

RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION: PRECONDITIONS AND LIMITS

Adrian-Paul ILIESCU*

* Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest, P.O. Box 16-201, Bucharest 77500, Romania. Fax: 40-1-6139643.

BIBLID [ISSN 0495-4548 (1996) Vol. 11: No 27; p. 33-47]

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to investigate the preconditions and the limits of rational reconstruction in the philosophy of language, as these preconditions and limits can be deduced from Wittgenstein's arguments against philosophical constructivism. It will be shown that a main precondition of reconstructions in the field of language is the existence of non-arbitrary patterns of linguistic use, while the limits of this kind of theoretical enterprise derive precisely from the absence of such patterns.

Keywords: essence, rational reconstruction, grammatical conventions, linguistic use, ordinary and artificial language, linguistic rules, hidden grammar.

Wittgenstein's whole attitude towards philosophy is unusual, and there are several amazing things about his metaphilosophical views, but perhaps the most surprising one is his insistence that the role of philosophy should be confined to describing what 'lies open to view' and to 'assembling reminders'. Many people would probably accept, in the end, the idea that philosophy should not try to explain and discover things, mainly because these tasks could be considered as typically scientific; but the claim that philosophers should only describe and 'assemble reminders' seems indeed wild, and, in any case, unbearably restrictive.

Most classical attempts made in this field went much further, offering quite articulate intellectual constructions which we even today consider as representative and valuable; why, then, would philosophy be not allowed to advance (if not explanations, at least) theoretical constructions which provide a deeper understanding of 'the way things are'? Why couldn't a philosopher give 'rational reconstructions' of the things he is interested in, instead of giving 'descriptions' and of 'assembling reminders'? Shortly, why should philosophy be exclusively descriptive, and never constructive?

These are (for us) legitimate questions, and if Wittgenstein has no convincing answers to them, a collapse of his whole metaphilosophical conception is to be expected.

But, as I shall now try to show, there are strong reasons for claiming (as Wittgenstein implicitly did) that in philosophy there is actually nothing to reconstruct.

1 .

The best starting point for a discussion of this topic seems to be Wittgenstein's remark that philosophy is nothing else than a particular, sufficiently well-determined, set of 'problems' (a quite reasonable claim, susceptible to be agreed upon by many people): "Denn die Philosophie, das sind die philosophischen Probleme, d.h. die bestimmten individuellen Beunruhigungen, die wir 'philosophische Probleme' nennen"¹. The philosophical 'problems', or, as Wittgenstein not accidentally insists, disquietudes have, as a rule, the form of 'What is X'-questions: "What is Time" (the Augustinian interrogation)², "What is Knowledge?" (the Socratic interrogation)³, "What is Language" (PU, § 92), "What is a proposition?" (Ibidem), "What is thinking?" (PU, § 327) etc. One does not go so far as saying that there cannot be other kinds of philosophical problems, but one does suggest that questions like the ones mentioned above are very characteristic -the Augustinian interrogation, for instance, is presented as typically philosophical, in contrast to the questions of natural science (PU, § 89). Although an attempt to present philosophical questions as being, essentially, 'What is X'-questions might seem restrictive, such an attempt has the advantage of being in perfect agreement with the notorious philosophical interest for 'essences'. And, as many of his remarks show⁴, Wittgenstein closely associated traditional philosophy with a search for essences. Since it can be supposed that the other philosophical problems are derived from these questions about essence, the idea that philosophy is basically a set of 'What is X'-questions does not seem to be inadequate.

2 .

But if philosophers ask questions like "What is Time?", then surely their aim must be either

- (i) to elucidate a concept ('time'), or
- (ii) to 'grasp the essence' of something (of time).

(Under a certain reading of PU, § 116,120, the alternative disappears, because the two are simply identical; but we do not have to bother about that).

The really important thing is that both (i) and (ii) imply, in a Wittgensteinian framework of thought, a requirement that appears as *fundamental* for any kind of philosophical work: the requirement of elucidating the use, or the grammar, of words.

(i) obviously implies the elucidation of meaning, and, since meaning is use, also the elucidation of use; a philosopher preoccupied by "What is Time?" should thus try to concentrate upon the way 'time' is actually used, upon the grammar of this word (for, as PU, § 496 indicates, grammar too describes the use of words).

But (ii) implies the same requirement too, not only because "Das *Wesen* ist in der Grammatik ausgesprochen" (PU, § 371), but also because "'Wesentlich' ist nie die Eigenschaft des Gegenstandes, sondern das Merkmal des Begriffes"⁵ and this shows that "Wer über das *Wesen* spricht, konstatiert bloß eine Übereinkunft" (BGM, I, § 74).

Philosophy, which is always interested in essence, should thus in any case concentrate upon linguistic use and grammar.

But how should a philosopher approach this topic? Should he try to explain use? No, because, according to Wittgenstein, 'there is nothing to explain'. Should he try to justify grammatical conventions, by proving their adequacy to reality? No, because language is autonomous (PG, IV, § 55) and its conventions simply cannot be justified in this way:

Die Konventionen der Grammatik lassen sich nicht durch eine Beschreibung des Dargestellten rechtfertigen. Jede solche Beschreibung setzt schon die Regeln der Grammatik voraus (PB, § 7).

It seems that the only thing philosophers can do is to describe, and thus to clarify, the use of concepts and the grammatical conventions associated with it.

3 .

Unfortunately, this is precisely what philosophers never do. They never show interest in the actual way in which concepts are used; they always neglect the examination of real cases in which one normally applies concepts like 'time', and they completely ignore the task of (merely) describing such cases. Their typical attitude (Wittgenstein believes) is well illustrated by Socrates, who, although interested in the essence of knowledge, never pays attention to the real cases of knowledge, i.e. to the cases in which the term 'knowledge' is correctly applied: "When Socrates asks the question 'What is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge" (BBB, p. 20). Socrates tries to deduce or to 'discover' the essence of knowledge, but not to describe what we actually call 'knowledge' or the real cases in which we use the word. And this is what philosophers generally do: they try to 'grasp the essence' without ever trying to describe the use of the relevant word or the grammatical conventions which actually express the essence.

But why have philosophers been so reluctant to describe, while being so eager to deduce or to discover (essences)? The answer is: "Denn sie sieht in dem Wesen nicht etwas, was schon offen zutage liegt und was durch Ordnen *übersichtlich* wird. Sondern etwas, was *unter* der Oberfläche liegt" (PU, § 92).

It is because philosophers have always been committed to the idea of 'hidden essence', to the idea that the essence must be somewhere *behind* of what we can see, that they have always considered describing as irrelevant; they felt it to be their proper task not to describe, but to discover and to explain. What could be described always seemed insufficient to them:

Das bloße Beschreibung ist so schwer, weil man glaubt, zum Verständnis der Tatsachen diese ergänzen zu müssen. Es ist, als sähe man eine Leinwand mit verstreuten Farbflecken, und sagte: so wie sie da sind, sind sie unverständlich; sinnvoll werden sie erst, wenn man sie sich zu einer Gestalt ergänzt. Während ich sagen will: Hier *ist* das Ganze. (Wenn du es ergänzt, verfälschst du es.)⁶

Thus, seeking the essence and describing the facts (concerning the use of words, the contexts of use etc.) have always been considered by philosophers as incompatible enterprises.

4.

Instead of describing, philosophers have constantly tried to *construct* concepts. As they considered ordinary concepts uninteresting and the task of describing them trivial, they thought it better to create *new* concepts, meant to lead us 'farther' or 'deeper' than any ordinary concept can do. The newly created concepts were supposed to grasp 'the real (hidden) essences' of things, and therefore classical philosophers thought highly of them. But Wittgenstein does not share their conviction; he thinks that such new concepts are arrived at through a process of purely philosophical sublimation or idealization which involves all kinds of misunderstandings:

Mancher wird sagen, daß mein Reden über den Begriff des Wissens irrelevant sei, da zwar dieser Begriff, wie die Philosophen ihn auffassen, allerdings nicht mit dem der alltäglichen Rede übereinstimmt, aber eben ein wichtiger, interessanter Begriff sei, der durch eine Art Sublimierung aus dem landläufigen und nicht sehr interessanten gebildet ist. Aber der philosophische Begriff ist aus dem landläufigen durch allerlei Mißverständnisse gewonnen worden und er befestigt diese Mißverständnisse. Er ist durchaus nicht interessant; es sei denn als Warnung (BPP, Band II, § 289).

Did that happen only in the case of the concept of knowledge? Of course not. Many other philosophical concepts are created by the same (mistaken) strategy. The Platonic Ideas are the result of the same fallacious strategy:

Ich will also sagen: Der '*reine*' Farbbegriff, den man sich aus unsern gewöhnlichen Farbbegriffen machen möchte, ist eine Chimäre. (...) Statt 'Chimäre' hätte ich sagen können 'falsche Idealisierung'. Falsche Idealisierungen sind vielleicht die platonischen Ideen⁷.

But the biggest mistake involved in 'constructivist philosophizing' is not that new concepts are invented; rather, it is that these newly constructed concepts are meant to explain or even to replace the old, usual, ones. Rudolf Carnap, for instance, explicitly defended a constructivism of this kind (which he preferred to call 'rational reconstruction'), pleading for 'the replacement of a pre-scientific, inexact concept' by (what he considered to be) 'an exact concept'⁸. Other philosophers did not emphasize the 'scientific' character of 'exact' concepts, but they nevertheless insisted to advance 'new' concepts which were more precise, or more 'logical' or better 'determined' (rationally) than the ordinary ones.

But, one could wonder, what is wrong with that? Wittgenstein suggests that the mistake involved in this old philosophical strategy is that, after rejecting the 'old' concepts naturally adapted to our usual language games, the 'constructivists' try to impose their new concepts (their 'idealizations') in these games and contexts which they don't really belong to:

Wenn es so etwas gibt, dann muß, wer falsch idealisiert, Unsinn reden, -weil er eine Redeweise, die in *einem* Sprachspiel gilt, in einem andern, wo sie nicht hingehört, verwendet (LSPP, Band II, p.48).

In other words, one creates a concept (like 'pure colour', or 'Beauty' -understood as 'pure' or 'perfect' beauty, or defined by some 'essential' feature supposed to characterize any particular case in which we use 'beautiful') by idealization, a concept which, therefore, is not in agreement with ordinary use, and then one tries to introduce it in the usual language games, where it does not belong and consequently does not make any sense. The philosopher sees a 'law' (i.e., a perfect rule) in the way a word is used (BBB, p.27) and tries to apply coherently his new concept according to this 'law'; but since, in general, such laws do not exist, his new concept does not function in the 'normal' language games -its 'transplantation' in them leads to nonsense.

5 .

But even if we accept the idea that philosophical constructivism has (often, or even always) failed, there still remains a question which, in a way, is the *main* question: is the failure of constructivist philosophy simply the result of mistakes accidentally made in the past by philosophers (of misunderstandings, or false idealizations), or is it unavoidable that constructivism would fail? In other words: is it just that classical constructivism happened to fail, or is it the case that any constructivist philosophy is bound to fail? Couldn't, in the future, (better equipped) constructivist philosophers build concepts which really grasped 'the essence' of things? This is an extremely important question; it forces one to choose between a position that can easily become trivial and another one, which is original, interesting and provocative. It is not hard to admit that the conceptual constructions proposed by philosophers in the past were mere figments of imagination, which failed to account for the 'reality' they were meant to grasp; but if this is all Wittgenstein has to say about constructivism, his merit is not tremendously great, because many other thinkers criticized classical philosophy, and especially metaphysics, in a similar way. In such a case, Wittgenstein should only be included into a large group of modern authors who denounced it. Moreover, if we accept this alternative, we may find it hard to account for the very general and categorical manner in which he dismisses philosophy (why does he refer to philosophy in general, and not to specific past contributions to it?). On the other hand, if we choose the other alternative, which implies that constructivist philosophy not only happened to fail (in the past), but it is somehow bound to err, Wittgenstein's position becomes much more radical but also much more interesting, although, of course, we still have to discover what grounds could there be for such skepticism towards intellectual constructions. I shall argue that this last alternative is the right one, and that there are solid grounds (inside a Wittgensteinean framework of thought for being very skeptical towards conceptual construction.

6.

Let us first remember that, according to Wittgenstein,

- (a) philosophers seek 'the essences of things';
- (b) essence is expressed by grammar; and,
- (c) grammar describes the use of words.

A constructivist philosopher proposes new concepts which are supposed to 'grasp' the essences, and this implies that his conceptual constructions should encapsulate grammatical conventions -according to (b)- and should correctly illustrate the use of words -according to (c). That is, our future (better equipped) constructivist must grasp correctly (by his new concepts) the characteristic grammatical conventions and patterns of use, in order to be entitled to claim that his newly constructed devices have successfully captured 'the essences'. For instance, a philosopher who proposes a 'concept of goodness' or 'of justice' must be able to show that his new concept grasps the characteristic grammar (and pattern of use) of the word 'good' (or 'justice') in a way which is *acceptable* to, and *recognizable* by (not only philosophers, but also) any competent speaker; if he is not, we should conclude that his 'concept of goodness' ('justice') fails to account for what competent speakers call 'good' ('just'), i.e. that our constructivist philosopher does not actually talk about goodness and justice, but about something else *that he, and only he, wants to call 'good' or 'just'*. (The supposition involved here is that a philosopher simply cannot seriously say to the competent speakers of a natural language things like the following: "I am now going to tell you what should be called 'good', and no matter whether you like it or not, *this* is what you should call 'good!'; i.e., if the philosopher aims at elucidating goodness, and not simply at developing his own, personal, idea of what goodness should be, then what he must do is to propose a concept which grasps the normal grammar of 'good' in a way that is recognizable by, and acceptable for, any competent speaker. In the light of the huge amount of speculative thinking that has been produced by philosophers, this supposition is not unproblematic; but it is unavoidable for anyone who understands philosophy in the way which is typical to the main Western tradition -after all, when asking 'What is Goodness?', Socrates and Plato wanted to elucidate *goodness* and not just to express their own, personal, feelings about what goodness should be.)

Now, the question is how can our philosopher grasp grammar and patterns of use by his new conceptual devices? Being a constructivist, he cannot do that by simply describing linguistic use; he is committed to constructing, not to describing, and, as a rule, he loathes describing as trivial and unphilosophical. The thing to do, then, for such a philosopher, is to deduce or to guess the patterns of use and the grammatical conventions which 'capture the essence'; the concepts he constructs must somehow manage to coincide with the basic conceptual conventions and patterns, an achievement that must be arrived at by intellectual insight, not by description.

It is at this point of the discussion that a very important (and often neglected) argument of Wittgenstein should be inserted -i.e., the (quite simple and straightforward) argument that the basic conventions of grammar simply cannot be 'guessed', 'deduced' or 'predicted'. The way in which a word 'functions' is not the kind of

thing that could be anticipated: "Wie ein Wort funktioniert, kann man nicht erraten. Man muß seine Anwendung *ansehen* and daraus lernen" (PU, § 340).

The limit Wittgenstein talks about here is not due to an epistemological insufficiency, and is not purely contingent; the reason for which one cannot guess or deduce patterns of use (or the corresponding conventions) is deeper: these patterns simply are not the kind of well-ordered structures which could be 'grasped' by an insight into 'how things are'. The reason for which we are bound to fail in any attempt of doing this is that these patterns are *of empirical nature*, i.e. they are complex concrete structures to be found in our linguistic experience, not abstract, geometrical, ones to be deduced or guessed. In order to reconstitute the way a word is used, one has to have access to empirical facts, because "daß ein Wort das und das bedeutet, so und so gebraucht wird, ist wieder eine Erfahrungstatsache wie die, daß jener Gegenstand ein Buch ist"⁹.

There is, of course, the obvious objection that sometimes one manages to guess an empirical fact, but then there is also the obvious response that *the use of a word* is not just a simple, individual, fact, but rather a complex (or complicated) factual pattern that nobody can guess or deduce.

Wittgenstein compares language to a labyrinth (PU, § 203) or to an old town (PU, § 18), and both comparisons suggest the 'empirical' nature of the linguistic institution. Trying to deduce or guess the patterns of use would be as hopeless a task as trying to deduce or guess the shapes of the streets in an old town, or the shapes of the paths in a (natural) labyrinth. Even if the streets had a geometrically standard structure, it would be absurd to try to guess it, instead of simply looking at it and describing it. But an old town has generally no well-ordered, deducible or predictable, structure and the shape of its streets cannot be anticipated or 'grasped' by pure intellectual insight.

If we keep in mind the fact that linguistic use is inherently imprevisible, i.e. cannot be guessed or deduced *a priori*, then we are able to see what the 'predicament' of the constructivist philosopher consists in: as *philosopher*, a constructivist is bound to seek 'the essences', which are 'marks' of our concepts, and he is thus compelled to grasp the basic grammatical conventions associated with the patterns of use; and, of course, these patterns are not to be deduced, but looked at and described; on the other hand, as *constructivist*, a philosopher is bound to construct concepts meant to grasp 'the essences', and not to look at, and to describe, empirical facts. The constructivist philosopher faces thus two contradictory requirements, and, unable to find a way out, he usually comes to (simply) invent new concepts, which are supposed to grasp the patterns of use (and thereby 'the essences') but which actually fail to do that: as mere abstract inventions, they belong more to an ideal language than to the real one, and they never manage to account for, and to coincide with, the actual patterns of use. Therefore, what constructivist philosophers in fact do is just to "devise an *ideal* use, which turns out to be worthless" (LSPP, I, § 830).

7.

But, at this point, a scientifically-minded reader would be tempted to raise the following question: why couldn't a constructivist philosopher do what is (in Chomsky's words) "just standard scientific practice", i.e. start with a description of the relevant facts (connected with linguistic use) and propose then a coherent construction, or a 'rational reconstruction', by means of new concepts (and perhaps explanations), accounting thus for what has been initially described? In other words, why couldn't a philosopher secure the adequacy of his conceptual constructions to (linguistic) experience? Why would all philosophical reconstruction be bound to go wrong?

The answer to this objection is twofold. First, it is doubtful that patterns of use can be satisfactorily described; Wittgenstein came pretty close to saying that they cannot. First of all, since linguistic use is not determined strictly by categorical rules, necessary and sufficient conditions or exact definitions, the patterns of use have no 'perfect geometry'; they are not characterized by the symmetry and order one can find in a set of abstract, ideal shapes -rather, they are similar to the irregular forms one becomes familiar with through experience. But such forms simply cannot be described; they can only be 'presented': "Eine Form kann nicht beschrieben sondern nur dargestellt werden" (PB, XV, § 171). And it is precisely because the patterns of use cannot be described that, when trying to clarify the meaning of a word, we have to evoke grammar rules: the form of a particular pattern cannot be described, but the way that word should be used can be clarified by presenting the relevant rules.

A second argument is the following: in order to describe patterns of use, one would have to describe language games, and consequently the whole logic of language, because "zur Logik gehört alles, was ein Sprachspiel beschreibt" (ÜG, § 56).

But is the logic of language describable? Wittgenstein came to have doubts on that: "Komme ich nicht mehr und mehr dahin zu sagen, daß die Logik sich am Schluß nicht beschrieben lasse? Du mußt die Praxis der Sprache ansehen, dann siehst du sie" (ÜG, § 501).

As to the reasons for which the logic of language remains undecipherable, several arguments could be invoked: the games we play with words are never completely circumscribed by rules (PU, § 68), they are somehow 'unregulated' and it is hardly possible to encapsulate in a description the logic of an 'unregulated' game; moreover, the logic of language games is always context-dependent, so that a satisfactory description of it would imply a satisfactory description of all the relevant contexts, which is clearly an impossible task (a natural language is so strongly connected with a form of life, that a description of its logic would only be possible when combined with a description of the entire corresponding form of life); finally, since understanding a language means mastering a technique (PU, § 199), describing the logic of language implies describing a technique -and a technique which is not purely algorithmic, which is in fact a *know-how*, can never be satisfactorily described because it consists in a set of practices one can only learn by exercising, not by a description of 'what one should do'.

Now, these arguments may sound unconvincing to some people, especially to those who feel that one is never in the position to decide about what can and what cannot be

described or explained, simply because future theoretical achievements can never be foreseen or confined within predetermined limits.

The kind of epistemic precaution that prompts this objection is not unreasonable, but it is very doubtful, I think, that the 'one never knows'- objection is a powerful one. For the main question, as far as I see, is not whether future will bring us pleasant surprises (proving, for instance, that the logic of language can be described), but rather the following: what makes one think (and hope) that such an achievement is possible? Part of the answer could be that one is inclined to see semantic performance as analogous to the syntactic one, and thus to expect an illuminating discovery concerning some algorithmic mechanisms which would explain meaning, understanding etc. But, if Wittgenstein was right in saying that language games are not everywhere circumscribed by rules, that they are based upon agreement in judgements and participation in forms of life, then their 'unregulated' (or, at most, partially regulated) character is a strong reason for rejecting this expectation as unrealistic. *Some* algorithmic elements (a certain logical mechanism which is describable) might very well be involved in semantic performance, but, taken as a whole, the language games which make meaning and understanding possible are not algorithmic and their 'logic' (based on agreement in judgements and involvement in forms of life) is much too complex to be captured in a theoretical description. The feeling that it should be possible to capture it comes, probably, from a commitment to the logicist, oversimplified, view according to which a limited set of strict, clear-cut and therefore describable, rails-like rules determines entirely the way we speak. But such 'semantic rails' do not actually exist.

But the really important, the decisive (in a certain sense), part of Wittgenstein's answer to the above objection is still to come; this reply is based upon the arbitrary character of linguistic patterns.

In order that a philosopher be able to provide 'rational reconstructions' of linguistic use, there must be some *non-arbitrary patterns* of use (to be reconstructed), for it is only such patterns that can be effectively 'captured' by theoretical models. Arbitrary patterns, characterizing evolutions which are in essential ways unpredictable, cannot be grasped and represented by a philosophical theory (and if science can give abstract reconstructions of factual patterns, this is precisely because these patterns are not arbitrary and the evolution of the events involved can be predicted).

Now, the main question is: are patterns of linguistic use non-arbitrary and predictable? Wittgenstein's answer is negative.

Du mußt bedenken, daß das Sprachspiel sozusagen etwas Unvorhersehbares ist. Ich meine: Es ist nicht begründet. Nicht vernünftig (oder unvernünftig).

Es steht da -wie unser Leben (ÜG, § 559).

In order to grasp the full meaning of the philosophical view expressed by this aphorism, we have to remember that the language games we usually play have not been 'constructed' consciously and deliberately, answering the requirements of Reason and Logic. They are seldom, if ever, based on rational reasons concerning the best way 'in which language games should be played'. There are rules saying how words should be

used, but there are none saying how patterns of use should be introduced and developed. The pattern of use, for a word like 'game' or 'number' (to take Wittgenstein's own examples), develops and becomes more and more complicated simply in virtue of our extending of a name from some particular cases to some other, new, ones, exactly as 'in spinning' ("wie wir beim Spinnen eines Fadens Faser an Faser drehen", PU, § 67). This process of extending the use of a name is not governed by strict rules, i.e. we are not compelled, by our own previous way of applying a word, to extend its use in a certain particular manner. But aren't there some reasons for extending the use of a word in a certain way, rather than in another? Of course there are such reasons, but they are never *compelling* ones (i.e., reasons which abolish our freedom to choose between alternative manners of developing a pattern of use). Although we generally have some reasons for extending the use of a name in a certain way (not in another), and these reasons influence our choice, they never determine it completely: despite their existence, we are still free, in any new particular case, to adopt an alternative or not -our right to choose remains unaffected: "Übrigens behalte ich mir vor, in jedem neuen Fall zu entscheiden, ob ich etwas zu den Spielen rechnen will oder nicht" (PG, VI, § 73).

This freedom of choice comes from the fact that the use of a word like 'game' is not governed by necessary and sufficient logical conditions which would compel us to apply the name in any new case in which these conditions are fulfilled, while prohibiting its application when they are not. There are thus no categorical (strict) and complete 'logical' or 'rational' requirements, implied by some sort of coherence involved in the language-game (as we have played it before), which would compel us to apply words in certain pre-determined ways; the coherence of our language games is always partial, 'uncircumscribed' by strict rules and open ended: it always leaves open several alternatives, because the rules which generate it are not 'rails'. That is why it is up to the speakers to decide how the use of words should be extended in new situations: "Du entscheidest, ob nun der und der Fall in diese Familie aufgenommen werden soll, oder nicht" (BPP, Band I, § 547). It is the speakers who make decisions about how a pattern of use should be developed, because, as Wittgenstein insists, "a word hasn't got meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent to us" (BBB, p.28) -we give meaning to words and we change their meanings (patterns of use) without being constrained by some 'objective' power. The pattern of use, for every particular word, is simply the result of a series of free decisions (which may involve the existence of some reasons, including 'coherence of use'-reasons, but which are not pre-determined by them). Therefore, the present ways of using words are, in an important respect, *contingent* -as any non-necessary result of 'subjective', free choices. From this point of view, it can be said that the patterns of use are, in an important sense, *arbitrary*.¹⁰

8 .

In order to make clear the sense in which the use of words is arbitrary, let us first remember that "Unsere Sprache kann man ansehen als ein alte Stadt" (PU, §18). The structure of an old city is not the result of previous planning, but rather the contingent result of many 'subjective' decisions of building a new house, a church etc.

The citizens have surely had their particular reasons for erecting their houses in some places, rather than in others; their decisions have never been totally random. But they were not compelled to build their houses in the places in which they did, because there had been no general plan to conform to; there were no 'objective' constraints to determine the way they should choose locations, no overall 'logic' to guide them in their choices (even if some loose coherence requirements could exist, they were not compelling since they did not have the character of strict regulations). That is why the resulting structure has no overall, 'objective', logic. And this, in turn, explains why there can be no 'theoretical reconstruction' of such an old town. One can, of course, draw a map of such a city, but this implies *looking at it and seeing* what its real structure is like; one cannot guess or deduce its structure, one has to see it on the ground. Therefore, 'elucidating the structure' implies, in such a case, an effort of describing, not of guessing, deducing or predicting.

The case of (natural) language is quite similar. One cannot deduce the pattern of use for a certain (ordinary) word, as one cannot deduce the shape (the meanders) of an old street; and one cannot guess how the use of a name will be extended in a new case, as one cannot guess where a new house will be built and how its building will affect the shape of the street (in an old town where no regulations exist). The evolution of a pattern of linguistic use is not pre-determined by the existing way of using words, exactly as the shape that a street is going to take is not pre-determined by planning (or by compelling requirements generated by the positions of the already existing houses). In both cases, there is no non-arbitrary pattern to be followed and observed (by the speakers or by the builders), no 'logic' to be maintained; for any new case, the freedom of choice still exists, and the result of several new choices is arbitrary in the sense that it is not pre-determined or pre-contained in an overall, previsible, logic.

A second clarification of the arbitrariness of patterns of linguistic use is prompted by another analogy: the foundational role played in Wittgenstein's thinking by the analogy between linguistic use and games makes it reasonable to expect that language use is arbitrary in the same sense in which games are arbitrary. Now, in what sense is a game arbitrary? A game has a logic of its own, a logic that follows from its basic conventions and rules. As governed by rules, and as having 'a point' (a fact that Wittgenstein does not omit), the game is not arbitrary, but 'logical'. Its logic is obvious for anyone who understands its rules and its aims (or its 'point'), and it is one which can be made visible to newcomers by mere description.

But, at the same time, a game 'is not everywhere circumscribed by rules' (PU, #68): some aspects of the game are regulated, but others are not, so that the different 'moves' made by the players and the results are not predictable. Here we have an ineliminable element of 'arbitrariness', and it could thus be said that a game is both arbitrary and non-arbitrary.

Analogously, there is a sort of 'logic' in the way a word is used, because there are some rules for applying it; in this sense, the patterns of use are not arbitrary. But the linguistic rules involved do not cover and do not regulate all the elements and all the aspects of use: there are no clear-cut boundaries (PU, § 68), etc. That is, although there are some rules involved in the patterns of use, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions to determine strictly the application of words. Linguistic use is

also both arbitrary and non-arbitrary, exactly as any 'grammatical' system which "ist mit Willkürlichen verwandt, und mit Nichtwillkürlichen"¹¹.

But the analogy between the arbitrariness of games and the arbitrariness of patterns of linguistic use goes deeper than that. The really interesting aspects of this analogy become visible when one concentrates upon the justification of rules.

It is immensely important that the logic of a game does not conform to a pre-existing pattern, which required that its rules were what they actually are; the rules do not follow 'necessarily' from some 'objective' constraints -they are not 'determined' or 'dictated' by 'hidden' principles, 'deeper' structures or previous choices. The rules of a game are simply the result of some free options previously made by people; they are nothing else than the rules *which happened* to be accepted once by players. In this sense, the rules and the 'logic' of the game are, once more, arbitrary; it is a simple matter of fact, and a matter of contingencies, that *these* rules, and not other ones, have been accepted. Nothing compelled people to accept them, nothing made it necessary that *these* rules be accepted; it was simply a series of free, 'arbitrary', options that led to their adoption. Accordingly, the resulting logic of the game is itself 'arbitrary' -i.e., it does not follow necessarily from another, 'deeper', logic, it does not reflect a system of 'hidden' constraints and it is not shaped by inevitable restrictions. (This is, naturally, proved by the fact that the players can always change the rules according to their most recent wishes, if, of course, agreement can be reached as to what these wishes are).

A main consequence of this kind of arbitrariness is the fact that nobody could have deduced or guessed the 'logic' of a game, or the rules which generate it; nobody could have predicted that *this* set of rules was to be accepted for this particular game, and this is because nobody could have anticipated the whole series of free options by which the rules have been adopted. At the same time, if the apparent logic of the game is not determined by another, 'deeper' or 'hidden' logic which we are not aware about, there is no question of 'reconstructing' the visible logic or the rules of the game. There is nothing to reconstruct, simply because these rules are arbitrarily chosen (in the sense explained above) and the only thing one can do is to describe them.

Now, if Wittgenstein's analogy is correct, then much the same considerations apply to language games. From one point of view, the patterns of linguistic use are not arbitrary: neither in the sense that they have been randomly adopted, nor in the sense that they can be changed by anybody any time. People had their reasons to speak in some ways, and not in others, and it is not easy at all to change the linguistic rules: one does not simply change these rules as one pleases, when one pleases. But the connections between patterns of use and the practical interests which influenced their adoption is a matter of natural history, completely irrelevant philosophically, as Wittgenstein remarks¹².

The important point, *for us*, is that it would be wrong to claim that people adopted the concepts they adopted because they *had to*, these concepts being the 'correct' ones (Ibidem); obviously, this is not the case, and alternative patterns of use could be equally correct. The present patterns have been accepted *freely*, and were not 'determined' by inevitable constraints; in this sense, they are arbitrary, and the resulting logic is arbitrary too.

The logic of linguistic use is the visible one, generated by the familiar rules who are arbitrary in exactly the same sense in which the rules of a game are arbitrary: nothing compelled us to accept *these* rules, and the logic generated by them does not follow necessarily from a 'deeper', hidden one. From this, second, point of view, the way in which we use words is inherently arbitrary, and therefore 'there is nothing to reconstruct'. The authors who advocate 'rational reconstruction' in the philosophy of language seem to be committed to the idea that 'there must be something behind' linguistic use: some principles which 'guide' or 'shape' the way we speak, a 'deeper' logic from which the apparent one follows, or more general patterns that the well-known patterns of use must conform to. The task of philosophy, they believe, is to discover and 'reconstruct' these 'hidden', determinant, elements that, in general, we are not aware about. But Wittgenstein's main premiss is that 'nothing is hidden': there simply are no such 'deeper' determinant elements, exactly as there are no such elements in a game. As arbitrary results of many contingencies, then, the patterns of use admit of no 'rational reconstruction'. It should be remarked that emphasizing this particular kind of arbitrariness does not amount to saying that words are simply used in a random, chaotic manner. We choose freely the ways in which words should be applied and their use should be extended, but of course that our choices are influenced by our interests -concepts "sind der Ausdruck unseres Interesses", as acknowledged in PU, § 570- and by forms of life. But this only shows that concepts are instruments (PU, § 569) and, as it is always the case with instruments, their adequacy is important for us; we have always specific reasons to use them in some particular ways. But the existence of such reasons does not prove the existence of a 'hidden' logic which compels us to adopt and use concepts in the way we do, exactly as the existence of some reasons for using hammers in the way we do does not prove the existence of a 'hidden' logic governing the production and the use of hammers.

There is a forgotten remark, in *Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie* (the first volume), which could also be very helpful in clarifying the sense in which patterns of use are arbitrary: "Wir verleihen Wörter, wie wir, bereits vorhandene, Titel verleihen" (§ 116). My reading of this remark is along the following lines: we do not confer titles randomly; we always have some reasons for conferring a certain title -but there is no algorithm to govern this social activity of conferring titles, i.e. there are no necessary and sufficient conditions which determine exactly who will be given a certain title. Therefore, although we know perfectly well to whom a certain title has already been conferred, and (in general) for what reasons, we are never able to foresee with certainty who else is going to be given that title later on: for the decision to confer a title (although influenced by reasons) is not mechanically determined (by reasons concerning the coherence with previous similar decisions or by strict conditions), it is a free one, and, consequently, largely imprevisible and hardly 'deducible'. The 'pattern of use' of a certain title is, in this respect, largely arbitrary: there is no hidden, deeper, logic shaping this pattern in a strict, previsible, manner.

Analogously, despite the fact that there are reasons for applying a word in a certain way, and not in others, in some cases, but not in others, there is no strict algorithm governing use; therefore, although we know quite well in what cases a word

has been previously applied, we can never tell (with absolute certainty) in which new cases it will be again applied and in which ones it will be not. The form that its pattern of use is going to take remains largely imprevisible; the pattern is open ended, susceptible of unexpected changes (due to new free decisions), and, therefore, in essential respects, 'indeterminate'. It is in this sense that patterns of use can be called 'arbitrary', and this feature is important.

This arbitrariness also explains why there cannot be "a kind of scientific investigation into what a word *really* means" (BBB, p.28). Claiming that there could be such an investigation implies supposing that the meanings of words are not fully contained in the rules and the patterns of use we are all familiar with, that there must be something 'behind' them which science should discover and 'reconstruct', helping us thereby to get a 'deeper' understanding of meaning. Wittgenstein's answer to this supposition is that, since meaning is use and nothing more than use, no attempt to understand meaning can go further than describing the patterns of use; we simply have to be content with noticing that "So werden diese Worte gebraucht" (PU, § 180), which actually amounts to acknowledging that "So spielen wir eben das Spiel" (PU, § 71). Somebody could suspect that this reply proves Wittgenstein's commitment to some sort of linguistic empiricism, according to which any investigation of language and meaning should be programmatically confined within the narrow limits of empirical description. But what really makes him say that we have to be content with a description of language games is his presupposition that there can be no 'hidden' logic behind these games; for if there was such a logic, then there would have been no arbitrariness of the kind we recognize in language. What makes people expect to find such a 'deeper', invisible, logic in our language games is the old conviction that language use is based on definitions, strict rules or even a 'law' concerning the application of words, a conviction Wittgenstein constantly criticizes (see, for instance, BBB, pp. 67-70) -precise definitions, strict rules or laws, clear-cut boundaries etc. seem to be *symptoms* indicating the presence of a hidden logic. But once one realizes that this conviction is wrong, and that such symptoms are not, in fact, characteristic for natural language, one can see that there are no reasons for supposing that 'there must be a deeper logic behind our language games'; and once one abandons the idea of a 'hidden' logic, one can easily accept that 'there is nothing to reconstruct'.

If Wittgenstein is right, then, rational reconstruction of concepts is only possible when there really is a non-arbitrary pattern, or a 'hidden logic' to be reconstructed, the limits of this theoretical enterprise are due, among others, to the absence of such patterns.

Notes

† I am extremely grateful to *Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung* (Germany) for financial support during the writing of this paper, and to Prof. Eike von Savigny (Bielefeld), Prof. P.M.S. Hacker (Oxford), Prof. Ilham Dilman (Swansea), Prof. Hans Lenk (Karlsruhe) and Prof. Felix Muehlhoelzer (Dresden) for useful suggestions.

1 *Philosophische Grammatik*, hereafter PG, I, § 141.

2 *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, hereafter PU, § 89.

- 3 *The Blue and Brown Books*, hereafter BBB, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1969, p. 20.
- 4 PU, § 92, 116 but see also, for an explicit claim, *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, hereafter PB, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1964, IV, § 54.
- 5 *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, hereafter BGM, I, § 73.
- 6 *Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie*, hereafter BPP, Hrsg. von G.E.M. Anscombe und G.H. von Wright, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, Band I, § 257.
- 7 *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie*, hereafter LSPP, Oxford and Cambridge, Basil Blackwell, 1992, Band II, p. 48.
- 8 See his answer to Strawson, in Schilpp, P.A. (ed.): 1963, *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*, La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, pp.933-940.
- 9 *Über Gewissheit*, hereafter ÜG, § 519.
- 10 Wittgenstein insists, in several places, that the rules of grammar are arbitrary, but since what I am mainly interested in here are patterns of use, I shall leave aside his arguments about the arbitrariness of grammar.
- 11 *Zettel*, hereafter Z, § 358.
- 12 PU, Teil II, xii, op.cit., p. 230.

Adrian-Paul Iliescu, PhD., is Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Bucharest and Head of the Department of Political and Moral Philosophy. His main research interests are: philosophy of language (particularly Wittgenstein), analytic philosophy, history of ideas, political philosophy. He has published several articles and two books: *The Philosophy of Language and The Language of Philosophy* (1989) and *The Anglo-Saxon Conservatism* (1994). He is editor of a Political Philosophy Series published in Romania.