining to the problem of life, but directly to the question of the philosophical method. Here it is:

Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, absorb us. / (“Don't take it as a matter of course”—that means: puzzle over this [*Wundere dich darüber*], as you do over some other things which disturb you. Then what is problematic [*das Problematische*] will disappear, by your accepting the one fact as you do the other.) (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §524).

²² In turn, this passage refers to one of the most famous propositions of the *Tractatus*: “In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order. – That utterly simple thing, which we have to formulate here, is not a likeness of the truth, but the truth itself in its entirety. / (Our problems are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete that there are.)” (Wittgenstein 1974, 5.5563).

Here, taking for instance the fact that pictures (or fictitious narratives) give us pleasure and absorb us, Wittgenstein is showing two possible attitudes as regards facts and invites us to take a stance for the second one: "Don't take it as... but as...". The first attitude consists in taking "as a matter of course" the fact that pictures (or fictitious narratives) give us pleasure or absorb us. Indeed, who would ever deny this? Don't we perhaps feel pleasure admiring the *View of Delft* by Johann Vermeer? Or are we not absorbed by reading the *Great Expectations* of Charles Dickens? That it is so or that this happens, thus, is no problem; the true problem – one might be tempted to say – is why it is so or why this happens and (in case) which science may give us a convincing explanation: psychology, most recent neurosciences or perhaps sociology? What really interests here, it seems, is not the fact that pictures give us pleasure, but rather why they do, as if in the absence of an explanation that pleasure was – so to speak – suspended over the void. Here "why?" prevails over "that", so much so that Wittgenstein is led to compare those who always ask "why?" to those "tourists, who stand in front of building, reading Baedeker [a famous German tourist guide], & through reading about the history of the building's construction etc. etc. are prevented from *seeing* it" (Wittgenstein 2006, 46).²³

Of course asking "why?" and attempting to answer is not wrong in itself. After all, seeking an explanation, making a hypothesis and elaborating a theory are a constitutional part of that scientific behaviour, which – taken as such – Wittgenstein has nothing to blame for. What he criticises, in case, is the assumption that this is the only legitimate mode to look at facts; and in particular the belief that a fact ceases to be "remarkable" or "astounding" once it is explained scientifically:

As though today [that is, in a time when we have a scientific explanation with regard to lightening] lightning were more commonplace or less astounding than 2000 years ago (Wittgenstein 2006, 7).

In any case, it is part of Wittgenstein's method to induce (or persuade) us to consider those facts remarkable, which we usually don't see, either because we take them as a matter of course or because we are so occupied with explaining them. It is as if, for instance, in wishing to explain *why* pictures give us pleasure, we forgot about the fact – taken as obvious or irrelevant – *that* pictures give us pleasure. For this reason, he insistently calls to look and surprise oneself: "Let yourself be *struck* by...",²⁴ "To repeat: don't think, but look!" (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §66a); and hence suppress this way – at least when philosophising – the question "Why?", convinced as he was that "[o]ften it is only when we suppress the question 'Why?' that we become aware of those important facts, which then, in the course of our investigation, lead to an answer" (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §471).

It should be noted anyway that Wittgenstein doesn't mean we should leave things unanswered, nor is he taking ignorance for the philosopher's virtue.²⁵ This would make the philosopher plainly – and sadly – a non-scientist. The philosopher's task is rather subtracting facts – particularly those he calls "facts of living" (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §630) – from the obviousness that conceals them, but without for this reason delivering them straight away to that other form of concealing that is – for Wittgenstein – the scientific explanation.

Furthermore, it isn't at all easy to recognise facts, such as the often mentioned fact that pictures give us pleasure. On the contrary, it is a matter of investigating, closely and in detail, the concept of pleasure that is at

²³ In this regard, see Genova 1995, 65.

²⁴ "Let yourself be *struck* by the existence of a such a thing as our language-game of confessing the motive of my action" (Wittgenstein 2009, II, xi, §334).

²⁵ As appears to think Fogelin 1987, 209-210.

work here, asking ourselves, for example, what place it occupies and how it is incorporated “in all of the situations and reactions which constitute human life” (Wittgenstein 1980b: II, §16), but also whether it refers exclusively to phenomena of human life.²⁶ For example, what would we say about a puppy that wags its tail in front of Vermeer's *View of Delft*: does it take pleasure? If not, why not? Or if so, why so? Or would we say it most certainly takes pleasure, but not in the picture. And does “in front of” have the same meaning in “the puppy is in front of the *View of Delft*” and in “my friend Paul is in front of the *View of Delft*”? And when Paul tells me about the pleasure Vermeer's picture gave him, is he using the same concept as when he tells me about his pleasure during a swim in the open sea? How can I decide? Where should I look? Or should I ask Paul himself? Hence, while it is true that the facts of living are “[w]hat has to be accepted” or they are – as one could also say – “the given” (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §630), it is also true that, in order to accept them, it is necessary to know how to see them, since they are “hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §129).²⁷

Completeness and incompleteness

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein devotes a few pages to what he calls “our craving for generality” (Wittgenstein 1969a, 17)²⁸ that coincides with what could be also named “the contemptuous attitude towards the

²⁶ “‘Human beings think, grasshoppers don’t.’ This means something like: the concept ‘thinking’ refers to human life, not to that of grasshoppers” (Wittgenstein 1980, II, §23).

²⁷ Wittgenstein adds in the same paragraph that “we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §129).

²⁸ According to Wittgenstein, among the main sources of our craving for generality there is “our preoccupation with the method of science [...] the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization” (Wittgenstein 1969a, 18).

particular case” (Wittgenstein 1969a, 18); which, as we already recalled in the premise, “springs from the idea that it [the particular or special or less general case] is incomplete” (Wittgenstein 1969a, 19).

The example he uses to depict this point is particularly effective. Let’s consider a treatise on pomology. Of such a treatise we can say that it is incomplete, if it doesn’t mention this or that type of apple; for instance, if it doesn’t mention the fruits of the European crab apple (*Malus sylvestris*).²⁹ In the case of a treatise on pomology, thus, “we have a standard of completeness in nature” (Wittgenstein 1969a, 19). But let’s consider now the game of chess and compare it with two very similar games: one without pawns and the other one with more pieces. Would we be inclined to maintain that the first game is an incomplete game (with regard to our game) or that the second one is a more complete game (than ours)? A game without pawns is perhaps like a treatise on pomology that doesn’t mention the fruits of the *Malus sylvestris*? Obviously we could always affirm that only the game of chess with pawns is complete; and that the first one (that without pawns) is incomplete and the second one (that with more pieces) is redundant, but we may do this only to reiterate that this is our game (the game we are playing or that we want to play); or to invoke an ideal of completeness that appears clear only because or until it is left unexpressed.

As a matter of fact, why should a game without pawns be considered incomplete? Or why would the addition of pawns render it complete, making it a game eventually? Surely, the game without pawns could be treated like an easier game or a more primitive one than ours, maybe because there are less pieces to be put on the board or perhaps since we noticed it is usually quicker to learn how to play. In any case, that game without pawns – be it simpler or more primitive than ours – “bears no mark of incompleteness” (Wittgenstein

²⁹ The example of the fruits of *Malus sylvestris* is mine.

1969, 19).³⁰ If it is played, it is by all means a game, even if it isn't our game.

The key point of Wittgenstein's considerations could here be expressed as follows: to say that it isn't our game is not the same as saying that it isn't yet (or completely) a game; or otherwise: that the presence of pawns in our game doesn't make a game without pawn a "not-yet-a-game" or an incomplete game. The only concession could be that, given the two games, it is very likely we might chose the one with pawns. Anyway, the game without pawns is so little incomplete as much as was our language "before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated in to it" (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §18); or, consequently, so little as much as our actual language is.³¹

"To regard what appears so obviously incomplete, as something complete" (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §723), is far from easy, as Wittgenstein explains well in an annotation from the previously quoted *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*:

[O]ne believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, that are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape. – Whereas I want to say: Here *is* the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.) (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §257).

Wittgenstein's variations on this point are a lot and of particular interest. For instance, he shows to think it little fruitful to look at the "feeble-minded" as to incomplete or lacking humans, as becomes clear in a

little quoted passage, which could well stimulate psychologists and psychiatrists:

The feeble-minded are pictured in our imagination as degenerate, essentially incomplete, as it were in rags. Thus as in a state of disorder, rather than more primitive order (which would be a far more fruitful way of looking at them.) (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §646).

However, he also seems to hold it as misleading or little fruitful to look at animals not as animals, but as non-humans; or as beings that bare in them a mark of incompleteness and that will never become humans. Of particular interest are in this regard a series of questions on children, cats and squirrels, which appear in *On Certainty*:

Does a child believe that milk exists? Or does it know that milk exists? Does a cat know that a mouse exists? (Wittgenstein 1969b, §478).

What Wittgenstein wants to reckon is that it is meaningless to maintain that, when it is hungry, the child tends towards the maternal breast, because he believes or knows that milk exists; the like it makes no sense saying the cat hunts the mouse, because the thinks or knows the mouse exists; above all, however, he wants us to ask, why we are tempted to add that "because he believes or knows" and why we are not satisfied to ascertain that cats hunt mice and children suck milk. Here, though, some may rebut saying that matters simply are as follows: children and cats don't know, in fact they are children and cats; the former aren't human yet and the latter never will. Only humans (speak adults) know, while children don't know yet and animals will never know: the child sucks milk "without thinking" the same as the cat hunts the mouse "without thinking". Wittgenstein's answer goes that many human behaviours – those he calls in fact "instinctive", "natural" or "primitive" (Wittgenstein 1967, §545), – are not different from the child's behaviour who (naturally) sucks the maternal milk or from that of the cat which

³⁰ Here Wittgenstein is thinking especially about the tendency "to talk of arithmetic as something special as opposed to something more general. Cardinal arithmetic bears no mark of incompleteness; nor does an arithmetic which is cardinal and finite" (Wittgenstein 1969a, 19).

³¹ Would you be ready to say that our language is incomplete, because we surely cannot rule out the possibility that in the future new symbolisms and calculations may be included?

(naturally) hunts the mouse or from that of the squirrel which (naturally) hoards food in the Summer it will need during the Winter. As “[t]he squirrel does not infer by induction that it is going to need stores next winter as well”, the like “no more we need a law of induction to justify our actions or our predictions” (Wittgenstein 1969b, §287). In this sense, we are like children, cats and squirrels when, for instance, we attempt “without thinking” to aid someone hurt:

[I]t is a primitive reaction to take care of, to treat, the place that hurts when someone else is in pain, and not merely when one is so oneself” (Wittgenstein 1980a, I, §915).

An example used by Wittgenstein at least twice, that of art and of the Egyptian style, may help us understand better what really is at stake here.³² Wittgenstein starts by observing that we could easily assume the prospective representation of humans and of other things is correct when “compared with [the] Egyptian way of drawing them” (Wittgenstein 1993, 387); and we could thus be tempted to conclude that Egyptian art is incomplete precisely because it lacks – as became evident after the Renaissance invention of perspective – the perspective. But would we be right to draw to such a conclusion? In order to understand why Wittgenstein’s reply is negative, one may further articulate his example by comparison with other four cases: an Egyptian painting, one by Paolo Uccello, a Cubist work, a drawing by an art novice. In the case of Paolo Uccello’s painting we may maintain it is fully (perhaps obsessively) perspectival; of the novice’s drawing we could say, at a glance, that the rules of perspective were not applied

correctly, while the Cubist work we may affirm did deliberately break them. But what should we say of the Egyptian painting? As a matter of fact, it appears we cannot say anything of what we said respectively of Paolo Uccello’s painting, the Cubist work and the novice’s drawing. Indeed, Egyptian artists did neither apply nor not-apply nor apply in an incorrect way the rules of perspective, because perspective was no option for that painting style. To blame Egyptian art for lacking the perspective is, thus, like reproaching a checkers player because she didn’t checkmate the king.

Still, someone may insist that it is provable that Egyptian art is lacking something, that is, by the fact that in front of Egyptian paintings we can easily ascertain that “after all, people don’t really look like that” (Wittgenstein 1993, 287). This would prove we have here, nevertheless, a standard “in nature” (remember Wittgenstein 1969a, 19). A painting without the perspective thus wouldn’t be like a chess game without pawns, but rather as a treatise or pomology without the European crab apples. According to Wittgenstein, however, this cannot at all “count as an argument” as his query which concludes this annotation demonstrates: “Who says I want people on paper to look the way they do in reality?” (Wittgenstein 1987, 387). As is obvious, the answer goes that no one is saying this, neither the nature of art nor human nature. Hence, why should we say this to the Egyptians (and with which right and what for)?

However, we may go on asking, don’t we risk thus forgetting what Wittgenstein himself recalled in a famous passage of the *Philosophical Investigations*, when he observes that, while it surely happens that “new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence”, it also happens that “other become obsolete and get forgotten” (Wittgenstein 2009, I, §23)? At least in some cases, shouldn’t we be able to say, in fact, that if a game was forgotten this happened because it was finally discovered it wasn’t a game, for instance because its

³² They are the examples on the Egyptian style in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Or is it just a matter of pretty and ugly?” (Wittgenstein 2009, II, xii, §367) and in the annotations of the years 1937-1938 published with the title *Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness* (Wittgenstein 1993, 387).

rules contained a contradiction? Wittgenstein's mode of responding to these questions and puzzlements can be illustrated by means of an example from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Let's thus imagine a game that "is such that whoever begins can always win by a particular simple trick". No one did however notice his fact; hence we can say it is a game: it is played and anyone who plays tries to win. But "[n]ow someone draws our attention to it [the trick it contains]; — and it stops being a game". (Wittgenstein 1978, III, §77). This conclusion, as Wittgenstein immediately acknowledges, is ambiguous though; indeed, he promptly asks how he should turn things around, "to make it clear to myself".

As a matter of fact, one may think that, by revealing the trick, we discover that what we have been playing was not a game at all (it seemed to be a game, but it actually wasn't) and that therefore, and properly speaking, up to now we have not been playing. But this isn't exactly what Wittgenstein really wants to say: "I want to say: 'and it stops being a game' — not: 'and we now see that it wasn't a game' (Wittgenstein 1978, III, §77).³³ What I can do, once the trick has been revealed, is alter the game so that, when playing, it may be possible to win or lose, because if one couldn't lose, the game would miss its point which is winning. However, nothing that happens now can make the things that previously happened not happen: if one played, trick or not, one did play.

³³ However, we could even imagine that it continues to be a game for some. For example, once the trick has been discovered someone could react this way: "What a great game! And so relaxing! Everyone has the certainty that, when it's their turn to begin, they'll win."

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