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The Myth of the Quietist Wittgenstein

Danièle Moyal-Sharrock

My father was a businessman, and I am a businessman; I want my philosophy to be business-like, to get something done, to get something settled.

Wittgenstein, in conversation with Drury (Rhees 1991, 125)

1. Metaphysics and scientism: the disease of philosophy and its source

Don't think, but look! (PI §66)

To say that Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophy is not sufficiently recognised is an understatement. What should be said is that Wittgenstein is the first philosopher to have precisely diagnosed the disease of philosophy. The disease of philosophy is caused by its propensity to *explain* rather than *describe* – to *think* (that is, *overthink*) without *looking* (that is, without *overlooking*). In its efforts to look *deeply*, philosophy overlooks the surface, what is always before our eyes; and in its will to explain, it emulates explanation as practised by science:¹

Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really *is* 'purely descriptive'. (Think of such questions as 'Are there sense data?' and ask: What method is there of determining this? Introspection?) (BB 18)

Explanation, when philosophy practises it, often results in metaphysics – that is, sublimated physics: the postulating of the basic entities and processes – such as sense data (or, more currently, internal representations) – that compose reality. So when philosophy emulates science, the 'crystal does not appear as an abstraction; but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete, as it were the *hardest* thing there is' (PI §97).² Plato's *Forms*, Aristotle's *form*, Descartes' *Consciousness*, Kant's *Pure Reason*, Hegel's *Being* and the early Wittgenstein's *Logical Form*:³ these are not offered as abstractions, but as hard crystals, allegedly ontologically robust entities, faculties, etc., that have crucially informed, or rather misinformed, philosophy throughout its history, perpetuating the explanatory, mythopoeic stance of the pre-Socratics. Plato reified predication, giving predicates *existence*, and indeed privileged existence. Aristotle corrected him, but got entangled in his own *form*. And so it goes. Wittgenstein properly diagnosed this metaphysical malady, and its source in scientism; and

against these he prescribed conversion to a method focused on description – one that engages looking rather than speculative thinking.

Wittgenstein was not the first philosopher to distrust metaphysics. Notably Hume, incensed by the speculative metaphysics of his predecessors – ‘entirely hypothetical’, depending ‘more upon Invention than Experience’ (1932, 3.6) – engaged in a reform of philosophy: waging ‘war’ on ‘abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon that gets mixed up with popular superstition’ and replacing them with ‘accurate and valid reasoning’ (2007, 5).⁴ However, Hume, even more than his predecessors, saw philosophy as an empirical science, and hoped that accurate description might, as in the sciences,⁵ lead to *explanation*; that philosophy might get beyond the task of mere distinguishing and describing the operations of the mind, and ‘discover, at least in some degree, the secret springs and principles’ – that is, the underlying causes – ‘by which the human mind is actuated in its operations’ (2007, 10). This shows Hume engaging an empirical battle against speculative metaphysics equipped with what, against all odds, is a metaphysical picture of the mind as something inner and hidden.

Along with hiddenness hankering for disclosure, speculation and reification abound (*cf.* Hume 2007, 145). The mind has the traits of a metaphysical entity which is able to perceive and conjoin ideas while ‘thought is a faithful mirror that copies its objects truly’, if more faintly, than those in which our original perceptions were clothed (2007, 8). Moreover, Hume’s *explanation* of the operations of the mind is modelled on Newton’s explanation of the operations of gravitational attraction. Brandishing a theory borrowed from physics may not have been the best way to engage in a crusade against speculative metaphysics in the name of accurate description. Hume’s motivation was admirable and well-founded, but even he – empiricist that he was – did not succeed in ridding himself of the metaphysical burden he was out to overthrow. Wittgenstein did. Like Hume, he believed that to understand our world, we must scrutinize it but, unlike Hume, the later Wittgenstein did not embark on his reflections about the human mind assuming it to be an inner, hidden entity whose ‘secret springs and principles’ needed to be discovered. Wittgenstein simply set about looking at the human mind in action – as something that is always before our eyes and of which we need not hypothesize the existence of ghostly processes. Wittgenstein’s emphasis on behaviour and perspicuous presentation, and his rejection of ghostly inner processes as superfluous and misleading explanations, all point to his having cured himself of speculative, explanatory metaphysics – the disease of philosophy.

But the Galilean revolution that Wittgenstein should have sparked in philosophy is still slow in coming, even if signs of it are afield in the ‘the e-turn’ in philosophy (Enactivism, Embodiment, Embeddedness and Extensiveness), which his work has prompted and fostered.⁶ I believe this slowness is much due to the fact that Wittgenstein has been championed, and therefore generally perceived, as a quietist philosopher: a philosopher whose aim is to dissolve rather than solve problems, and whose stance towards matters philosophical and non-philosophical is one of non-interventionism. What I would like to do in this paper is to extricate Wittgenstein from the quietist and reductively therapeutic image that has overshadowed him, by showing in what ways he was an *interventionist* philosopher – a philosopher who wanted to change things – both within philosophy and for the sciences.

2. The *Therapeutic Wittgenstein* and quietism

In her Introduction to *The New Wittgenstein*, Alice Crary affirms that ‘Wittgenstein’s primary aim in philosophy is ... a *therapeutic* one’ – that is, he advocates philosophy as a form of therapy whose goal is to ‘help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing’ (Crary 2001, 1). On this view, philosophical problems are considered to be nothing but illusions, and philosophy’s aim is to get us to recognize those illusions for what they are, which should lead to their *dissolution*, and not to their *solution* (for they should not be envisaged as solvable by argument or reasoning). The real work that has to be done is not on philosophy, but on oneself, on one’s own confusion (*cf.* CV 24). Indeed, on this *reductively* therapeutic (henceforth, referred to simply as Therapeutic) reading of Wittgenstein,⁷ the *Tractatus* is a hoax meant to deceive us into thinking it is offering the solution to the problems of philosophy, only to disabuse us (TLP 6.54) and thereby *cure* us of the temptation to believe that there are solutions to metaphysical problems and that there are legitimate philosophical problems.⁸ This account of the *Tractatus* is the most spectacular *deus ex machina* I know of in philosophy.

The trouble with Therapeutism is that it gives all of Wittgenstein’s philosophy an exclusively deconstructive or negative burden; it limits the possibilities of his philosophical method to the point of deforming it – as it does the *Tractatus* – by forcing it to fit into this exiguous mould.⁹ Although this reading has lost much of its credibility amongst Wittgensteinians, the image of a merely therapeutic and ideologically quietist Wittgenstein is still potent: it informs the popular as well as the philosophical mainstream perception of Wittgenstein, and remains resonant in some Wittgensteinian quarters. Witness the recent publication of Paul Horwich’s *Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy* where it is still claimed that, on Wittgenstein’s view, the philosopher’s job is to remove the confusion responsible for misguided philosophical arguments, but that once this is done, we are not left ‘with any positive new theory or *new understanding*’:

‘The net result will be simply that we have cured ourselves of a particular tendency to get mixed up [...] The most we can hope for is the elimination of our traditional concerns’ (Horwich 2012, 6; 20 my emphasis)

This is precisely the kind of quietism that has been wrongly, and nefariously, pinned on Wittgenstein. His was a more proactive stance: he did not only uphold the dissolution of problems but their solution; not only demystification but positive *understanding*. Horwich’s Wittgenstein makes the philosopher at best a cured individual with nothing more to offer: all she can do is sit back in the hope that all other philosophers have undergone the same conversion. Yet Wittgenstein did not sit back. He taught and wrote philosophy. He tried to find ways of imparting his findings, clarifying them through argument and example, and showing how and where the disease strikes and how to go about fighting it (e.g. OC §37). He gave philosophers instructions (e.g., ‘We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place’ (PI §109)) and showed them where they go wrong, for example, when explaining Moore’s mistake of talking of *knowing* in cases where doubt would not be possible

(OC §178). Wittgenstein did not hesitate to correct – e.g., ‘I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and inquiry’ (OC §151). He also replaced metaphysical explanation – say, of meaning – with down-to-earth description:

It looks to us as if we were saying something about the nature of red in saying that the words ‘Red exists’ do not yield a sense. Namely, that red does exist ‘in its own right’. The same idea—that this is a metaphysical statement about red—finds expression again when we say such a thing as that red is timeless, and perhaps still more strongly in the word ‘indestructible’.

But what we really *want* is simply to take ‘Red exists’ as the statement: the word ‘red’ has a meaning. (PI §58)

It should now be clear that when Wittgenstein writes that ‘philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language’ (PI §124) – the phrase that is singly mostly responsible for his being called a quietist – this does not mean that it should not correct philosophical use when it goes awry, but only that it should not interfere with the *actual* or *ordinary* use of language.¹⁰ Wittgenstein’s non-interventionism concerns only *ordinary* language – which does not imply that ordinary language may not eventually be impacted by philosophical clarification.¹¹

Wittgenstein clearly engages in more than self-therapy and urges us to do the same: ‘The danger sets in when we notice that the old model is not sufficient but then we don’t change it’ (BT 318). Because of its misleading uniformity, language can lead us astray. It is the philosopher’s task to ‘show differences’, to work ‘against the myth-forming tendencies’ (MS 158, p. 49) and ‘the misleading analogies in the use of language’ (PO 163).

3 The importance of conceptual / grammatical elucidation

The philosophical problem is an awareness of disorder in our concepts, and can be solved by ordering them. (BT 309)

Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy as conceptual or grammatical elucidation¹² is rooted in the realization that what we, in our scientific attitudes, have traditionally taken to be metaphysical problems are nothing but linguistic confusions: ‘The characteristic of a metaphysical question being that we express an unclarity about the grammar of words in the *form* of a scientific question’ (BB 35). This is why, in keeping with Wittgenstein’s ‘modern’ way of philosophizing (MWL 113), the philosopher should rid herself of the urge to approach problems scientifically, and engage in the task of conceptual elucidation and rearrangement which alone can ‘bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (PI §116):

It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. ... And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*,

and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite* of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (PI §109)

Wittgenstein insists that a main source of philosophical problems is linguistic: philosophical problems occur when ‘language goes on holiday’ (PI §38):

Philosophical troubles are caused by not using language practically but by extending it on looking at it. We form sentences and then wonder what they can mean. Once conscious of ‘time’ as a substantive, we ask then about the creation of time. (AWL 15)

It is crucial that we not underestimate, as is often done by Wittgenstein’s detractors, the damage produced by conceptual confusion and the related importance of conceptual elucidation.¹³ Tim Crane, for example, thinks some of these ‘supposed [intellectual] confusions’ to be ‘so banal that it is quite incredible that any serious thinker should be taken in by them’ and he dismisses the linguistic nature of philosophical confusion:

[T]o ask whether time flows (for example) is not to suffer from any kind of intellectual disease which is in need of therapy; it is not to have your intelligence bewitched by language; it is not to misunderstand what Wittgenstein called the ‘grammar’ of the word *time*. Rather, it is to grapple with questions that are at once simple to grasp – what is it for some things to be in the past, and some in the future? – and also of great complexity: how our actual temporal experience of the world is related to the picture of time and space that we have acquired from physics. (2016)

Note that Wittgenstein would not be averse to grappling precisely the questions Crane lists here; what he is really worried about in the AWL passage – and Crane fails to address – is the worry that because of language (i.e. ‘time’ being a substantive), we are confused into thinking that time is a thing (and therefore ask about its creation). As Wittgenstein makes clear:

[I]t is the use of the substantive ‘time’ which mystifies us. If we look into the grammar of that word, we shall feel that it is no less astounding that man should have conceived of a deity of time than it would be to conceive of a deity of negation or disjunction. (BB 6)

Such mystification – often, as here, in the form of reification – is neither rare nor of superficially linguistic importance. Because they are substantives, we are mystified into taking ‘time’, but also ‘mind’, ‘memory’ or ‘consciousness’, to be full-blown entities having discrete existence and location. Because ‘consciousness’ is a noun, we think it must stand for a nominatum – a thing it names. Also, it is all too tempting a step to infer, from the fact that we are sometimes conscious, the *existence* of an *entity* called consciousness. This out-dated residue of the Platonic reification of states and qualities has been blown out of all proportion, the problem of consciousness being ‘arguably the most central issue in current philosophy of mind’ – consciousness being viewed by many philosophers as a physical entity that can only be understood by investigating the brain.¹⁴

The attempt to capture the human person in microphysics has plagued philosophy since, perhaps, the pre-Socratics (the atomists), but it seems to me more pervasive today than it has ever been. Raymond Tallis invokes the current ‘neuromania’, as he calls it, ‘based on the incorrect notion that human consciousness is identical with activity in the brain, that people are their brains, and that societies are best understood as collections of brains’, rightly adding that ‘while the brain is a necessary condition of every aspect of human consciousness, it is not a sufficient condition – which is why neuroscience, and the materialist philosophy upon which it is based, fail to capture the human person’ (2012). Indeed, in its attempts to find the ghost in the machine, philosophical neuromania has even found its way to the *Scientific American* in the guise of ‘experimental philosophy’: ‘Some philosophers today’ – reads the headline in that journal – ‘are doing more than thinking deeply. They are also conducting scientific experiments relating to the nature of free will and of good and evil’ (Knobe 2011, 39). The article is entitled ‘Thought Experiments’, punning on the fact that the thought experiments conducted by philosophers these days tend to emphasize the ‘experiment’ rather than the ‘thought’.

When philosophers like Crane object that reification – being nothing but an innocuous, figurative way of speaking – does not mystify us, they are wrong: reification often impacts and reflects our understanding of some mental concepts as *physical* entities or places in the brain. Of course, this is not dismissive of reification; it only flags our vulnerability to it. Crane’s suggestion that we should accept transfers and extensions of meaning as part of the essence of our language (2015, 258) is platitudinous: Wittgenstein is only combating the extensions that are taken *literally*. As Peter Hacker aptly quips, there is ‘nothing wrong with talking about the *foot* of a mountain – as long as one does not wonder whether it has a shoe’ (Bennett et al, 2007, 154). John Searle’s suggestion that human beings are ‘embodied brains’ (Bennett et al, 2007, 120f) does not smack of the innocuously figurative. Such figurative expressions can mislead us into thinking that a problem is a scientific one when in fact it is not. Scientism can mystify us in different ways, mostly through the uncritical adoption of scientific ways of thinking and images, and their systematic transfer and application to realms outside science.¹⁵

Conceptual confusions such as these are far from trivial in that, like all our unquestioned assumptions and many of our powerful pictures, they by default inform empirical research. Taking the mind and the brain as synonyms or as co-extensive has repercussions on how we conduct research on and treat mental illness; for example, by privileging – through acknowledgment, reward and funding – the physiological approach which de-contextualizes psychiatric disorders and treats them as discrete, drug-treatable, brain conditions rather than as

products of nurture which deserve increased attention and funding. In calling attention to grammatical mystification generally, Wittgenstein also called particular attention to the absence of clarity which has often led the empirical and human sciences astray for centuries.

The scientist crafts new theories about the natural world by using accumulated data, as well as the resources of her laboratory often supplemented by those of her imagination. But in crafting her theories, she is not always linguistically circumspect; indeed, often, as Wittgenstein puts it, her ‘mouth simply runs’:

In a scientific investigation we say all sorts of things, we make many statements whose function in the investigation we don’t understand. For not everything is said with a conscious purpose; our mouth simply runs. We move through conventional thought patterns, automatically perform transitions from one thought to another according to the forms we have learned. And then finally we must sort through what we have said. We have made quite a few useless, even counter-productive motions and now we must clarify our movements of thought philosophically. (RPP ii, 155)

Philosophers are supposed to be the professionals of clarity, and so rather than unquestioningly adopting ‘the picture of time and space ... acquired from physics’ (Crane, 2016) or the picture of memory acquired from neuropsychology, they must conceptually investigate those pictures to ensure that the scientist enter the lab with clear concepts.¹⁶ There is no scientific investigation that is not informed by language, and it is the philosopher’s task to ensure that the scientist is as conceptually well-equipped as possible, both by correcting scientists’ inapt concepts and replacing them with apt ones.

Wittgenstein’s new method of philosophising aims to get philosophers to realise the detrimental consequences of being bewitched by language; to stop taking that seemingly innocuous step of turning a quality into a thing and then examining it as if it *were* a thing. In response to Crane’s dismissal of the value of this method and his urge that we stick to traditional philosophy as a ‘straightforwardly intellectual endeavour in pursuit of the truth’, one must ask what *that* has brought us in the past two thousand years? How has philosophy, as the ‘attempt to answer certain abstract questions which have arisen in the history of human thought in various forms, provoked by various kinds of speculation’ (Crane 2016), brought us anything but universal disagreement on these questions and on the nature of the concepts it abstractly investigates? This scientific view of philosophy as a discipline that, continuous with science, adds to our knowledge about such things as time or the mind or consciousness has proved a failure. It’s time to move on.

How rife the confusion is about the nature of philosophy is evidenced by the current feud on the *uselessness* of philosophy, which shows up the confusion about its dividing line with science. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow’s claim that because ‘philosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science’ ‘philosophy is dead’, and scientists have become the sole ‘bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge’, evinces the currency of the view that philosophy is meant to add to our knowledge (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010, 13). But as Wittgenstein makes clear, it is a crucial misconception to see philosophers as involved in the quest for knowledge at all. Philosophy’s role is *not* to bring us

new knowledge but to set us on the clear path to knowledge: ‘One might also give the name "philosophy" to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions’ (PI §126). This enables us to realise that the fact that science progresses and philosophy does not – at least where knowledge is concerned – is neither a sad state of affairs nor a slur on philosophy, but precisely the way things ought to be.

In reaction to the proclamation that philosophy is dead, physicist Victor Stenger argues that when physicists take ‘their equations and models as existing on one-to-one correspondence with the ultimate nature of reality’, they are engaging in a grand philosophical tradition – namely that of Plato – and this ‘makes them philosophers, too’ (Stenger 2015). The problem though is that Stenger comes to such a conclusion only because he takes metaphysics to be *bona fide* philosophy – an assumption that Wittgenstein seeks to correct. Understanding that metaphysics is in fact pseudo-science in philosophy’s clothing helps clarify the boundary line between science and philosophy.

Stenger’s (misguided) praise notwithstanding, philosophy’s far from glowing record in intellectual usefulness is, I believe, warranted: although philosophers have achieved some great insights, they have also largely contributed to conceptual confusion and dispute. But I also believe Wittgenstein has given us the tools to make that right. Those tools are *conceptual elucidation* and *perspicuous presentation*. However, on Wittgenstein’s view, the philosopher does not wield them – as Locke would have it – as an ‘under-labourer... removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge’, but as an indispensable, proactive, guide to understanding:

What is it ... that a conceptual investigation does? Does it belong in the natural history of human concepts? – Well, natural history, we say, describes plants and beasts. But might it not be that plants had been described in full detail, and then for the first time someone realized the analogies in their structure, analogies which had never been seen before? And so, that he *establishes a new order among these descriptions*. He says, e.g., ‘compare this part, not with this one, but rather with that’ ... *and in so doing* he is not necessarily speaking of *derivation*; nonetheless *the new arrangement might also give a new direction to scientific investigation*. He is saying ‘Look at it like *this*’ – and that may have advantages and consequences of various kinds. (RPP i, 950)

And so, *pace* Horwich (2012, 6), on Wittgenstein’s view, the philosopher’s perspicuous presentation *can* bring new understanding – only let’s not confuse that with knowledge.

4 Re-arranging the familiar: philosophy as perspicuous presentation

The Wittgensteinian philosopher differs from scientists and metaphysicians:

[I]t is ... of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand' (PI §89)

What is in plain view remains misunderstood, or hidden to us, because its simplicity and familiarity have rendered it invisible (PI §129). Once made surveyable by the philosopher's 'new order', rearrangement or 'perspicuous presentation' (PI §122), we are then 'struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful' (PI §129).

But there are many ways of ordering concepts so that they show themselves in their clearest light, and Wittgenstein is not innocent of the most 'conservative' kind of elucidation, which is *classification*. He goes about it relentlessly in the *Remarks on Philosophical Psychology*, with variants in *Zettel*:

Plan for the treatment of psychological concepts.

Psychological verbs characterized by the fact that the third person of the present is to be identified by observation, the first person not.

Sentences in the third person of the present: information. In the first person present, expression. ((Not quite right.))

Sensations: their inner connexions and analogies.

All have genuine duration. Possibility of giving the beginning and the end. Possibility of their being synchronized, of simultaneous occurrence. (RPP ii, 63)

Continuation of the classification of psychological concepts.

Emotions. Common to them: genuine duration, a course. (Rage flares up, abates, vanishes and likewise joy, depression, fear.)

Distinction from sensations: they are not localized (nor yet diffuse!).

Common: they have characteristic expression-behaviour. (Facial expression.) And this itself implies characteristic sensations too. Thus sorrow often goes with weeping, and characteristic sensations with the latter. (The voice heavy with tears.) But the sensations are not the emotions. (RPP ii, 148)

Here, we find Wittgenstein classifying psychological concepts such as emotions and sensations – he will also do moods – according to certain characteristics like localization and duration. He even goes in for subclasses, distinguishing directed from undirected emotions. A real taxonomy is developed. In many of these remarks we also see Wittgenstein go for generalizations and the stating of necessary conditions:

Do not forget: sight, smell, taste etc. are sensations only because these concepts have something in common – as one might take auger, chisel, axe, oxyacetylene torch together, because they have certain functions in common. (RPP i, 782)

The general differentiation of all states of consciousness from dispositions seems to me to be that one cannot ascertain by spot-check whether they are still going on. (RPP ii, 57)

Emotional attitudes (e.g. love) can be put to the test, but not emotions. (RPP ii, 152)

Far from the non-committal stance of a philosopher intent only on dissolving and not reordering, and above all not looking for *the* right or ‘correct’ order, Wittgenstein speaks here of ‘the correct’ treatment’ (RPP ii, 311). The correct classification of these phenomena can alone can bring understanding:

Don’t put the phenomenon *in the wrong drawer*. *There* it looks ghostly, intangible, uncanny. Looking at it rightly, we no more think of its intangibility than we do of time’s intangibility when we hear: ‘It’s time for dinner.’ (*Disquiet from an ill-fitting classification.*) (RPP i, 380; emphasis added)

Meaning, again, that there is a *right-fitting* classification:¹⁷ ‘one has got to *master* the kinships and differences of the concepts’ (RPP i, 1054). It is the philosopher’s responsibility to scrutinise ill-fitting classifications (such as speaking of knowing as a state rather than a disposition) that lead to misleading pictures of the phenomena.

Philosophical classifications are not – as in science – derived from observation of the phenomena, but from ways of speaking about the phenomena. This is what makes the investigation conceptual rather than empirical. It does not, however, lead to linguistic reductivism or linguistic idealism¹⁸; for what we say, how we speak about phenomena, is going to be impacted by how things are. This impact is twofold: causal and logical. Wittgenstein makes clear that inasmuch as the philosopher is doing conceptual elucidation, the *causal* aspect of this correspondence should not concern her – ‘our interest does not fall back on ... *possible* causes’ (RPP i, 146) – for she is concerned only by the logical (or grammatical) relation – that is, what it makes sense to say.¹⁹ This is where Wittgenstein is often accused of reducing our conceptions of the world to linguistic projections unattached to the world – a form of *linguistic idealism* or *reductivism*. The accusation, however, is unwarranted. In clarifying our concepts, Wittgenstein cannot be accused of linguistic idealism, for our concepts are inextricably (logically) connected to our practices, behaviour and form(s) of life:²⁰ ‘The concept of pain is simply embedded in our life in a certain way’ by a set of ‘very definite connexions’ (RPP II, 150). So an investigation’s being grammatical or conceptual does not mean it is unrelated to reality. Much of our grammar is conditioned, non-ratiocinatively infused, by facts (OC §558); it is what we might call *reality-soaked* or *thick* grammar²¹.

Language does not articulate a form of life independent of it, but rather carries and partly constitutes the human form of life. What we say is inextricably, internally, related to what we do, what we are and the world we live in. This should confirm the importance of the linguistic turn in philosophy – the importance of turning our attention to the linguistic nature of much of reality and to the reality-soaked nature of much of language.

5. 'A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar' (PI, p. 222)

On Wittgenstein's view, in elucidating the grammar of love – that is, in clarifying what can and cannot be said about love – a philosopher elucidates what love *is*. But we must remember that by this is meant elucidating only its *logical* nature: e.g., is love a feeling or an emotion or an emotional attitude? In adequately examining the grammar of love, the philosopher arrives at a perspicuous presentation or classification of the concept of love.²² For example, his reminder that as it is nonsensical to speak of love as something that can last a minute, love cannot logically be classified as an emotion or a feeling, but it can be an emotional attitude:²³

Emotional attitudes (e.g. love) can be put to the test, but not emotions. (RPP ii, 152)

Love is not a feeling. Love is put to the test, pain not. One does not say: 'That was not true pain, or it would not have gone off so quickly.' (Z §504)

Of course, as indicated above, the phenomena – in this case, human behaviour – will have impacted our grammar of love and pain. But the philosopher is investigating the concepts, not the phenomena; although in so doing, she is in touch with the phenomena.

The *logical* status of 'what can be said' about phenomena is due to our agreement here not being one in opinion or observation, but in form of life.²⁴ Unlike science, where agreement is (at least sought to be) established objectively – derived from and justified by observation – our agreement in grammar, in what makes sense, is due to convention, unconcerted agreement. Although not objective, this agreement is indisputable: any competent speaker of English must find nonsensical to speak of love as something that can last a minute or of pain as something that cannot. This is something it is not possible to debate, because everyone would agree to it (*cf.* PI §128).

But what of the grammars of mind and brain? Can we arrive at a classification that everyone would agree to? Indeed, why suggest their alleged synonymy is nonsensical or idle in the first place when it constitutes the bread and butter of so many philosophers? Well, because it results from the metaphysical urge to look for 'something that lies *beneath* the surface' (PI §92) and the scientific urge to posit ghostly inner processes.²⁵ Because 'instead of simply saying what anyone knows and must admit', such philosophers are constructing 'a myth of mental processes' (Z §211). The same goes for remembering:

If someone asks me what I have been doing in the last two hours, I answer him straight off and I don't read the answer off from an experience I am having. And yet one says that I *remembered*, and that this is a mental process. (RPP i, 105)

One might also marvel that one can answer the question "What did you do this morning?" – without looking up historical traces of activity or the like.

Yes; I answer, and wouldn't even know that this was only possible through a special mental process, remembering, if I were not told so. (RPP i, 106)

The perspicuous philosophical description here, to which everyone would agree, is 'I answer straight off and don't read the answer off from an experience I am having'. Anything more is speculative explanation characteristic of the 'elves in the basement' mentality.²⁶ To break the hold of those captivating but imperspicuous pictures of the mind, the philosopher must filter out their tendentious and explanatory overlay, and remind us of the unrecognised *obvious*²⁷: i.e. the mind is a set of capacities.²⁸

The peril of scientism is that it encourages people to think that, in order to be adequate, explanations must be theoretical and deep (that is, distant from what we ordinarily think, say or do); and that *not* giving such deep theoretical explanations is a sign of epistemic incompetence. As Wittgenstein writes:

If, for instance, you ask, 'Does the box still exist when I'm not looking at it?', the only right answer would be 'Of course, unless someone has taken it away or destroyed it'. Naturally, a philosopher would be dissatisfied with this answer, but it would quite rightly reduce his way of formulating the question *ad absurdum*. (PR 88)

6. Wittgenstein as armchair scientist: theorizing, of a kind

'In order to climb into the depths one does not need to travel very far; no, for that you do not need to abandon your immediate and accustomed environment' (RPP i, 361)

Does Wittgenstein believe that the only legitimate philosophical preoccupation with reality is a preoccupation with language? He seems adamant that empirical facts *about* language are irrelevant to philosophers:

We are not interested in any empirical facts about language, considered as empirical facts. ... I am only *describing* language, not *explaining* anything. (PG 30)

An explanation of the operation of language as a psychophysical mechanism is of no interest to us. (PG 33)

How language acts on us or the way we acquire language fall outside the purview of grammatical elucidation:

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs (PI §496)

In grammatical investigation, the criteria for whether a language is understood are unaffected by the way language was acquired, whether through teaching or not (BB 12). And so, ‘teaching as the hypothetical history of our subsequent actions (understanding, obeying, estimating length, etc.) drops out of our considerations’ (BB 14).

But, in fact, teaching does *not* drop out of Wittgenstein’s considerations: remarks on the genesis of language and on language-acquisition abound in his work.²⁹ So either this is a contradiction in Wittgenstein or what he says regarding the irrelevance of empirical facts about language applies only to the philosopher engaged in conceptual elucidation; but conceptual elucidation is *not* all that the philosopher engages in. I now briefly explore this.

Some of Wittgenstein’s remarks are clearly in the form of hypotheses on how language is learned. Here is a familiar one:

How does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations? – of the word ‘pain’ for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. (PI §244)

Here Wittgenstein offers, on the basis of empirical observation, a *possible* explanation for how we acquire the meaning of the names of sensations. Is this not armchair learning theory? Such passages give the legitimate impression that Wittgenstein sometimes comes to conclusions about language acquisition from observation, and so is advancing theses or explanations. Indeed, for David Pears, ‘a cardinal *thesis* of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy [is] that language is built on a pre-existing structure of related perceptions and actions’ – a thesis which relies on his examination of the pre-linguistic systems on which any language must be based (Pears 1995, 418, 412). Could it be, as Pears also wonders, that in spite of drawing a firm line between philosophy and scientific inquiry, Wittgenstein found himself inevitably trespassing on the forbidden ground? Does Wittgenstein’s use of the terms ‘primitive’ and ‘natural’, for example, belong to a theory of language acquisition? Keith Dromm does not think so:

[W]e need not understand Wittgenstein to be making empirical claims – let alone offering a full-blown linguistic theory – in his later writings. Instead ... these terms [‘natural’ and ‘primitive’] belong wholly to the type of conceptual investigation that Wittgenstein pursues in those writings.² (Dromm 2003, 675)

In fact, however, Wittgenstein’s use of ‘natural’ and ‘primitive’ is *not* wholly conceptual; he also applies these terms ontogenetically and in such cases, there is an empirical description of language acquisition which leads to a conclusion.³⁰

I think it would be a mistake to call scientific – armchair or otherwise – the kind of simple explanation Wittgenstein offers in PI §244. Armchair science is usually defined as the endeavour to find truths about the world without direct observational or experimental input (Northcott & Alexandrova 2014), sometimes through analysis or synthesis of existent

scholarship, sometimes by sheer intuition or reflection. It characterises a large part of scientific modelling. The kind of explanation Wittgenstein engages in is not of this ilk: his is a simple, straightforward conclusion drawn from the lucid scrutiny of basic facts – a perspicuous presentation of what is always before our eyes. We might say, then, that here Wittgenstein’s perspicuous presentations of what we *say* extend to perspicuous presentations of what we *do*. His basic empirical ‘explanations’ are but presentations drawn from surveying our basic ways of acting, arranging what we have always seen in a more perspicuous light.

As Oswald Hanfling reminds us, there are several senses of ‘theory’ (Hanfling 2004, 187), and one of these may well apply to what Wittgenstein is doing, in spite of his injunction at PI §109. Wittgenstein’s explanations or theories are not of the kind he denies philosophy. The latter, are rightly described by Horwich as hypotheses about some non-evident reality: attempts to unearth facts that are not out in the open; that cannot be discerned merely by looking in the right direction with an unprejudiced eye and a clear head (Horwich 2012, 64). In contrast, Wittgenstein’s explanations result from observations of what ‘in our *your immediate and accustomed environment*’ (RPP i, 361), is plainly before our eyes, from observations so candid and unadulterated by assumptions (‘Don’t think, but look!’) that ‘everyone would agree with them’. Indeed, one would think that Wittgenstein’s *thesis*, as Pears calls it, that ‘language is built on a pre-existing structure of related perceptions and actions’, is hardly debatable, and yet it is debated by some (e.g., Chomsky³¹). This suggests that Wittgenstein underestimates the potential for even the obvious to be a cause of debate and controversy. It is perhaps to the extent that what may seem incontestable (e.g., PI §244) is in fact contested by some, that it may be called a thesis (thereby also pre-empting accusations of dogmatism).

In fact, the passage responsible for the consensus that Wittgenstein believed no theses can be advanced in philosophy should be reread: ‘If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them’ (PI §128). What Wittgenstein is saying here is not that there cannot be any philosophical theses, but that should there be, they would be, or so he believes, non-debatable and uncontroversial.

Does this mean that what philosophy advances is just trivial? Wittgenstein said as much to Moore:

[Wittgenstein] said that he was not trying to teach us any new facts: that he would only tell us ‘trivial’ things – ‘things which we know already’; but that the difficult thing was to get a ‘synopsis’ of these trivialities [...]. He said it was misleading to say that what we wanted was an ‘analysis’, since in science to “analyse” water means to discover some new fact about it, e.g. that it is composed of oxygen and hydrogen, whereas in philosophy ‘we know at the start all the facts we need to know’ (MWL 114)

Wittgenstein’s explanations are as removed from scientific, scientific or metaphysical speculation as can be but look across his desk, he did. For there can be no doubt that Wittgenstein came to (and was consequently able to bring us) his revolutionary views on language, meaning, action, mentality by observing human behaviour and practices. Wittgenstein would have to look across his desk, observe our form of life, to say things such

as: ‘... we can regard behaviour as dissimulation *only under particular circumstances*. (LW I, 252; my emphasis); ‘Just try – *in a real case* – to doubt someone else's fear or pain’ (PI 303; my emphasis); ‘There is an *unmistakable* expression of joy and its opposite. ... there are cases where only a lunatic could take the expression of pain, for instance, as sham.’ (LW II, 32-33; emphasis in the original); ‘The words “I am happy” are a bit of the behaviour of joy’ (RPP I, 450). These, however, are not to be taken as conclusions he comes to about what he sees, but as descriptions that can’t be argued with. That such *realism* did not explanatorily enter into his *conceptual* elucidations, did not turn into an *empiricism* (that is, that he did not turn his observations into justifications) does not mean it did not impact his thought and infiltrate all aspects of his philosophy.³²

Of course, it cannot be excluded that Wittgenstein might have ventured into explanation *against his will*:

I struggle again and again – whether successfully I do not know – against the tendency in my own mind to set up (construct) rules in philosophy, to make suppositions (hypotheses) instead of just seeing what is there (MS 108, Vol. IV, 160)

Yet, even such passages do not rule out that the kind of explanation he struggled to avoid was only the scientific kind, and that this leaves coherent room in Wittgenstein’s philosophy for both the conceptual and the theoretical, thinly rendered. Perhaps the temptation for the latter – which we might call *simple* explanation – was too great to pass up, particularly as it makes so obvious the idleness of explanations that involve speculative metaphysics or the fabrication of ghostly processes. Simple explanation thus became an extension of the perspicuous presentations of a philosopher aware of all the wrong ways of importing explanation into philosophy. Indeed, non-theory-laden, perspicuous explanation is the only kind of explanation that should be expected from a clear philosophical vision.

7. Stop quieting Wittgenstein!

As I hope to have shown, neither Therapeutic nor linguistic reductivism can be pinned on Wittgenstein. Perceptions of his philosophy as fenced in by language and unconcerned by the connection between word and world are unwarranted. So are perceptions of his view and practice of philosophy as only, or mainly, about therapy, dissolution and deconstruction. Of course, no one would want to deny the therapeutic aspect in Wittgenstein’s philosophy: there are elements in it of working on oneself and the purging of false pictures and the dissolution of false problems; but it is wrong to *reduce* it to that. Therapeutic misrepresents Wittgenstein for whom the therapeutic method was not, and was never claimed to be, his only or even preferred method of doing philosophy; indeed, by his own affirmation: ‘there is not a philosophical method’ (PI §133).

John McDowell attempts to make Wittgenstein’s quietism less ‘idle’ by flagging it as ‘an activity of diagnosing, so as to explain away some appearances that we are confronted with genuine problems’. If successful, the ‘supposed problems disappear, leaving no need for theory construction to make things ‘less mysterious’’ (2009, 371). However, McDowell fails to see

that Wittgenstein did not stop at diagnostic activity, but was in the business of problem-solving, and not only dissolving: ‘If I am correct, then philosophical problems must be completely solvable, in contrast to all others’ (BT 181); ‘If one doesn’t want to SOLVE philosophical problems – why doesn’t one give up dealing with them?’ (LW ii, 84; emphasis in the original).

Generating and perpetuating the myth of a quietist Wittgenstein has contributed to mainstream philosophy’s depreciation of a great philosopher.³³ Far from being a neutral bystander in the realm of philosophy, Wittgenstein is a militant, interventionist philosopher whose positive contributions to philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy, education theory, anthropology, primatology, sociology, aesthetics and the cognitive sciences must be recognized, applied and celebrated. On Wittgenstein’s view, philosophy does *not* leave everything as it is, for philosophy or for the sciences: it destroys houses of cards and rearranges the jaded familiar so it can become perspicuous to us; it demystifies where there is confusion and bewitchment; it elucidates where language has gone on holiday; it helps us revise our misconceptions and see things aright, thereby reorienting our philosophical and scientific paths. Wittgenstein’s impact outside philosophy has been more resonant and acknowledged than within.³⁴ Indeed, the recent protest by psychologists against the BBC’s general perception of the mental as all in the brain, signals the recognized influence of his thought on psychology: ‘by "psychological" I don’t mean "inner"’ (RPP ii, 612).

To proclaim Wittgenstein’s quietism – for better or for worse – is to attempt to silence the revolutionary and constructive impact he has made, and can still make, to our *understanding* of ourselves. Peter Hacker has tirelessly made clear, and rightly so, that Wittgenstein’s agenda was interventionist:

Although Wittgenstein has sometimes been misinterpreted as a philosophical quietist, nothing, could be further from the truth. For it is Wittgenstein who, for the first time in the history of our subject, has explained why philosophy has *a license* to interfere in the sciences. For scientists are no less liable to conceptual confusions than anyone else, and scientific theorizing is as liable to conceptual entanglement as any other intellectual endeavour. (Hacker 2013, 19)

Philosophical contribution to the sciences requires keeping up with, and correcting how scientists conceptually engage in their business; it does *not* involve adding to their knowledge base. And so Wittgenstein has not trespassed the thick dividing line between science and philosophy, but contributed to the sciences, he has – and will continue to do.³⁵

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¹ It is this sense of explanation – the scientific sense – that, when practised by philosophers, Wittgenstein (and this paper) counters. Of course, not all explanation (pace strong explanatory scientism of the kind upheld by Stephen Hawking) is scientific (e.g., the explanation of a word's meaning), and Wittgenstein often alludes to a thinner sense of explanation which amounts to a re-description. This is related, but only partly, to what he refers to as 'further descriptions' rather than explanation, as what is called for, say in aesthetics, ethics and philosophy (MWL 106). On this, see Cioffi (1998; 2007) and Schroeder (1993).

² Wittgenstein's closest precursor here is Nietzsche, in his criticism of metaphysics as the postulation of some deep, underlying entity that can *explain* phenomena.

³ TLP 2.18: 'logical form, i.e. the form of reality'.

⁴ Metaphysics is not altogether abandoned by Hume: 'we must cultivate true metaphysics carefully, in order to destroy metaphysics of the false and adulterated kind' (1748, 5).

⁵ Particularly as practised by Newton with his anti-hypothetical stance. Recall Newton's famous phrase, '*hypotheses non fingo*' (I don't feign / invent hypotheses), which suggests that hypotheses should be based on observation, not speculation.

⁶ Here is an account of Wittgenstein's description of his practice of philosophy, by G. E. Moore: 'I was a good deal surprised by some of the things he [Wittgenstein] said about the difference between "philosophy" in the sense in which what he was doing might be called "philosophy" (he called this "modern philosophy"), and what has traditionally been called "philosophy". He said that what he was doing was a "new subject", and not merely a stage in a "continuous development"; that there was now, in philosophy, a "kink" in the "development of human thought", comparable to that which occurred when Galileo and his contemporaries invented dynamics; that a "new method" had been discovered as has happened when "chemistry was developed out of alchemy"; and that it was now possible for the first time that there should be "skilful" philosophers, though of course there had in the past been "great" philosophers. He went on to say that, though philosophy had now been "reduced to a matter of skill", yet this skill, like other skills, is very difficult to acquire. One difficulty was that it required a "sort of thinking" to which we are not accustomed and to which we have not been

trained – a sort of thinking very different from what is required in the sciences. [...] he also said that the “new subject” did really resemble what had been traditionally called “philosophy” in the three respects that (1) it was very general, (2) *it was fundamental both to ordinary life and to the sciences*, and (3) it was independent of any special results of science; that therefore the application to it of the word “philosophy” was not purely arbitrary. He did not expressly try to tell us exactly what the “new method” which had been found was. But he gave some hints as to its nature. He said [...] that the “*new subject consisted in ‘something like putting in order our notions as to what can be said about the world’*, and compared this to the tidying up of a room where you have to move the same object several times before you can get the room really tidy. He said also that we were “in a muddle about things”, which we had to try to clear up’ (MWL 113-14; emphasis added). That Galileo is also the ‘father of modern observational astronomy’ – being the first to turn the telescope towards the stars and getting our first perspicuous view of them – is another good reason to see in him Wittgenstein’s scientific counterpart.

⁷ This vision of Wittgenstein – which I am calling Therapeuticism – was promoted by the New Wittgensteinians, thus called because of the title of what might be called their manifesto volume, *The New Wittgenstein* (Routledge, 2000). Notable ‘New Wittgensteinians’ are Cora Diamond, James Conant, Alice Crary and Rupert Read.

⁸ See, for example, Hutchinson & Read (2006, 5).

⁹ Peter Hacker has abundantly shown the untenability of the Therapeutic (also known as ‘Resolute’ or ‘New Wittgensteinian’) reading of the *Tractatus*. See ‘Was he trying to whistle it?’ and ‘When the whistling had to stop’, reprinted in Hacker 2001.

¹⁰ Here is an example of the distinction: ‘What I am aiming at is also found in the difference between the casual observation “I know that that’s a...”, as it might be used in ordinary life, and the same utterance when a philosopher makes it’; ‘For when Moore says “I know that that’s a...” I want to reply “you don’t know anything!” – and yet I would not say that to anyone who was speaking without philosophical intention’ (OC §§406-407).

¹¹ Remember his remark to Moore that philosophy as he newly conceived it resembled traditional philosophy in being ‘fundamental both to ordinary life and to the sciences’ (MWL 113).

¹² I will use these more or less interchangeably throughout the paper, as Wittgenstein often does. Note that Wittgenstein uses ‘grammar’ as a generic term for the **rules or** conditions that determine sense (PG 88).

¹³ Certainly Hume did not underestimate it: ‘the chief obstacle ... to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and ambiguity of the terms’ (E 45).

¹⁴ See Gennaro (n.d.). William Seager’s worry that ‘despite recent strides in neuroscience and psychology that have deepened understanding of the brain, consciousness remains one of the greatest philosophical and scientific puzzles’ is telling (2016, i).

¹⁵ See Tejedor (2017).

¹⁶ For a discussion of Wittgenstein’s impact on neuropsychology’s correction of its misconceived storage and imprint models of memory, see Moyal-Sharrock (2009).

¹⁷ Which is not to say that this is the classification that lies ‘in the order of things’, but that it is the most logically (grammatically) adequate. And of course, there can be different classifications (or *assembling of reminders*) of the phenomena, relative to the philosopher’s *particular purpose* (cf. PI §127).

¹⁸ I argue this, with Wittgenstein as a case in point, in Moyal-Sharrock (2016a).

¹⁹ ‘We are interested in language as a procedure according to explicit rules, because philosophical problems are misunderstandings which must be removed by clarification of the

rules according to which we are inclined to use words. We consider language from one point of view only.’ (PG 32)

²⁰ Wittgenstein is clear that there is a correspondence between concepts / grammar and very general facts of nature’ (PPF 365; RPP i, 46): ‘A natural foundation for the way [a] concept is formed is the complex nature and the variety of human contingencies’ (RPP ii, 614); ‘The rule we lay down is the one most strongly suggested by the facts of experience’ (AWL 84); ‘The language-game with colours is characterized by what we can do and what we cannot do’ (Z §345).

²¹ See Moyal-Sharrock (2016a).

²² This classificatory aim is essentially no different from Crane’s search for ‘the categories to which conscious phenomena belong’ in his *New Directions in the Study of the Mind*, only Crane’s project attempts to chart the elements of the *ontology* of consciousness (<http://www.timcrane.com/new-directions.html>).

²³ This seems contestable for we ordinarily speak of love as a feeling. Yet remember that philosophy is not there to interfere or correct ordinary usage but only to clarify it philosophically, put philosophical order in the disorder of our concepts.

²⁴ “‘So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?’ – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life’ (PI §241).

²⁵ See Child (2017).

²⁶ I owe this new way of characterising homunculi or ghosts in the machine to Peter Tse, brain neuroscientist, who likens what happens when someone is asked to think of their mother’s maiden name as their saying: ‘Elves in the basement, give me my mother’s maiden name’ and it appeared in their consciousness (BBC *The Forum*, 27 January 2015).

²⁷ How, it may be objected, can one remind someone of something they never knew? I take ‘reminder’ here to mean something like ‘bringing to mind or to our attention’ something that we had seen (that was right under our eyes) without registering or paying attention to it.

²⁸ ‘A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably’ (PI §115).

²⁹ See Cooper (2017).

³⁰ Lars Hertzberg (1992) distinguishes two senses in Wittgenstein’s use of the notion of ‘primitive’: a *logical* sense, indicating the place occupied by a type of reaction or utterance in relation to a language-game; and an *anthropological* sense, connected with understanding the place of a reaction in the life of a human being. I would add: *in the history of the human species* – and so: primitive in the *phylogenetic* sense as well.

³¹ As Chomsky would also hotly debate Wittgenstein’s leitmotif that ‘In the beginning is the deed’ – as also would philosophers who hold representations or propositions as basic to thought.

³² ‘Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing’ (RFM vi, 23, p. 325).

³³ As argued, for example, in Pascal Engel ‘The trouble with W*ttg*ns**n’ *Rivista di Estica, Homagio a Diego Marconi*, 2007, 11-26. Also, Michael Lynch’s reply to Paul Horwich where Lynch questions the validity for philosophy of an overly narrow view of philosophical therapy (‘Of Flies and Philosophers: Wittgenstein and Philosophy’ <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/05/of-flies-and-philosophers-wittgenstein-and-philosophy/>).

³⁴ See Moyal-Sharrock (2016b) for an appreciation of Wittgenstein’s current impact on philosophy and outside of philosophy.

³⁵ This paper has been a few years in the making; I owe its closure to a question put to me in conversation by Peter Hacker at the Laurence Goldstein Memorial conference in Kent (2015).

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