Philosophy as Good for Nothing: Wittgenstein, Socrates, and the Ends and End of Philosophy

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1. One of the *loveliest* things about philosophy is that the question, "What is philosophy?" is itself a *philosophical* question. I once bemoaned to Eike von Savigny that one implication of this is that one is in a certain sense stuck. Anytime one sets out to "do philosophy," one presupposes an answer, consciously or not, to the question as to what philosophy is and how it should be carried out! I am less worked up about this issue than I used to be, but I am now even more concerned about the nature and value of doing philosophy. And given recent work by other philosophers—for example, Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood's recent *An Introduction to Metaphilosophy* and Timothy Williams' *The Philosophy of Philosophy*—there seems to be a felt need to speak more explicitly about metaphilosophy, even if plenty of folks were doing metaphilosophical work without bringing it under that label, e.g., Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Quine, Derrida, and those whose influence has been not merely on this or that problem but to a large extent on method.

2. What are we doing when we do philosophy? How should we understand what philosophy is? These two questions are importantly different, as the first is easily read as descriptive and the second as normative. As we are here not merely interested in what activities people have called philosophy but in what *should* be called philosophy, our pursuit is, to that extent, normative and not merely descriptive.

There are two common ways to try to understand philosophy, namely, by subjects/questions asked and by method; and method implicates the question of ends, as well. What are we after, when we're doing philosophy? Truth or something else? And we should note that method and ends are not necessarily coextensive, for we could agree that truth is the end but disagree as to what truth looks like and/or the best method for arriving at it.

In this context, I want to ask the audience to consider carefully the immense variation in what has been called philosophy in the west and what goes by that name today, and what we might consider philosophical activity that goes by some other name. Calling Western philosophy a footnote to Plato, while making an interesting point, does a radical disservice to the radical variety that we find from Aristotle, to Plotinus, to Cicero, to St. Augustine, to Nicholas of Cusa, to Descartes, to Hume, to Kant, to Nietzsche, to Wittgenstein, to Beauvoir, to Quine, to Joshua Knobe. And this is to list only Western philosophers and primarily men. If we bring in non-Western philosophy and women, the variety of things we might call *philosophy* mushrooms beautifully. And we have, of course, not even touched on the variety of methodologies and ends found under the umbrella term "philosophy." Let us note, here, too, that all this speaks to the philosophical nature of the question, "What is philosophy?" In the rest of this section, I'd like to look at several points that we can draw out from the above considerations and by considering part of the recent Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood text on metaphilosophy.

First, let us note, as Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood do, that any essentialist conception of philosophy, i.e., any conception that claims that there are or ought to be specifiable individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for what philosophy is is going to confront the problem of being either overly inclusive, i.e., including things that we would not want to label philosophy, or overly revisionist, i.e., excluding too much from what has

historically been deemed philosophy. This difficulty is, of course, not definitive regarding rejecting the essentialist position on philosophy.

In this context, I want to emphasize two things. First, the history of philosophy demonstrates the difficulties, if not impossibility, of giving analyses of essences generally. This, of course, is not conclusive as one can simply argue that that is to be expected given the deep complexities involved. However, second, given the nature of the human organism as imperfectly rational, fallible, and continually changing in response to continually changing conditions, and given the messiness of the conditions and events that confront humanity, it strikes me as naïve to think that there could be a singular activity called *philosophy*. This is not conclusive, but it should, I think, give us strong reason to pause. Wittgenstein, I'd argue, gives us further reason to pause if we take seriously his writings on essences and family resemblance.

Second, let us note that if there is no normative essence to philosophy, then there is room for various possible activities legitimately deemed philosophy. And that means neither that everything currently called philosophy would necessarily be legitimate nor that just anything goes. Thus, an important question is: what sort of defeasible criteria might be used to determine what is and what is not philosophy? I say "defeasible" because I am convinced of the contingent and historically contextualized nature of any such criteria; that is, they are themselves subject to philosophical critique and inquiry.

Third, let us note that two of the most important questions concerning possible candidates for philosophy are: a) What is the relationship of philosophy to the sciences? and, again, b) What are the aims of philosophy? These two questions are clearly interdependent.

Regarding the second question concerning the aims, we can divide them up generally between those that are cognitive and those that are non-cognitive. However, what exactly does *cognitive* mean here? Does it mean making truth claims? If so, then truth claims about what? The world? Would that then exclude a conception of philosophy as the logic of the sciences, i.e., where philosophy does not make claims about the world in the way science does but helps to clarify the concepts and claims of the sciences? Would such clarification not involve truth claims? Certainly, but, we might say, they're either about concepts or the relationships between them; they are not truth claims about the nature of the world but claims made true by the meanings and concepts implicated.

However, since one can aim to make truth claims about the world, concepts, or implications, we might wonder about how useful the cognitive/non-cognitive distinction is for dividing things up, as it does not mark the difference between, say, *science* and *philosophy as logic of the sciences*. In fact, if we don't limit the cognitive to the making of truth claims about the physical world, then it is not clear that any of the positions on philosophy that Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood canvass are non-cognitive. For example, philosophy as a contribution to human understanding makes claims about our knowledge that are meant to constitute or lead to understanding. Philosophy as transcendental inquiry makes truth claims about experience. And even philosophy as edifying discourse has truth as a goal, even if it is not objective truth; that is, there are standards of truth and correctness in play even for Rorty—they are just not absolute, final, or "objective."

Fourth, what we find missing from their discussion, even though Wittgenstein appears twice, is a view of philosophy that sees philosophy either, one, as something from which to be freed from without replacement or, two, something to be ended altogether for reasons other than being freed. In the interpretations one often finds of Wittgenstein's later work, or at least the *Philosophical Investigations*, where it is often understood to be offering *philosophy as therapy in*

distinction from non-therapeutic, "traditional" philosophy, traditional philosophy is seen as fundamentally flawed and something from which to be freed. This kind of freeing seems to imply an end to traditional philosophizing, though given the variety of that tradition, it is unclear to me that all of it could really be called into question *en masse* in a way that some other one thing, namely, Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy could replace it. But, if it did, that would be a way of bringing one kind of philosophy, namely, "traditional philosophy," to an end, leaving a Wittgensteinian replacement.

There are at least two other main ways philosophy might be thought to be capable of being brought to an end. First, a positive sense, where all its problems receive solution and no new problems arise. Given both the human condition—fundamentally fallible, imperfectly rational, temporal, and always under the possibility of death—and given the apparent lack of progress in philosophy, this is unlikely, to say the least; however, some form of it is found in the idea of philosophy as "midwife to" or "residue of" the sciences, where philosophy "progresses" by eventually clarifying its problems to where they become answerable by science. Second, there is a negative sense of ending philosophy, where it's shown that all previous philosophy rests on a fundamental error. I take the *Tractatus* to give a version of this negative sense of ending philosophy.

Importantly, of all the conceptions of philosophy so far, it is *perhaps* only with philosophy as Wittgensteinian therapy that we find the possibility of a true non-cognitive view—the goal is to free people of philosophy, not by making new truth claims, but ad hominem-like, by using what the "patient" already knows.

3. Here is one way of describing Zen Buddhism: The overarching goal of Zen is to end suffering for others and ultimately oneself. The ending of suffering is possible if one awakens to the true nature of reality and thereby becomes *enlightened*. Enlightenment is, in part, a matter of seeing the world aright, achieving a kind of final wisdom that will allow one to let go of desire and attachments, which divide the self and other.

Due to my work on the writings of the 13th century Zen Master Dōgen, I don't think this is the best way to think about Zen Buddhism. However, let us continue with this conception for a bit. Along these lines, we can view meditation, *zazen*, as a (necessary) *means* for achieving the goal, the *end*, of enlightenment. The idea is that if one meditates, practices zazen, correctly and sincerely long enough, then this will be the *means* to a breakthrough experience, where one apprehends reality as it really is, and this will transform one's experience of self, world, and other, and thereby bring an end to suffering. Meditation, then, is a tool, *the means*, to be used to achieve an end. Given such a description, and it is a tempting one, it is interesting to read the following from the 20th century Japanese Zen monk Kodo Sawaki:

> What is zazen good for? Nothing! We should be made to hear this good-for-nothingness so often that we get calluses on our ears and practice good-for-nothing zazen without any expectation. Otherwise, our practice really is good for nothing.[1]

What could it mean to say that zazen is good for nothing?! Why do it then?

For Dōgen, enlightenment is best *not* conceived of as some final state to be attained after long, strenuous effort on the cushion doing zazen. One should spend a great deal of time in seated meditation, but it is not to be conceived of as practice in pursuit of some *separate* goal.

[1] *The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo*, 138.

Instead, for Dōgen, enlightenment is something that one enacts with one's entire body-mind, not only on the cushion but in every activity. It is a way of being, of doing, marked centrally by presence, compassion, and the grasping of, and openness to, the transitory and interdependent nature of everything. But, to repeat, it is not some distant goal. As Dōgen says, Buddhas don't wait for enlightenment. To view zazen, or anything else, as a means to the end of enlightenment is to defile it. For Dōgen and Kodo, as soon as one sincerely sits zazen, one actualizes enlightenment. Thus, Kodo insists upon saying that zazen is good for nothing. If it is viewed as a means to an end other than itself, then it is defiled, then it will amount to nothing, for, among other things, such defilement sets up a dualism in the heart of reality—namely, the dualism between enlightenment and non-enlightenment. But, in Dōgen's tradition, everything is already enlightenment itself, Buddha-nature itself, it must "simply" be actualized.

It can be helpful to think of this conception of enlightenment along the lines of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, well-being/"happiness." In *the Quest for a Moral Compass*, Kenan Malik says that for Aristotle virtue is not an *end*, but is a *means* to *eudaimonia*. This is problematic because, for Aristotle, virtue properly understood is not a means but rather both an *end in itself,* insofar as it is *to kalon* ("the beautiful"—that for the sake of which things are appropriately done), and *partially constitutive* of *eudaimonia*. That is, *eudaimonia* for Aristotle *just is* a life of virtuous activity (in combination with other goods such as pleasure, wealth, luck, being a man, good looks, etc.). Similarly, a life of enlightenment is a life of "enlightened" (compassionate) activity. Neither virtue nor zazen are properly conceived of as means to the ends in question.

I have gone through this brief description of Dōgen's Zen and related it to Aristotle's work because I think doing so allows us to more clearly draw out what it means to take an activity as an *end in itself* and not *merely a means*. In this context, I think we can even better appreciate Socrates in the *Apology*. I want to consider that as we may see the seated meditation of zazen as "good for nothing," so, too, we might explore the idea of "philosophy as good for nothing."

To get closer to that idea, let's turn to the *Apology*. Famously, Socrates say:

> If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because…it is the greatest good for a [person] to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for a [person], you will believe me even less.[2]

The central line here is, "…it is *the greatest good* for a [person] to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living…." I want to note first, that while he explicitly references virtue and the other things, which are by and large (if not completely) ethical, he nevertheless refers to what he is doing elsewhere in the dialogue as *philosophy*. For example, "…I would say to you: 'Men of Athens…I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to *practice philosophy*, to exhort you….'"[3] Whether Socrates is supposed here to have thought that ethics was all of philosophy, is unclear. Regardless, Socrates is doing philosophy, even if it is not all of philosophy—however, two things: one, I'd argue that one can't do ethics without doing metaphysics, epistemology, etc.; two, given the wide range of

[2] (37e-38a, Tran. Grube)
[3] Plato 29d-30b.

things we've seen count as philosophy, no "philosopher" does all philosophy, even if within a single tradition.

Turning back to Socrates' point about philosophy as the greatest good, I want to emphasize that he does not say that the greatest good is *to have solved* philosophical problems or *to have achieved some final theory of things*. No. The greatest good is to *discuss* philosophy, the activity itself. Insofar as such an examined life is a philosophical life, this squarely contains the idea that philosophical conversation, doing philosophy, is an end in itself. In this sense, then, we can say, *as long as there are no deans, governors, or members of the BOR in the room*, that philosophy is *good for nothing*.[4]

4. It is presumably conceivable that one day we will be able to say with great confidence, and in unison, what the world's ultimate constituents are from the perspective of physics, that some final physical description of space-time and all the laws governing the behavior of whatever is ultimate could be given. In this vein, too, it is conceivable that at least some of what are now taken to be difficult philosophical problems will turn into resolved scientific ones. It is conceivable that aspects of consciousness, for example, might succumb to this.

Now, I could be mistaken about this concession to science. Perhaps its claims will also always remain tentative, at least many of them, due, for example, to the underdetermination of theory by the evidence. However, even if that is not the case for science, i.e., for law-governed, causal-empirical explanations of phenomena, something akin to the underdetermination of theory by the evidence seems to be unavoidably true for human beings regarding philosophical questions about value, meaning, God, suffering, death, how to conceive our humanity, the self, the self in relation to others, the self in relation to the world, and on and on. In these areas, anything that we or others have said will always be tentative for at least two reasons. The first is our inescapable epistemic limitations, including our always being in a state of incomplete information, incomplete understanding, and unknown (unknowable?) levels/degrees of justification. The second is that not only are we on Neurath's ship, never able to go into dry dock to "objectively" assess and adjust our understanding and knowledge of things once and for all, but we are forever sailing into foreign waters, waters whose nature changes in relation to the machinations of the ships sailing upon them. Less poetically, as individuals and as a species, we are forever coming upon new difficulties, new interests, new concerns, new questions, and changes in the world we experience more generally. That which is important to a young adult is not the same for someone in middle age, nor is the way everything appears. This shift in appearance is due, in part, to shifts in belief and values, but also to accumulation of, and reflection on, experience more generally. And whenever we come to any tentative place to set anchor, after a while, we recognize the need to set off again. Not only does this occur over the course of a single person's life, but, of course, it also occurs because of cultural and societal changes, many of which are tied to technologies. One of the problems with technology's pace is that we never have enough time to discern the value and/or possible harm of a technology before it becomes ubiquitous and before it is taken up as a new foundation and built upon. But the point is that as individuals and as a species we continually confront ever new conditions: *Reality is continually confronting us as a question demanding a response*.

Nevertheless, even given this description of the human condition, we, of course, must be very careful in talking about philosophy as good for nothing. First, is philosophy not a *means* to

[4] Another issue I wish to bracket here is whether we need to think of philosophy as the greatest good to think of it as an end in itself in the way I discuss it.

achieving the examined life? Doesn't so much come from Socrates' saying that "the unexamined life is not worth living"? So, we might think, living the examined life, the philosophical life, is a *means* to achieve an examined life. I think that's mistaken because Socrates says that the unexamined life is not worth living *because* philosophy is the greatest good. That is, it is practicing philosophy, examining life, daily that makes life meaningful; practicing philosophy is the meaning, not a means to it. As Aristotle's *eudaimonia* is constituted by a life of virtue, the examined life, the meaningful life, is *constituted* by practicing philosophy daily.

However, if we think of philosophy as good for nothing, as being an end in itself, what happens to the end of truth? Are we not after something, mustn't we be after something if practicing philosophy is to constitute an end in itself? In other words, even if we agree that philosophy can be an end in itself, the nature of its activity is still dependent upon some characterization of the end. For Socrates a central goal is to work to figure out the nature of virtue and the good life, and to understand and know oneself; that is, he pursued *the truth of those matters*. And given the clearly, so to speak, *lived-life* nature of that goal, it is understandable how pursuing it might constitute an *examined life*. But what about other possible philosophical ends? What about philosophy as immature science? Or philosophy as a part of science? Can we view those pursuits as ends in themselves that constitute the greatest good and the examined life? The view of philosophy-as-the-greatest-good seems to fit better with *philosophy as elucidation and critique of worldview* or *philosophy as edifying discourse*. And perhaps this view of unending philosophical practice as an end in itself fits Rorty's conception of philosophy as edifying discourse best of all, for, "the point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find 'objective truth'."[5] Again, truth is still the ideal of inquiry here, it is just that there is no illusion of "objective truth," or truths of an unchanging noumenal world. However, the conclusion I want to draw here is not that Rorty's view of philosophy as edifying discourse should be adopted, but rather that, given the idea of philosophy as the greatest good, as constitutive of a meaningful life, and given the pluralistic view of philosophy I want to endorse, we must be careful to consider exactly what can fulfil the idea of philosophy as the greatest good.

5. I want to briefly confess something that goes to further show the imperfect rationality of our existence and the complexity of the issues under discussion. Because of my philosophically induced longstanding atheism and fear of death in the absence of God, etc., for a very long time without realizing it, I have been under the constant threat of nihilism. Further, I have long been unaware of just how much that nihilism, though it continues to loom, sword-of-Damoclese-like, has been largely kept at bay through my philosophical work the last 20 years or so.

However, it does not always merely loom. For example, when I first taught in grad school (around 2003), I was leading discussion sections and early in the semester we read Plato's *Phaedo*. Taking the students through the arguments for an afterlife had me obsessing more than usual about death, and I ended up falling into the worst acute depression I'd ever felt. For the first time, my day to day experience was washed out, feeling gray and without meaning. I had never actually experienced a lack of meaning in my engagement with the world before. This lasted for weeks, a mercifully short time in hindsight, but what helped to pull me out of it was the realization that though so much else had been drained of meaning, my love and care for my family and friends was intact. I still experienced them as meaningful and important.

[5] Rorty quoted in Overgaard, Gilbert, and Burwood 2013, 43.

I share this bit of biography because I think it reveals how much issues of meaning, issues of nihilism, are not merely the product of argument, but are in some sense *nonrational* aspects of our psychology. I didn't find reasons to find my relationships meaningful, they simply were despite what seemed like good reasons against their being meaningful. Further, while I am here exploring the idea of philosophical activity itself being the greatest good, and a possible way of responding to nihilism, philosophical activity is not the sole source of meaning. And the apparently unassailable value of my relationships, and of the love at their heart, calls into question what their relationship is to philosophy and what it means to call philosophy the greatest good. A question I am going to bracket.

6. Philosophy arises out of both our nature and the world's (an artificial line, of course, as our nature is a part of the world). We have both "bodily" and "thoughtly" existence, the nature of each a) affects our modes of existing and b) are themselves always in question. The world comes to us underdetermined and variably interpretable. Add to this situation that we exist in time, and in a reciprocal relationship with the world and each other, ourselves and the world always changing in response to each other. We face uncertainty regarding what has come before and what and who we were, what confronts us now and what and who we are now, and what will confront us in the future, and who and what we will be.

In this lived context, what, then, is philosophy? I want to offer a response that is general enough to be as inclusive as possible, yet is not meant to provide necessary and sufficient conditions. One that is meant to be *informative* and *useful*, but nevertheless a *defeasible*, working *explanation*. Philosophy, then, most generally, is the careful working out of how best to respond to those aspects of life and the world we find confronting us at any given moment that are indeterminate and not settleable by direct observation, where this indeterminacy is due to epistemic limitations and/or intrinsic features of the situation (such as underdetermination), and where the "best" of "how best to respond" is always itself in question as to its meaning. This way of looking at human beings and philosophy explains, in part, why "What is philosophy?" is itself a philosophical question. In part, what philosophy is, and what we think it *should* be, will be determined by what we work out to be "the best" way of responding to the indeterminate and confounding world that confronts us, moment to moment.

Further, what I find helpful about this explanation of philosophy is that it acknowledges that giving reasoned arguments in some format is not going to be the only legitimate way to think one is best responding to the those "problematic" aspects of the world. Importantly, this understanding of philosophical activity does not mean that everyone must become academic philosophers or that one must engage texts labeled "philosophy" or that one has to engage texts at all. An important question is found here, namely, what might be the minimum requirements for doing philosophy? Leaving that aside though, I want to emphasize the importance of the idea that one need not engage or write explicitly "philosophical" texts to satisfy this explanation of philosophy. We find people engaging in all sorts of ways that wouldn't count as "philosophical" by many/most academic philosophy departments. For example, in literature and poetry. This leaves open the place of argument in philosophy, but we should remember that arguments come in many forms, most of which are not in explicit terms of Premise 1, Premise 2, Therefore, Conclusion C. And thus, authors of literature and poetry may well be engaged in argument and engaged in making a case for a point of view, or, alternatively, "simply" expressing a point of view in a significant and recommending way, or some other way that is from their perspective the best way to respond.

From all that we have seen so far, what we have found is that life confronts us, most basically, with what we can call the *philosophical imperative*. Life demands philosophy. It is a categorical imperative, one that applies to everyone, regardless of whether they acknowledge it or want it. And it is a self-referential imperative, one that demands to be questioned as to its nature and consequences.

Let us connect the philosophical imperative to the idea that philosophy is "good for nothing," that philosophy is an end in itself, and that it is philosophical activity that constitutes a meaningful or worthwhile life. While there may be a variety of possible sources of meaning available to people, if we recognize both the philosophical imperative, and the idea of philosophy as the greatest good, then we have an implied source of meaning insofar as life demands philosophy and philosophical activity constitutes a meaningful life. In other words, life demands to be made meaningful, and this demand is irrevocable, withstanding, at the theoretical if not psychological level, the threat of nihilism, whatever its source.

We can put this point regarding life, philosophy, and meaning/value even more provocatively, namely: The meaning of human existence is, at least in part, to figure out that existence, vis-à-vis the philosophical imperative. However, vitally, the point of figuring out life is not as a preliminary to some other state or mode of existence. It is, rather, an end in itself. In this way, too, philosophy becomes like Dōgen's conception of zazen where the point is not something outside of zazen but simply zazen itself.

7. One of the reasons I was first attracted to Wittgenstein's later work was that it seemed to provide an explanation for both why it was that philosophers were doing what they were doing and why they were unable to definitively solve the problems they confronted. In my early "disciple" stage of studying Wittgenstein, I uncritically accepted my interpretation of his diagnosis as spot on! Over the years I lost my disciple card and became more critical of Wittgenstein while still deeply influenced, particularly, by his later work. And it's in this context that I find myself perplexed by Wittgenstein's intimations regarding bringing philosophy to an end, or at least "traditional" philosophy, and his overall ambivalent attitude and temperament toward philosophy.

In the *Investigations*, we must contend with whose voice is in play. Thus, in §133, when we read

> The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question.
> There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were. PI §133

we are left with the question of who the "me" is in "enables *me* to break off philosophizing when I want to." According to Rush Rhees Wittgenstein said to him, "In my book I say that I am able to leave off with a problem in philosophy when I want to. But that's a lie; I can't."[6] And in Wittgenstein's correspondence we find a similar tension. Early, in 1912, he writes to Russell, "There is nothing more wonderful in the world than the *true* problems of philosophy."[7] In 1935, he writes to W.H. Watson:

[6] Rhees, 1984, p. 219 n. 7
[7] 1912 letter to Russell #4

> I have not yet published anything and don't know if I ever will but my intention is now to have something publishable ready by the end of this academic year. *After that I want to leave Cambridge and Philosophy and I have some mad plans.* One is to study medicine, if I still have the brains to study anything. I long for a job that puts me in contact with human beings.[8]

A seemingly clear expression of his desire to leave *philosophy*! But then in 1945, he writes to Malcolm, "I too regret that for external and internal reasons I can't do philosophy, for that's the only work that's given me real satisfaction. No other work really bucks me up."[9]
I note this series of apparently changing attitudes not because they are unknown, but, in part, to emphasize what I have already, namely, that we are beings *in time*, subject to changing conditions and changing selves. But I also do it to bring into focus the question of what it could mean, given what I'm calling the philosophical imperative, to "leave Cambridge and Philosophy." A simple interpretation would be not that he intends to break off doing philosophy altogether, but rather that he wants to leave the philosophical scene in Cambridge. However, given that the above letter is not the only sign of Wittgenstein's struggling with whether to keep to philosophy, this simple interpretation of leaving "Cambridge and Philosophy" is not obviously correct. We might consider here both Wittgenstein's preference for isolation when doing philosophy and the last line above—"I long for a job that puts me in contact with human beings." We should note, too, that this idea of possibly leaving philosophy altogether implies both a) the denial or rejection of the philosophical imperative, and the considerations that ground it; and b) that Wittgenstein did not think that doing actual philosophy could be done in the context of everyday life, i.e., apart from attempting something grand and significant.

These issues come even more into question when we consider Monk's biography of Wittgenstein, where, after noting Russell's writing that (the young) Wittgenstein's strongest impulse is philosophy, he writes:

> He believed that one should be – …as all geniuses are – a creature of impulse. But he also had an almost overbearing sense of duty, and was prone to periodically crippling self-doubts. Russell's encouragement had been necessary precisely because it enabled him to overcome these doubts, and to follow his strongest impulse *happily*. His family had been struck by the immediate change that came over him after he had been encouraged to work on philosophy by Russell. And he himself, at the end of this term, told Russell that the happiest hours of his life had been spent in his rooms. But this happiness was caused not simply by his being allowed to follow his impulses, but also by the conviction that – as he had an unusual talent for philosophy – he had the *right* to do so.[10]

[8] 1935 letter to W. H. Watson #198. My emphasis. This happens in 1935. As noted below, there is good reason to believe that around 1937 there was a major shift in Wittgenstein's conception of what he was doing regarding methodology. What connection is there between his pre-1937 views of methodology and his hear thinking he might be able to get to a point of leaving off from philosophy?
[9] 1943 letter to Norman Malcolm, #308
[10] Monk 1990, 45.

What an idea! Must one earn the right to do philosophy? The answer depends on what we mean by philosophy, but it is a fascinating contention. And in this context, too, we should remember Wittgenstein's regularly steering people away from philosophy and/or intellectual pursuits more generally. I'm thinking, for example, of Francis Skinner, whom Wittgenstein warned away not only from an academic career in mathematics, but whom Wittgenstein also thought was not a "thinker" to begin with.[11] As Monk emphasizes, Wittgenstein also attempted to dissuade Malcolm from academia: "Couldn't Malcolm do some manual work instead? On a ranch or on a farm, say?"[12] Declining, Malcolm went on to get his PhD in philosophy, but in response to this, Wittgenstein expressed deep reservation in a letter:

> Congratulations on your Ph.D.! And now: may you make good use of it! By that I mean: may you not cheat either yourself or your students. Because, unless I'm very much mistaken, that's what will be expected from you. And it will be very difficult not to do it, and perhaps impossible; and in this case: may you have the strength *to quit*.[13]

Wittgenstein makes clear in a letter four months later that his concern regarding Malcolm cheating himself (or others) is not specific to him but anyone in his position. Is the problem here philosophy or academia? It's not clear. One can imagine that the cheating concerns the expectation that he will teach philosophy in a way that is anathema to Wittgenstein, such that the problem is not Malcolm's interest in philosophy but his interest in *making a living at it* through being an academic. This suspicion is further corroborated when we consider a letter Wittgenstein writes to C.L. Stevenson in September of 1934:

> I hope you'll enjoy teaching: but if you're any good at it I think your enjoyment will be kept down somewhat by the discovery of how *enormously* difficult it is to get clear enough about a thing to be able to explain it to another man without cheating him and yourself. I mean that if you don't find it *overwhelmingly* difficult to teach philosophy you won't be much good at it. For I imagine that "rock-bottom honesty", as you call it, is damn difficult to acquire.[14]

One perhaps cheats the other if one tries to do the philosophical work for the other that the other needs to do form themselves. It is easy to remember Wittgenstein's preface to *PI* and his not wanting to spare the reader the trouble of thinking. Perhaps in the context of teaching there may well be, too, the temptation to try to make something clear to the students that one has not yet sufficiently clarified for oneself. So, the problem here seems to be more with the context of academic teaching than philosophy.

We might take the following as further evidence for thinking the problem is academia. In response to a flippant remark from Malcolm regarding Britain's purported assassination of Hitler, Wittgenstein is recorded as having said:

> …what is the use of *studying* philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not

[11] Monk 1990, 359.
[12] Monk 1990, 425.
[13] McGuinness 2012, 326. Letter to Malcolm on 22.6.40.
[14] McGuinness 2012, 233. Letter to Stevenson on 10.9.34.

> improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any . . . journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends.[15]

Here Wittgenstein seems to be assigning some value to philosophy beyond the creation of great works, such as he pursued. However, we should be careful to note that here the question is one of *studying* philosophy, not *doing* philosophy. We might think that one cannot study philosophy without doing it, but it is not clear that Wittgenstein would have been keen on this idea.

This is but some of the evidence for Wittgenstein's ambivalent attitudes and beliefs about philosophy. He seemed to be both enamored with it and in need of getting away from it. No doubt this is partially explained by his intensity, evidenced, for example, in his need to sit in the front row of a darkened movie theatre watching American westerns to get away from his thinking. And we see it, possibly, in PI §133, where he writes, "The [real discovery is the one] that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question." This can be read as an expression of a felt need to find peace in, or in regard to, philosophy. However, as always, we need to be careful here. As David Stern emphasizes under the influence of Cavell, "'The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of breaking off doing philosophy when I want to' – can both be read as an expression of an earlier vision of the end of philosophy – the idea that there is a Real Discovery to be made – and the later rejection of that idea."[16]

While noting Stern's warning, I nevertheless think we need to pay careful attention to the *metaphilosophical* component of the lines in §133, for example, "so that it [i.e., philosophy] is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question." That is, the real discovery would be one that not necessarily obviated the need to do some form of philosophy altogether, but the one that would obviate the need to do *metaphilosophy*, which for Wittgenstein meant finding a way to comprehensively address, or "explain away," individual philosophical problems.[17] We find such an attitude expressed early in the *Tractatus* insofar as he took that work to have ultimately discovered a way to "solve" all philosophical problems. And earlier in his notebooks, he writes, "Don't get involved in partial problems, but always take flight to where there is a free view over the whole single great problem, even if this view is still not a clear one."[18] I more and more think that the "single great problem" of philosophy for Wittgenstein was philosophy itself. And given his aspirations to greatness and genius, it would be fitting that he would not be satisfied with addressing this or that philosophical problem, but would need to go to the heart of philosophy itself and either solve it or destroy it. And this need not, of course, mean that he was not also caught up by individual philosophical problems—philosophical problems which he simultaneously wants to use to work out the nature of the proper metaphilosophy, and to

[15] Monk 1990, 424. My emphasis.
[16] Stern 2004, 131.
[17] Fogelin 1987, however, takes issue with a reading of PI §§89-133 metaphilosophically. But I don't know if his complaint is simply about those sections of PI or Wittgenstein's work more generally. He writes, "'Wittgenstein's problems are philosophical rather than *meta*-philosophical . . . For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are not genuine problems: they present nothing to be solved . . . A philosophical investigation should respond directly to a philosophical problem by exposing its roots and removing it' (…142….)." Quoted in Stern 2004, 124.
[18] November 1, 1914.

demonstrate how it works,[19] all while being himself tempted again and again to be seduced by them as genuine problems. Wittgenstein was all-too-human, torn by deep tensions.

Later, after he recognizes the limitations of the *Tractatus*, he doesn't give up the quest for a comprehensive method, though it is complicated by an apparent abandonment of being able to fulfill the aspiration in a singular way. In thinking about his metaphilosophy, we do well to be cautious and not, as Stern warns against, "…presuppose that Wittgenstein's 'approach to philosophy' is the same in the 1930-1 manuscripts, the 'Philosophy' chapter of the Big Typescript, and the *Philosophical Investigations*."[20] Along these lines, let's note recent remarks from Conant concerning the above quoted passage from the 1914 notebooks. He writes:

> Let me say, first of all, that I agree with McGinn that the aspiration that is expressed here in the *Notebooks* is one that continues to shape the conception of philosophical method at work in the *Tractatus*. In fact, I wish to argue for an even stronger claim: namely, that this aspiration—for a single free view over the whole of philosophy—continues well into the period of work that people ordinarily think of as belonging to that of the "later" Wittgenstein. I will also be concerned to argue for two further related claims: (1) that Wittgenstein's eventual abandonment of this aspiration represents as significant a development in Wittgenstein's philosophical trajectory as any that is properly associated with the break between the *Tractatus* and those writings of Wittgenstein's which date from the first half of the 1930s; and (2) that it represents a shift in his thinking about the nature of philosophy whose momentousness becomes completely obscured on the standard telling of Wittgenstein's philosophical development.[21]

Conant, like Schulte (2002) and surely others I'm unaware of, sees Wittgenstein shifting from a singular methodology to a pluralistic one around the time of 1937. However, even though the methodology may be properly viewed as pluralistic, we can with good justification assert that Wittgenstein holds the view that philosophical problems need to be *dissolved* rather than *solved* up until the end of his life, however it is to be done. Evidence for this general view of dissolution can be found, for example, in Wittgenstein's lifelong appreciation of Hertz's lines: "When these painful contradictions are removed, the question as to the nature of force will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions."[22] Just to trace a few moments of Wittgenstein's basic interest in this line of thinking, in the notes for the February 23rd, 1939 meeting of the Moral Science Club, after explicit reference to Hertz's lines above, we have, "Dr W said he must confess that this passage seemed to him to sum up philosophy."[23] Later, in the November 14th, 1946 meeting of the Moral Science Club Wittgenstein is reported to have presented a paper in which, among other things, he talked about how:

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[19] Compare this line from the 1939 minutes of the Moral Science Club. In reference to the "Method of Verification," Wittgenstein, "…thought that the best way of shewing whether the method of investigation were useful would be to thrash out one or two problems by means of it" (McGuinness 2012, 289).
[20] Stern 2004, 126.
[21] Conant 2015, 626.
[22] Quoted in Monk 1990, 446.
[23] McGuinness 2012, 296.

> A question may be answered in either one of two ways: by giving an explicit answer to it, or by showing how the question is a muddled one, and therefore should not have been asked. Philosophical questions are answered in the second way, for the general form of a philosophical question is, "I am in a muddle; I don't know my way." Prof. Wittgenstein gave as an example what Mach did in connection with the muddle about "temperature", and he quoted with approval what Herz said about such questions as, "What is force?".[24]

Around this time, Wittgenstein does cross out Hertz's typed lines from TS 227, the so-called "*Spätfassung*" of the *Investigations*, and writes in the Nestroy motto that comes to replace it in the *Philosophical Investigations*.[25] I don't take this as a rejection of it, and when I recently emailed David Stern about Hertz's view, asking "Was [Wittgenstein] still thinking generally along those lines up until the very end? My impression is yes" he responded, writing, "We…know that he repeatedly quoted it throughout his life, and there's no sign I know of that he changed his mind about the importance of Hertz's work. So, yes, I'd agree."[26]

For these reasons, I believe that for the later Wittgenstein, whatever the detailed complexities of interpretation, whatever the *details* of the methodology, the proper metaphilosophy is still going to make philosophy out to be a non-cognitive enterprise intended to treat people's philosophical perplexities. It's in this context that we *can* legitimately situate the idea of philosophy as therapy, referenced, as we've seen, in PI §133: "There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were."

When it comes to thinking of *philosophy as* consisting of a variety of methods that are therapies, we should, I think, be concerned to answer three questions. First, what are its goals?—That is, is philosophy to effect changes in people's beliefs, attitudes, emotional well-being, ways of living, what? Second, what are its methods? What exactly are these different methods/therapies? How are they performed? Are they tabulated in advance? And third, what is its scope? That is, is philosophy-as-Wittgensteinian-therapy supposed to be applicable to all hitherto-deemed philosophical problems or is it limited to certain problems only? If only certain ones, then what criteria do we use to differentiate which are which?

There is not time now to address these three questions in the way that I think they deserve. The number of questions, for example, concerning genetic vs immanent, resolute vs irresolute, and Pyrrhonian vs non-Pyrrhonian, etc., readings that need to be answered here is immense. So, I'm grateful that so many others have already been long at work at these or related issues.

In the time I have left, I want to simply raise some general concerns about the overarching idea that *all possible properly called philosophical problems are such to be properly handled only by way of dissolution in contrast to solution or something other than dissolution*, whatever and however dissolution is to be achieved. I want to note at the outset that the philosophical imperative could be true while all the problems prompted by life are to be dissolved and not answered in some other way. However, regarding Socrates' notion of philosophy as the greatest good, it is not clear whether that general idea could be carried out if all philosophy is dissolution.

The two main issues that I want to address now concern, first, whether it is plausible to think that *all possible philosophical problems or questions* are genuinely susceptible to

[24] McGuinness 2012, 404.
[25] See the Kritische, Genetische Edition of PI.
[26] Email exchange on 4.6.18.

dissolution, and, second, what it could mean to think of philosophy as therapy given the nature of human existence and the idea that doing philosophy is constitutive of a meaningful life. My remarks on these issues will be much more programmatic than I would like, but that is due in part to time and in part to their exploratory nature.

8. Seriously addressing the question of whether it makes sense to think of all possible philosophical problems as dissolvable, rather than solvable (or perhaps even perpetually in progress and desirably so), we'd need to go into much more detail about all the various ways a problem might be dissolvable—a task beyond our present scope. Nevertheless, I take the following issues to be general enough that they bypass this problem, at least to some extent.

Please, consider the following examples and difficulties:

I) Simply given the massive variety of issues and methods that have been deemed philosophical, across time and from East to West, even if they cannot all be correct in their details, why think that they could all be susceptible to dissolution as opposed to solution? I find this difficult to take seriously. And this is made worse if we extend the notion of family resemblance to philosophy itself. If there is no essence that unites all things deemed philosophical, then why think that there is something that runs through them all, namely, being subject to dissolution and rooted in confusion, ignorance, temperament, temptations, and being held captive by pictures and disguised nonsense?

In this context, too, we might note that the depth and richness of the variety of the philosophical landscape necessarily looks different to us today than it could have to Wittgenstein in the first half of the 20th century. As just one aspect of this, consider the "analytic/continental divide" that didn't enter consciousness until the mid 20th century.[27] More recently, one of the biggest divisions has been between so-called "experimental philosophy" and the rest. Clearly, Wittgenstein would likely be dismissive of many of these issues and "brands" of philosophy; nevertheless, there they are.

II) If we reject the idea that there are timeless universal Truths with a capital "T" to be discovered, which presumably is a position that Wittgenstein would be friendly toward, then if we are attempting, for example, to work out what is going to be just in a given situation, and, in particular, we are attempting to work out whether a past conception of justice is applicable presently, would this not be a philosophical task, both theoretical and practical? And assuming it is, what would it mean to say that the issue is one of mere temperament or linguistic confusion such that there is no real problem, such that we should see that the question should not have been asked to begin with, we just need to see things aright and the problem is dissolved? I may be in the throes of a muddle myself, but I just can't see such ancient and yet presently pressing questions as pseudo-questions.

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[27] https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/bridging-the-analytic-continental-divide/
and, which, according to Gary Gutting:
The analytic-continental division was institutionalized in 1962, when American proponents of continental philosophy set up their own professional organization, The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), as an alternative to the predominantly (but by no means exclusively) analytic American Philosophical Association (APA).

III) Consider Wittgenstein's writing to Keynes in 1935, "I am sure that you partly understand my reasons for wanting to go to Russia and I admit that they are partly bad and even childish reasons but it is true also that behind all that there are deep and even good reasons."[28] I find this terribly important as I do not have the impression that Wittgenstein considered his working through the reasons to go or not to Russia as doing philosophy. Particularly since working through those reasons would mean also working out things about himself, and Wittgenstein, at least in the early 30s, seemed to locate the problems of philosophy with the self, as he writes then: "Working in philosophy…is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)"[29] Perhaps one issue here is that such a "philosophical problem" as to whether and why to go to Russia would not rise to the level of a grand philosophical inquiry. Perhaps it is too applied for his taste? Or perhaps the question of whether to go to Russia is too rooted in values and given his metaethical views he did not think they could be treated philosophically? I don't know.

IV) I have argued that the *metaphilosophical* problem regarding the properly conceived nature and method of philosophy is itself a philosophical problem. Consider the above quoted lines from the 1946 Moral Science Club meeting that the proper way to respond to a *philosophical* question is by "…showing how the question is a muddled one, and therefore should not have been asked." If it the metaphilosophical question, "What is the correct method of philosophy?" is a philosophical question, and I don't see how it is anything but, then Wittgenstein's point would have to apply, namely, that it evinces a deep muddle on his part and that it should not have been asked to begin with! Could this issue be sidestepped by distinguishing between Pyrrhonian and non-Pyrrhonian readings, and insisting upon a Pyrrhonian one, or something similar? I'm not sure, but I am confident that it would be misleading to treat Wittgenstein's work as unproblematically representing either a purely Pyrrhonian or a non-Pyrrhonian approach, for example.

V) And isn't there a *deep* problem in the background? That is, if Wittgenstein earnestly believes that all possible philosophical problems are due to confusion, ignorance, language, temptations, human frailty, what have you, then isn't the implication that in theory, if not in actuality, one could be freed of all philosophical problems? That is, and here is the deeply problematic part, the assumption is that at root, life, and/or the world, are not problematic in themselves. It's similar to the assumption made by some that the world has a fixed, single way of being such that, in theory, it would be possible to formulate the one true and complete description of it, it's just that we are too epistemically limited to figure it out. Similarly, Wittgenstein's assumption that all philosophical problems are pseudo-problems implies that the world is actually unproblematic in itself, it's just that we are too fallible, too caught up in ignorance, language, and our temperaments and other temptations, etc. We are psychologically and rationally imperfect and the problems lie *not* in the world, so to speak, but us and our interaction with it. And the latter are, at least in principle, "fixable."

Briefly, I want to note that these issues are obviously more complicated than I'm making them out to be. For instance, one issue here concerns Wittgenstein's thoughts about religion in contrast to philosophy. That is, he might argue that insofar as the world is problematic in itself, that is where religion comes in. It is only by way of religion that one can "feel absolutely safe,"

[28] McGuinness 2012, 245. Letter to J.M. Keynes, 6.7.35.
[29] Wittgenstein 1980, 16e.

as he was wont to describe a fundamental religious experience. I can't address this complication here except by way of agreeing that it is an issue, but one that I don't think Wittgenstein is well placed to handle. That is, I don't think we can draw such a fine line between philosophy and religion. Much more needs to be said here.

My position is that the intrinsic features of the self and world are such that they are inherently problematic. While one might, say through Buddhist practice, come to be untroubled by the problematic nature of the world, the world nevertheless presents itself to us as an open question. And many of those questions cannot be answered but philosophically and many of them, I maintain, are not pseudo-questions. On a personal level, as I have gotten older, I have come to appreciate more and more the way in which tension and a kind of contradictoriness or paradox are at the center of so much that is important; many of the examples concern the self and time, and the self in relation to others, but also issues like liberty vs safety, intentions vs consequences, for example [Buddhism & Nietzsche, too]. These are not eliminable tensions but ones that arise again and again. Now, I can easily imagine someone saying that the things I've in mind are not true contradictions, not true paradoxes. Sure, there is some tension but any appearance of a contradiction or paradox is *mere* appearance. Once we get clear on the exact propositions and concepts in question, we can resolve the apparent paradox, the apparent contradiction, and be on our way. However, while I may well be wrong, my examined experience tells me that these tensions are central to the human experience, and, while, they are meant to be engaged and navigated, they are not meant to be removed while living authentically.

9. What it could mean to think of philosophy as therapy given the nature of human existence and the idea that philosophy is the greatest good? Here I want simply to raise the question of what the goal of Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy might be given my Socratic contention that doing philosophy is, if not the greatest good, then nevertheless something that constitutes a substantively meaningful aspect of our existence and a way to respond to nihilism. Could Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy be consistent with that Socratic contention?

One of the first issues here is whether the idea is that one could submit to Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy and be "cured" once and for all or whether it would require multiple "sessions" or whether it would be an unending process due both to the nature of language and our own. This issue is made more complex if we consider a complication raised by Conant. He claims, I think correctly, that for Wittgenstein, the philosophical plurality of "methods/therapies" referenced in §133 is not supposed to be taken as finished or completely figured out in advanced. Further, Conant writes:

> …Middle Wittgenstein's continuing aspiration [was] to be able to find a way to put philosophy on an absolutely solid footing—a footing which would leave much work for subsequent individual practitioners of the subject to do while, nonetheless, having altered the internal character of philosophy forever. For the nimbus of philosophy would have been lost once and for all: philosophy would have been reduced to a craft of applying a now fully available set of tools. It is this conception of what he seeks, in seeking the method of philosophy, that Wittgenstein finally came to abandon in Norway in 1937.
>
> On Later Wittgenstein's conception, the treatment of philosophical problems can no longer be separated in this way from a continuing exploration of the fundamental character of philosophy itself—which is to say that philosophy can never lose its nimbus while remaining philosophy. The forms of creativity required for the discovery of fruitful

> methods in philosophy and the forms of creativity required for the fruitful application of such methods to particular problems of philosophy are recognized by Later Wittgenstein as two aspects of a single task, each of which requires an unending cultivation of the other. This means that the most that philosophy can hope to achieve is to bring us moments of peace—moments in which we are able to break off philosophizing —because this or that philosophical perplexity has been made to completely disappear. For Later Wittgenstein, this means not only that the task of philosophical elucidation can never come to an end (as was already the case for Early Wittgenstein) because it is piecemeal in the Goldfarb sense, but also that we can never settle on a final and definitive answer to the question "What is philosophy?" (as Early and Middle Wittgenstein both thought we could), for the task has come to be recognized as one which is piecemeal also in the McGinn sense.[30]

There is much that we could address here, but I want to focus on two points. First, I want to note that Conant's claim here that for Wittgenstein "…we can never settle on a final and definitive answer to the question 'What is philosophy?'" needs to be worked through carefully and in detail to see whether he is right regarding Wittgenstein's thought and to what extent that claim is inconsistent with my own reading here of both philosophy and Wittgenstein. Independently of Wittgenstein, I'm in agreement with the point that there is never a finished, good for all time answer to the question: What is philosophy? Second, consider Conant's claim that, on his reading of Wittgenstein, "…the most that philosophy can hope to achieve is to bring us moments of peace—moments in which we are able to break off philosophizing —because this or that philosophical perplexity has been made to completely disappear." Given my contention that life is inherently problematic and that it moment to moment presents itself to us as an open question calling for a philosophically informed response, I'm not sure what it could mean to say that we could ever "break off philosophizing," particularly if, as I maintain, there is a base sense of philosophy that is continually demanding, along the lines of the philosophical imperative, to figure out the best way to respond to what we encounter moment to moment. And this is whether we are taking a bath, reading in bed, walking down the street, or talking with a dinner companion about what to eat.

Lastly, given the variety of ways in which life presents itself to me as problematic, I'm, again, simply not sure how all its issues are "simply" dissolvable perplexities and muddles. And, thus, if doing philosophy constitutes a substantively meaningful aspect of my existence, then I don't know what it would mean to say that philosophy as Wittgensteinian therapy could play the role of meaning giver in the way I am reading Socrates' position. This is in part because if my philosophical activity is to be meaningful in the Socratic sense I've discussed here, I have to see the problems as genuine. In Zazen, I sit simply to sit, but this is while simultaneously knowing that sitting not only actualizes Zen practice moment to moment but also, and perhaps seemingly contrary to that point, sitting functions to improve my ability to meditate, be present, and to adopt a metalevel awareness that is skillful in letting go, all things needed for skillfully navigating reality and realizing enlightenment. Similarly, though philosophy may be an end in itself, it is still the activity it is because it seeks to understand the truth of something. I do not want to insist that philosophy is necessarily centered on understanding the truth of something—it may in other moments seek other ends—but the point is that it is centrally concerned with understanding. And I am not convinced that the kind of understanding sought can be conceived

[30] Conant 2011, 642-43.

of always as the dissolution of an apparent problem. For me, understanding is more and more taking the form of understanding the necessity of the tensions and problems and the simple importance of my grappling with them. I do not seek their dissolution, for that would negate the human experience; rather, I seek to understand them, my relations to them, and how best to navigate them. While Wittgenstein has, I think, helped me to do these things, it is not because I have attempted to adopt a full blown Wittgensteinian methodology. Much more needs to be said here.

Thank you.