

## **Wittgenstein on dispositions as abilities. A de-naturalized perspective**

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on Wittgenstein's use of the notion of disposition. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein characterizes understanding as a mastery of a technique. This is a dispositional notion and many scholars have rightly presented dispositional readings of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in virtue of his remarks on meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein seems to suggest that understanding the meaning of a word is best characterized as having the disposition to correctly use that word, that is, as knowing how to employ the word. However, scholars think that the notion of disposition as an ability— even if it is correctly 'applicable' — is not endorsed by Wittgenstein, because they think that he had in mind a narrow and materialistic conception of disposition as a state of a physical apparatus. This paper argues that Wittgenstein does not endorse a materialistic and narrow conception of disposition. By contrast, Wittgenstein criticizes one particular misleading use of the concept and he actively employs a de-naturalised notion of disposition as acquired ability, or embodied practice.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, Dispositions, Abilities, Naturalism, Knowledge-how

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### **0. Introduction**

In PI §150 Wittgenstein famously characterizes understanding as a mastery of a technique, that is, as an ability which is acquired through training<sup>1</sup>. This is indeed a dispositional notion and many scholars have tried to give dispositional readings of Wittgenstein's later philosophy (Williams 1999, Horwich 2012, Baker and Hacker 2005, Foster 2004, Gilmore 1999, Kemp 2014, Kenny 2002, Pears 1971, Tait 2005, Teichmann 2015, Voltolini 2009). The notion of disposition seems to be useful to characterize Wittgenstein's later views on understanding, language and meaning as it comes from his remarks on Rule-Following. Moreover, the dispositional account helps avoiding the philosophical danger of mentalism and behaviorism in philosophy of mind and language. According to Wittgenstein, it is misleading to characterize understanding as an inner and mental process; it is rather something *immediate*, that is, something which is not mediated by any intellectual intermediary because it is an institution, or an

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<sup>1</sup> See References for abbreviations of Wittgenstein's works.

incorporated habit. In particular, understanding occurs when we show to have acquired the ability to follow rules like the other members of our community in a spontaneous way. In this sense, we could characterize understanding of meaning as a kind of knowledge how: knowing, or understanding the meaning is best characterized as knowing how to use the word or the expression, that is, as having the disposition or ability to use the word in accordance with its grammatical rules. The dispositional reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy borrows legitimacy from a notion of disposition as acquired and embodied practice; a propensity to action which is part of human's second nature. Many scholars argue that this notion of disposition – even if it is correctly applicable – is not endorsed by Wittgenstein, because they think that he had in mind by contrast a narrow and materialistic conception of disposition<sup>2</sup>. However, they only take into account PI §149 and little attention is given to Wittgenstein's own use of the concept in other works. Indeed, Wittgenstein does employ the concept of disposition only once in PI and he criticizes dispositionalism as a deceptive perspective on knowing and understanding.

If one says that knowing the ABC is a state of the mind, one is thinking of a state of an apparatus of the mind (perhaps a state of the brain) by means of which we explain the manifestations of that knowledge. Such a state is called a disposition. But it is not unobjectionable to speak |59| of a state of the mind here, inasmuch as there would then have to be two different criteria for this: finding out the structure of the apparatus, as distinct from its effects. (Nothing would be more confusing here than to use the words “conscious” and “unconscious” for the contrast between a state of consciousness and a disposition. For this pair of terms covers up a grammatical difference) (PI: §149).

Here, the word «disposition» is actually used to refer to a state of a physical apparatus and this kind of dispositionalism consists in explaining the manifestations of knowing by appealing to such a state.

This paper focuses on Wittgenstein's *own use* of the notion of disposition. It will be shown that Wittgenstein's use of the concept is more extensive and complex than expected. This use is twofold: there are explicit references, that is, passages where Wittgenstein explicitly uses the term «disposition», and implicit references, that is, passages about the *related concepts* of ability, understanding and possibility. It will be argued that even in Wittgenstein's writings is possible to find an alternative use of the concept which is not equivalent to the model of state of an apparatus assumed in PI §149. Wittgenstein is against *one particular* misleading way to use the notion at issue. Moreover, Wittgenstein's remarks about the notion of disposition provide a de-naturalized conception of dispositions as abilities which might be used to contrast the current paradigm on dispositions which is mainly conditioned by a naturalised perspective (Damschen *et al.* 2009)<sup>3</sup>.

Firstly, I will trace alternative uses of the concept in RPP II and BB. Secondly, I will present Wittgenstein's criticism on a misleading conception of dispositions by looking at

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<sup>2</sup> Baker and Hacker restrict Wittgenstein's conception to «Central state materialism» (Baker and Hacker 2005: 367).

<sup>3</sup> I use the expression «current paradigm» to refer to a body of specific works on dispositions which share the following aspects: 1. Hypostatisation of dispositions (the term «disposition» denotes an entity whose metaphysical nature is still disputed), 2. Simplification fallacy: identification of all dispositions to mere natural capacities such as fragility and solubility, 3. Causality of the dispositional, that is, the relation between the disposition and its manifestation is construed in terms of cause and effect.

Waissman's typescripts, dated 1931-1934 and collected in the volume *The voices of Wittgenstein* (from now on VW)<sup>4</sup>.

## 1. Dispositions vs States of consciousness

In PI §149, reference to dispositions is negatively judged by Wittgenstein as a deceptive image of understanding and knowing. However, we find a different attitude in RPP II §43, §45, §178 and §243. In this context, Wittgenstein is trying to classify some psychological concepts and in order to do so he distinguishes between states of consciousness and dispositions. Wittgenstein uses the label «disposition» for those concepts that do not signify states. These concepts are knowing, understanding, believing, and meaning. In PI §149 Wittgenstein writes that knowing is not a state of mind, or disposition, whereas in RPP II §43-45 he suggests to think of understanding and knowing as dispositions rather than states of consciousness. Is he using the term «disposition» in two different ways?

### 1.1 State of an apparatus vs state of consciousness

First of all, I argue that Wittgenstein does draw a distinction between «state of consciousness» and «state of an apparatus». When Wittgenstein talks about dispositions as states of mind, he specifies that those states are states of a physical apparatus, hence something different from conscious mental phenomena, like feeling pain, having toothache, or having an inner experience (*Erlebnis*). We find further evidence of this distinction in BB, where Wittgenstein tries to clarify the concept of power («can» and «be able to»). In this context, Wittgenstein writes that we erroneously tend to think that the fact that something is possible, that someone *can* do something, consists in the fact that someone, or somewhat, is in a particular state. This tendency is embodied in our language and it manifests itself even when we call «state of mind» the capacity to resolve a mathematical problem, or the capacity to enjoy a piece of music. These examples are informative because they are similar to the scenario of PI §149: when Wittgenstein uses the expression «State of mind» without referring to a state of consciousness, he is working with examples of activities governed by rules; activities that presuppose mastery of a certain technique. Moreover, Wittgenstein explicitly states that in these cases with «state of mind» we don't mean «conscious mental phenomenon», but «state of a hypothetical mechanism», or model of mind. This alleged mechanism would explain mental phenomena because such phenomena would be manifestations of such mechanism and their possibility would depend on its particular features.

The same tendency shows itself in our calling the ability of solving a mathematical problem, the ability to enjoy a piece of music, etc. certain states of mind; we don't mean by this expression "conscious mental phenomena". Rather, a state of the mind in this sense is the state of a hypothetical mechanism, a mind model meant to explain the conscious mental phenomena (BB: 69).

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<sup>4</sup> There are two methodological concerns: first, this material is chronologically prior to PI, RPP II and BB. In this sense, we might wonder whether it would be plausible to use this material to clarify remarks written later, given the transitory nature of this phase of Wittgenstein's thought (Stern 1995). Second, this material is an *indirect* presentation of Wittgenstein's thought; it contains Waissman's notes. However, there is an extensive use of the notion of disposition. Furthermore, we find many examples, even remarks, that we find in the same form in later works. In these texts we already find philosophical issues that will be extensively debated in later writings, although other elements will be abandoned, such as the use of the notion of calculus and the characterization of language as a mechanism governed by a definite set of rules.

We easily overlook the distinction between stating a conscious mental event, and making a hypothesis about what one might call the mechanism of the mind (BB: 67).

Here, we find something similar to PI §149 and even here Wittgenstein has something to say against such a way of seeing things: we tend to describe the way in which a subject plays games such as reacting to orders, carrying on sequences, having in mind the mechanism that makes a musical instrument such as a pianola work. «In the working of the pianola we have a clear case of certain actions, those of the hammers of the piano, being guided by the pattern of holes in the pianola roll», however, «it is clear that although we might use the ideas of such mechanisms as similes for describing the way in which B acts in then games 42,43, no such mechanisms are actually involved in these games» (BB: 70-71)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the distinction is not between state and disposition, but rather between state of consciousness and disposition - which might be further defined as a state of an apparatus.

## 1.2 The dispositional

The distinction between «states of consciousness» and «dispositions» is purely functional. It is a term of comparison, like «language game» or «form of life». In RPP II, knowing and understanding are thought of as dispositions, *rather than* states of consciousness. I say 'rather' because Wittgenstein characterises these concepts in a negative way: he does not say that knowing, understanding and believing *are* dispositions of the subjects. He says, for example, that seeing is a state which is not comparable to a disposition, like knowing and understanding, or that intention and intending are neither emotions, nor moods, or sensations, or representations. The notion of disposition, then, seems useful to clarify the grammar of such psychological concepts and it helps avoiding the perspective according to which such concepts would refer to certain inner experiences of the subject<sup>6</sup>. Wittgenstein highlights three main criteria of the dispositional: 1. A disposition is not interrupted neither by a discontinuity of conscience nor by a lack of attention and this, he points out, is not a causal observation (RPP: II §45). I argue that this remark highlights the grammatical fact that adverbial phrases cannot be applied to dispositional expressions. We can't say «I have been continuously understanding since yesterday night», whereas we can reasonably say «I have been having toothache since yesterday». 2. Experience (*Erfahrung*) teaches us that we have a certain disposition, or inclination and tests are needed to testify that some dispositions are still present (RPP: II §57). 3. Dispositions are learned and trained. «Knowing is having learned and not forgotten» (RPP: II §300)<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, I don't think that Wittgenstein uses the notion of disposition as status of an apparatus in these paragraphs. The notion does not refer to a subject's state of consciousness, but no materialistic shift seems to be present here. The notion has a different role in the broader context of discussion. In these paragraphs the concept is used as a term of comparison, whereas in PI §149 Wittgenstein is referring to a

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<sup>5</sup> These critiques echo Ryle's discussion on the para-mechanical fallacy (Ryle 1949).

<sup>6</sup> This misleading perspective presupposes a denotative model of meaning applied to the psychological and experiential vocabulary. Wittgenstein traces this model in the work of William James (1890).

<sup>7</sup> Ryle uses the same expression to characterize knowing as a capacity. In Ryle's system a capacity is one type of disposition together with liabilities, propensities and habits (Ryle 1949: 257). The notion of disposition, though, is not used as a technical term as in Ryle's work and Wittgenstein himself seems cautious in this respect.

dispositional account of understanding, hence applied dispositionalism in philosophy of language.

## 2. The variety of use of the concept of power

We find further extensive use of the notion of disposition in BB. I would like to focus on some remarks about the grammar of the related concept of power (BB: 40-68). In this section Wittgenstein does not actually use the term «disposition». However, as we have seen, Wittgenstein introduces a functional distinction between state of consciousness and disposition. Moreover, he classifies the concepts of believing, knowing, understanding as dispositions rather than state of consciousness. At the same time, Wittgenstein characterizes understanding as mastery of a technique, as an ability. For these reasons, I argue that we are justified in treating Wittgenstein's remarks on the concept of power as useful elements for a talk about dispositions.

Wittgenstein introduces a philosophical issue that, as we shall see, is already discussed in some writings from the 30's. We use dispositional statements every time we ascribe an ability to someone. We say that someone *can* play the piano, or that someone *is able* to resolve a mathematical problem, or that someone *can* speak French. Wittgenstein tries to argue against the temptation to construe such dispositional statements as statements that point to and describe a particular condition or state of the subject in a particular moment. We tend to consider a man's ability, that is, the fact that a man has learned an activity, or he is able to do an activity, as a particular state, or condition of the subject, even if we can't point to anything specific when we are asked to specify such a state (RPP: II §43, §44).

There are various reasons which incline us to look at the fact of something being possible, someone being able to do something, as the fact that he or she is in a particular state. Roughly speaking, this comes to saying that "A is in the state of being able to do something" is the form of representation we are most strongly inclined to adopt, or, as one could also put it, we are strongly inclined to use the metaphor of something being in a particular state for saying that something can behave in a particular way. And this way of representation, or this metaphor, is embodied in the expressions, "he is capable of...", "he is able to multiply large number in his head", "he can play chess": in these sentences the verb is used in the present tense suggesting that the phrases are descriptions of states which exist at the moment when we speak (BB: 68-69).

Wittgenstein's grammatical remarks on the concept of power suggest a possible use of the notion of disposition which, on the one hand, preserves the distinction between state of consciousness and something that is not a state of consciousness and, on the other hand, it does not reduce the meaning of the word «disposition» to the state of a physical apparatus. By contrast, these remarks are meant to «heal» the temptation to see abilities and dispositions as inner states of the agent which are empirically inaccessible. As a whole, Wittgenstein shows the variety of use of the concept of power using several imaginary cases, or language games. First of all, we might indeed use dispositional statements as descriptions of the state of an object. For example, suppose there is a tribe where men test sticks as to their hardness (BB: 41). In their language they have expressions of the form «this stick can be bent easily», or «this stick can be bent with difficulty». When we utter those sentences we are saying something about the sticks, we are describing the sticks. Secondly, the concept of power might be used as an expression of possibility. For example, imagine a tribe in whose language there is an expression corresponding to our «He has done so and so» and another expression corresponding to

our «He can do so and so», but the latter expression is only used «where its use is justified by the same fact which would also justify the former expression» (BB: 46). Finally, dispositional statements might be used to express conjectures. The expression «This quantity of gun-powder can blast this rock» expresses a conjecture as to whether a certain load of gun-powder will be sufficient to blast the rock (BB: 59).

Certain characteristic features appear in these cases in different combinations: there is the element of conjecture (That something will behave in a certain way in the future); the description of the state of something (as a condition of its behaving in a certain way in the future); the account of certain tests something or someone has passed (BB: 68).

Overall, Wittgenstein wants to highlight the grammatical fact that a «vast net of family likenesses connects the case in which the expressions of possibility, “can”, “to be able to”, are used» (BB: 68) and the descriptive use is only one among many.

### 3. De-naturalizing dispositions

We have seen so far that Wittgenstein employs the notion of disposition in different contexts. Overall, we might distinguish two macro uses: 1. «Disposition» vs «State of consciousness»; in this case the concept of disposition is actively used as a term of comparison in order to clarify the grammar of the concepts of meaning, understanding, intending and believing; 2. Applied dispositionalism in the fields of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. In this context, Wittgenstein faces philosophical thesis according to which knowing is a disposition of the subject, understanding consists in having a certain disposition, where «disposition» stands for a status of a physical apparatus. Wittgenstein's attitude seems clearly critical in context 2, but not entirely critical in context 1. In what follows I will take into consideration Waissman's typescripts from the 30's. It will be shown that Wittgenstein explicitly uses the notion of disposition in order to characterize his perspective on language. Therefore, the employment of this notion is not just a critical device used by the scholars. Moreover, Wittgenstein traces a deceptive use of the concept of disposition which clearly echoes the use informed by the model of the state of a physical apparatus we have previously discussed (PI: §149).

In *The Voices of Wittgenstein*, Wittgenstein explicitly suggests the utility of the notion of disposition in order to dissolve misunderstandings on the concepts of understanding and meaning. «Understanding the meaning of a word is comparable with what we call an ability or capacity. [...] One could indeed more or less state that understanding its meaning is being able to apply the word correctly» (VW: 357). However, he also states that this way of looking at things is necessary but not sufficient, because «the same difficulties hold for the word “ability” as for the word “understanding”» (*ibidem*).

What does it mean to understand a proposition? Nowadays the ordinary view is that understanding is a mental process which occurs in me (VW: 437).

We disentangle things, perhaps, most effectively by employing the concept of disposition [...] only we must be clear that this disposition is essentially something hypothetical. That is, we are not using the word “disposition” to refer to a shadowy something that contains in embryonic form all the future applications of the signs (VW: 369).

What are the «same difficulties» quoted in the passage above? The «very deep-rooted mistake», or «false picture» consists in working with a concept of possibility as a «shadowy reality». Wittgenstein talks about «The paradox of possibility» (VW: 32-43)<sup>8</sup>. This paradox is the idea that when we say «that something which is indeed not the case is nonetheless possible, it seems as if in this case something were not the case, and yet more the case that if it couldn't have been the case» (VW: 39). Something is not the case, but it *is* in a stronger sense than something that is not the case and it couldn't even be the case. We conceive possibility as a *shadowy reality*.

One often has the feeling that reality moves, so to speak, on the rails of possibility, that everything that happens is, as it were, already prefigured or prearranged as possibility (VW: 361)<sup>9</sup>.

This misunderstanding is similar to the confusion between the grammatical and the ideal: we see that the proposition «the edges of a cube are equal in length» is not an empirical proposition as «the edges of this wooden cube are equal in length». However, we conclude that, given that the first proposition does not refer to a real cube, it does refer to an ideal one, that is, the geometrical cube. We postulate a shadowy entity which should stand behind something *more real*, empirically accessible. Now, this misunderstanding easily applies to the concept of ability too: in this case we conceive the ability as a *shadowy performance*. This misunderstanding is connected to a certain use of the word «can»: we tend to think that, for example, the fact that a distance cannot be at the same time both one and two metres long is a fact concerning the nature of distance. Here we are operating with a concept of «can» as a concept that describes the object, the state of the object. In this way, we erroneously confuse grammatical rules of a concept with descriptions of natural facts with natural necessity.

Overall, I think there is an analogy between the conception of possibility as «shadowy reality» and the conception of ability/disposition as a «shadowy performance». In both cases we match what is real (in this context I think this means 'actualised') with something that is postulated and hypostatized- a «shadowy entity»- which stands behind and anticipates what does not exist yet. This entity contains in embryonic and ethereal form what is not the case but could be the case. We use this image, indeed, when we try to answer to questions such: «How is it possible to imagine something which does not exist?», «How can it be that we are able to imagine the very thing that later happen?», «How can we understand a false proposition?», «How is it possible that when I give an order the person react in accordance with it with actions that are not mentioned in the expression of the order?»<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, I argue that, from the wittgensteinian perspective, what is to be avoided is not the employment of the notion of disposition itself, but rather a particular use of that term, namely, the use which comes from the misleading image of the mental as a non-physical reservoir of potential elements<sup>11</sup>. In

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<sup>8</sup> «The use which is made of the word «can»- the expression of possibility- in §49- can through a light upon the idea that what can happen must have happened before. (Nietzsche)» (BB: 47).

<sup>9</sup> We find a similar perspective in Frege's *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik I*. Frege states that the straight line is already drawn before it is drawn. According to Wittgenstein, the geometrical line appears to be a shadow-picture of the actual line. (VW: 361).

<sup>10</sup> For this reason, I think that here lies the problem of pre-determination which will be a core element of the later Rule-Following discussions.

<sup>11</sup> These remarks echo Ryle's critique of the para-mechanical model of mind. The postulated «shadowy entities» are states, or processes classified as mysterious, badly characterizable. For this reason, they are situated in the indistinct and airy category of the mental. They are thought to belong to the realm of the mental because it seems impossible, or at least very difficult, to situate them in the material world without

the case of dispositions, the mistake lies in our using the term to point to a mental state that would contain all the acts that still have to be actualised. As if these acts were already embryonically present in the disposition and had just to manifest themselves<sup>12</sup>. It is the same misunderstanding as when we think that a person correctly understands an order because when the order is given he means the order in a particular way, that is, as if in giving the order we also give a compacted set of reactions that fulfil it.

This point clearly emerges also from the paragraphs on the causal conception of language and on the notion of order (VW: 91-99). Followers of the causal view of language state that signs induce movements, or reactions thanks' to training. The order coincides with the sign that causes a certain action given a process of association. If the movement is done, then the order has been followed. With this perspective, we should admit that even a dog follows the order if it does the movement generated by the sign. We should say the same in the case of a machine. The definition of order is what is at issue here, namely, the criteria we use to say that something is an order. Wittgenstein's remarks are not about the understanding of the order<sup>13</sup>. The causal theory of order defines the order by looking at its effects. However, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that if something is an order in virtue of its produced effects, then if the system does not generate the effects, then that something is not an order anymore. Consequently, with this perspective it makes no sense to speak of violation of the order, but this would be a very queer way of using the word «order». Someone might try to object that it is still possible to add new elements to the causal chain in order to accommodate the idea that the order of doing P is still an order even if P does not follow. Nevertheless, if we define the order with P and all the other elements of the causal chain, the problem arises again in the same form. Followers of this theory confuse causal/empirical consequences and logical consequences. Take for examples these two sentences: «The device is structured in a way that 'a' produces this movement», «the letter 'a' is the order of moving in this way». According to Wittgenstein, these two sentences are independent: the former is verified by experience, the latter is the product of an agreement. I think the main point is that the question «What is the execution of the order?» is about the sense and the answer is then a grammatical explanation (VW: 97). It is not a question about an empirical fact that we can experience, it is rather a question about that concept of order because we lack that concept or maybe we are still not able to use it. So, even if in this part Wittgenstein uses the notion of disposition, I think that his critique is against the causal conception of order, and not the employment of the concept of disposition itself.

If one says: the order that P should occur is the process which, together with a disposition in a person, effects P, then whether something is the order that P should occur depends from the start on what future experience we will have [...] there would be no point at all in giving an order since the wording of the order would only be proved to be correct or incorrect by the future (VW: 105).

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violating its laws. The misunderstanding leads us/or is grounded on an image of the mind as «a kind of protoplasm in which things appear to happen that are unknown to physics and chemistry» (Ryle 1949: 43).

<sup>12</sup> What is misleading is a notion of disposition as something latent but already actualized in the ethereal realm of possibility.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect, it is different from the Rule-Following discussion.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to present the outcome of a textual study on the wittgensteinian use of the concept of disposition. I would like to conclude by stressing two main points:

1. We find several uses of the notion of disposition in Wittgenstein's writings. Scholars have generally taken into account only one of them by looking merely to paragraph 149 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Therefore, Wittgenstein does not endorse the narrow and materialistic conception of disposition as a state of a physical apparatus. Indeed, Wittgenstein does not criticize the employment of the notion of disposition. He writes against a particular use of the concept which comes from a misleading conception of possibility- the shadowy-model. Moreover, Wittgenstein himself employs the notion of disposition in order to characterize his own perspective on language, understanding and meaning and this notion does not correspond to the model of state of a physical apparatus. Therefore, it is legitimate to give a kind of dispositional reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy by using a notion of disposition which is found in the wittgensteinian *corpus*.

2. Wittgenstein's use of the concept of disposition suggests a *de-naturalized notion* of disposition, that is, a notion which is different from the one which is presupposed in the most recent technical works on the topic. Wittgenstein explicitly draws a grammatical relation between the concepts of disposition, ability, understanding and knowledge-how. In this sense, he does not commit himself to the simplification fallacy, that is, he does not use the word «disposition» only to refer to mere natural capacities such as solubility, fragility, conductivity. The concept of disposition is used to give an account of human practices. Dispositions, in this sense, are abilities and skills which do not reduce to states of the brain. They are rather patterns of behaviour which have been learned through training and education in a particular system, or form of life<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the notion of disposition, if correctly de-naturalized, might be used to highlight the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy to current issues at the interface between the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind.

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<sup>14</sup> Talking about «patterns of behaviour» does not imply the reduction of human action to *mere* behaviour, given that we are operating with a richer notion of behaviour. Patterns of behaviour are, in this context, patterns of *use*, i.e., embodied ways of employing linguistic expressions which are part of a practice embedded in the relevant socio-cultural context. We might further define patterns of use as embodied ways of *correctly* employing linguistic expressions but this would lead us directly into the debate on the normativity of meaning which I can't properly discuss here.

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