On the Right Track

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1. Introduction

Suppose that everyone accepted the statement 'Twice two is five', simply because they used the numeral 'five' in the way that we currently use the numeral 'four'. Would that make twice two five? It wants only a modicum of philosophical sophistication, combined with some awareness of the difference between mentioning an expression and using it, to answer no.

Now suppose that everyone *believed* that twice two is five. Would *that* make twice two five? The second question seems much harder. This is not so much because it is unclear whether, if the supposition in question held, that would indeed make twice two five, but because it is unclear what the supposition in question is. What, as Wittgenstein once asked, would it be like for everyone to believe that?[1] How would it differ—how could it differ—from a mere notational discrepancy?

We can imagine people who come to accept the statement 'Twice two is five' via an arithmetic just like ours, and who come to accept it, moreover, in the conviction that they have not merely changed their terminology but have, on the contrary, made some sort of cognitive advance, say because they are trying to accommodate some bizarre discovery in quantum mechanics, or because they are trying to accommodate some bizarre discovery in (for that matter) arithmetic, or because they have been brainwashed. Yet how clear is it, in any of these cases, what we are imagining, let alone that we are imagining something that merits the description 'everyone's believing that twice two is five'?

[1] Wittgenstein (1974, p. 226). It is something of a philosophers' artefact, as Wittgenstein hints, to talk about everyone's 'believing' a mathematical proposition in the first place.

After a while, it is hard to resist the conclusion that nothing would in fact count as everyone's believing that twice two is five. And it is hard not to attribute this in turn to the (flagrant) impossibility of twice two's being five. Indeed, whatever minimal commitment to realism we have already incurred—in answering no to the first question above—it is hard not to take a step beyond that to the following much more radical view. Our mathematical concepts are answerable to mathematical reality, not just in the sense that whether we count as exercising our mathematical concepts correctly depends on what mathematical reality is like, but in the sense that whether we count as exercising mathematical concepts at all depends on what mathematical reality is like. Unless our mathematical thinking were justified by mathematical reality, it would not be mathematical thinking.

This is one of many views that might attract the label 'Platonism'. What can be said about it? Well, one thing that can be said about it is that it is an anathema to Wittgenstein. At one point he asks whether our number system resides 'in *our* nature or in the nature of things', and he answers, '*Not* in the nature of numbers.'[2]

Indeed many commentators would say that Wittgenstein accepts the converse answerability, the answerability of mathematical reality to our mathematical concepts. Some might even say, reverting to the second question above, that he thinks that everyone could believe that twice two is five, and that this would make twice two five. I disagree. There are times, certainly, when he totters on the brink of saying either that or something like that.[3] But I think his considered view is rather the following. In accepting the statement 'Twice two is four', along with the other arithmetical apparatus needed to make us reject the alternative 'Twice two is five', we are endorsing certain rules of representation.[4] If we accepted the statement 'Twice two is five', we would be endorsing different rules, using homonyms. This would *have* to be a notational discrepancy. No concept of ours would be the concept of *five* if we allowed it to be interchangeable with the concept of twice two. Twice two could not *be* five: such is our rule. And we could not 'believe' that twice two is five.

Very well; but if this is not expressive of the answerability of our mathematical concepts to mathematical reality, then must it not be expressive of the converse answerability after all? No doubt it is too

[2] Wittgenstein (1967, sect. 357), his emphasis.

[3] See again the passage referred to in note 1 above.

[4] Cf. his claim that '3 + 3 = 6' is a rule as to the way in which we are going to talk, as quoted by G.E. Moore in Moore (1959, p. 279).

crude to suggest that we could have made twice two five. But there does seem to be a constitutive link in this picture between the value of twice two and our rules. Does this not suggest that, unless it is because twice two is four that we have the rules we have, then it must be because we have the rules we have that twice two is four?

I am sure that Wittgenstein would demur at saying either of these. He would urge scepticism about whatever metaphysical question appears to have these as its only two possible answers. Twice two is four. In saying this, we are expressing one of our rules. And it is contingent that we have the rules we have. We could quite easily and quite properly have had different rules. Had things been different in various specifiable ways, and in particular had we been different in various specifiable ways, we would have had different rules. But twice two would not then have been other than four. Rather, we would not have thought in those terms. Nor have we *made* twice two four. That twice two is four is a mathematical necessity, and if it has any explanation then it has a mathematical explanation.

2. Platonism and Cartesianism

Wittgenstein's rejection of the Platonism outlined in the previous section, and the question of what should replace it if he is right, are among the main concerns of Crispin Wright's excellent new collection of essays *Rails to Infinity*. This collection includes previously published work by Wright in this area (though in some cases, it must be said, only on a rather liberal interpretation of 'this area') together with his previously unpublished Whitehead lectures on self-knowledge. There is also some new material in the four introductions written for the four sections into which the essays are organized, and in a pair of postscripts. The collection is a powerful reminder of how much there is to learn from Wright's penetrating work on Wittgenstein or of broadly Wittgensteinian inspiration. There is far more in the collection than I can discuss here. I shall confine myself for the most part to what Wright says about mathematics, and indeed to some rather limited aspects of what he says about mathematics. But first I want to make some observations in connection with the other principal topic of the collection: the privacy of psychological phenomena.

The privacy of psychological phenomena generates exactly the same dialectic as that which I described in the previous section in connection with mathematics. When we reflect on our psychological concepts, in which this privacy finds expression, we feel an urge to say that, unless it is because our psychological discourse is governed by the rules it is that psychological phenomena enjoy the privacy they do, which seems absurd, then it must be because psychological phenomena enjoy the privacy they do that our psychological discourse is governed by the rules it is: our psychological concepts must be answerable to psychological reality. And this, just like the corresponding view about mathematics, is an anathema to Wittgenstein. He believes it leads to all manner of confusion. Here is Wright (p. 372, his emphasis):

> It is, for Wittgenstein, with the very craving for legitimising explanations of features of our talk about mind … or mathematics that we are led into hopeless puzzles about the status … of those discourses. Philosophical treatment is wanted, not to solve these puzzles but to undermine them—to assuage the original craving that leads to the construction of the bogus models and interpretations by which we attempt to make sense of what we do … The problem of self-knowledge is a signal example. It can have—I believe Wittgenstein's [*sic*] holds—*no solution* of the kind we seek; for that very conception of a solution implicitly presupposes that there must be a something-by-virtue-of-which the distinctive marks of avowals are sustained. But those marks are part of 'grammar' and grammar is not sustained by anything. We should just say 'this language game is played'.

This parallel between the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of mind explains what would otherwise be a rather singular feature of Wright's discussion: his use of the label 'Platonism' for what is standardly called 'Cartesianism' (e.g. p. 373). The exact historical suitability of either label for the views under discussion raises exegetical questions about Plato and Descartes that I cannot hope to address here. But I draw attention to this point because I think it is instructive to see how the converse appropriation, in other words the use of the label 'Cartesianism' for what I have been calling (in what I take to be a relatively orthodox way) 'Platonism', would also have some rationale. The view that I have been calling 'Platonism' allows us to derive conclusions concerning the form of mathematical reality from premisses concerning the form of our thought about mathematical reality. A particularly significant case in point is the conclusion that mathematical reality is infinite, which we can derive from the premiss that we exercise the concept of the infinite in the way we do. Whence comes the idea, we might ask (as of course Wittgenstein famously does[5]), that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? And the Platonist answers, 'From the fact that that is precisely what it is. Nothing less could either justify or explain our conceiving the series in the way

[5] Wittgenstein (1974, Pt I, sect. 218). This is the origin of the title of Wright's book.

we do, as the product of the infinite applicability of a certain finite rule. We could not *have* our idea of the infinite unless that idea had its source in the infinite.' It is clear why I say that the use of the label 'Cartesianism' for this way of thinking has some rationale. That we could not have our idea of the infinite unless that idea had its source in the infinite is, suitably construed, a familiar and vital precept of Descartes's system.[6]

To see the Platonism here in this Cartesian guise is to see it in a guise that is frankly unattractive. Descartes's principle that our idea of the infinite must be explained by something with at least as much reality as what the idea is an idea of, which fuels his argument for the existence of the infinite, has, for most people nowadays, very little appeal. And just as there are all sorts of alternatives to that principle, so too there are all sorts of ways of explaining how we have come to be able to participate in our finite mathematical practices (in terms of our natural capacities, our facility with manipulating symbols, our techniques of teaching and inculcation, the various applications that we make of our mathematics, and so forth) without alluding to anything infinite.

But if we reject such Platonism, are we then forced into an equally unattractive scepticism? If we deny that there is any need to acknowledge the infinite to explain anything in our mathematical practices, must we doubt whether there is any need to acknowledge the infinite to explain anything at all? Must we doubt whether our concept of the infinite is so much as coherent? There are philosophers of mathematics who are prepared to take such scepticism extremely seriously.[7] But most want to resist it. How can they?

3. Skolemite scepticism

One way to address this question is by focusing on a milder scepticism, familiar from discussions of the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem. I shall refer to this as Skolemite scepticism. Here the issue is not what explana-

[6] See esp. Descartes (1984, Third Meditation). Not that we have to go back as far as Descartes to find an example of a philosopher prepared to think in this way. Consider the following quotation:

> To get [the idea of infinity], we need to be operating with the concept of numbers as the sizes of sets, which can have anything whatever as their elements. What we understand, then, is that the numbers we use to count things in everyday life are merely the first part of a series that never ends … Though our direct acquaintance with and designation of specific numbers is extremely limited, we cannot make sense of it except by putting them, and ourselves, in the context of something larger, something whose existence is independent of our fragmentary experience of it … When we think about the finite activity of counting, we come to realize that it *can* only be understood as part of something infinite.

This is pure Platonism—pure Cartesianism. It is a quotation from Thomas Nagel's most recent book, Nagel (1997, p. 71), his emphasis. (The whole of pp. 69–74 is worth reading in this connection.)

[7] Wright himself is an example: see Wright (1982).

tory project may or may not force us over the boundary between the finite and the infinite but what explanatory project may or may not force us over a boundary within the infinite, between the countable and the uncountable. What the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem shows, according to Skolemite scepticism, is that, since there is no need to acknowledge the *uncountable* to explain anything in our mathematical practices, for everything we do and say can be quite satisfactorily interpreted in such a way that our quantifiers have only countably many things in their range, it follows that there is no need to acknowledge the uncountable to explain anything at all. (This is a kind of localized variant of the original scepticism—albeit localized to the transfinite—which is one reason why Essay 12 of Wright's collection, 'Skolem and the Sceptic', is not the incongruity which it may at first appear.)

Neither the original scepticism nor this more modest, Skolemite version, both of which are targeted on our mathematical practices, can be allayed if we confine ourselves to an external view of those practices and then ask to what extent we need to indulge them in order to explain their success. Such, at any rate, is what the opponent of Platonism is bound to say. It is not clear, however, that this represents a victory for the sceptic. For where mathematical practices are concerned, in contrast, perhaps, to scientific practices, the very idea that they can be judged by how well they play this kind of explanatory role is already a concession to the sceptic (just as it is, of course, to the Platonist: indeed it is what makes Platonism and scepticism look like the only available options here). Furthermore, in the case of Skolemite scepticism, there is no *motivating* it if we confine ourselves to an external view of the relevant practices. For to acknowledge, say, that there is a model of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory with a countable domain is already to wield some fairly heavy-duty set-theoretical machinery.

Does this mean that Skolemite scepticism is self-stultifying? Does motivating Skolemite scepticism involve wielding enough set-theoretical machinery to drive Cantor's familiar argument for the existence of the uncountable?

Not necessarily. Suppose that the issue is whether there are any uncountable sets. At no point in the proof of the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem is the power set axiom used. A sceptic about whether there are any uncountable sets can withhold assent from this axiom.

But if he does, then he is confronting the argument for the existence of uncountable sets directly, in its own terms. His scepticism is then simple mathematical scepticism, what we might call 'ground-level' scepticism as opposed to 'meta-level' scepticism. That is, it is scepticism that arises within our mathematical practices, scepticism about whether those practices are acceptable even in their own terms. It is not scepticism that arises at the prompting of philosophical reflections *on* our mathematical practices, scepticism about whether they are acceptable by some external standard. It is not Skolemite scepticism. What seems to follow is that Skolemite scepticism, even if it not self-stultifying, is unjustified. If anyone has doubts about the uncountable on mathematical grounds, preferring to work with a set theory that lacks the power set axiom, so be it. We must wait to hear what it is about the power set axiom that gives him pause. But at any rate his wariness had better be based on something other than the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem. In saying this, I take myself to be largely in agreement with Wright, whose helpful and incisive discussion of these matters, in Essay 12, does much to mitigate the alarmism that so often accompanies this result.

Similarly as far as the original scepticism is concerned. If anyone has doubts about the infinite on mathematical grounds, preferring to work with a set theory that lacks the standard axiom of infinity, so be it. We must wait to hear what it is about this axiom that gives him pause. But at any rate his wariness had better be based on something other than what we are impelled to say when we step back from our mathematical practices and can descry only their various finite features. There is nothing in that process to discourage us from re-immersing ourselves in the practices.

4. Ground-level mathematical scepticism

But still, we are surely not entitled to immerse ourselves in whatever practices we please. Surely not *anything* goes. For if it does, how are we to make sense of what Wright, in a related connection, calls 'basic distinctions on which our ordinary ideas of objectivity [and] the growth of knowledge … would seem to depend' (p. 5)?

Well, our practices can be criticized for not meeting their own internal standards of acceptability. As I observed in the previous section, there is room for ordinary ground-level doubts about the uncountable. Wright himself voices one such doubt, towards the end of Essay 12. He calls into question our grasp of the idea of an arbitrary subset of an infinite set, and more particularly our grasp of the idea of an arbitrary subset of the set of natural numbers.

It is worth a brief digression to consider Wright's strategy in doing this. He does not express his doubt in the most natural way. And he is wise not to. The most natural way to express the doubt would be to say that we have no guarantee, when we conceive of an arbitrary set of natural numbers, that our conception extends to all such sets. But here there *is* a threat of self-stultification. (No guarantee that our conception extends to *all* such sets?) What Wright does is to consider, in turn, various characterizations of the idea of an arbitrary set of natural numbers and to say in each case why he does not think it gives us a grasp of that idea. He concedes at the end of his essay that it is 'to some extent a subjective business' whether a given characterization does give us such a grasp (p. 402). He is bound also to concede, as I am sure he would be happy to, that he may have overlooked a characterization which, even by his own subjective standards, succeeds where these fail. Nevertheless, in the last three or four pages of his essay, he presents an important challenge to those who uncritically talk about the power set of the set of natural numbers: the challenge, namely, to rebut the objection that they literally do not know what they are talking about. And this illustrates well how there can be ordinary ground-level scepticism about whether our mathematical practices meet their own internal standards.

But if the Wittgensteinian response to the twin threat of Platonism and meta-level scepticism—the twin threat, in other words, of the view that we are entitled to our mathematical practices only in so far as they are justified by mathematical reality and the view that we are not entitled to them at all—is that we are entitled to them in so far as they do meet their own internal standards,[8] then is it not still too close for comfort to the principle 'anything goes'?

5. Radical scepticism and grammar

In order to see these issues from a slightly different angle, let us consider another doubt that we might have about the uncountable, more radical than Wright's, namely the doubt about whether there is an inconsistency in the very idea; or, a little more precisely, about whether there is an inconsistency in the mathematics we use when reckoning with it. This is a doubt that we can do next to nothing to assuage. If someone prefers to work with a set theory that lacks the power set axiom simply because there is then one less potential source of incon-

[8] To repeat an earlier quotation from Wright, we should just say 'this language game is played' (cf. Wittgenstein 1974, Pt I, sect. 654); or, to echo a familiar quotation from Wittgenstein himself, 'without justification' does not mean 'without right' (Wittgenstein 1974, Pt I, sect. 289; cf. Wittgenstein 1978, Pt VII, sect. 40).

sistency, all we can do is to note that he is more circumspect than we are.

What is striking about this more radical scepticism is that, while it certainly counts as ground-level scepticism rather than meta-level scepticism, and while, relatedly, it receives no special impetus from the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem, it looks as if its fate is dependent on that of Platonism, or at least on that of Platonism in a specific respect. It looks as if nothing less than the actual consistency of our set theory can justify our accepting its consistency. If we explicitly affirm, for instance, that there is no way of deriving a contradiction from our set-theoretical axioms, then surely there had better not *be* any way of deriving a contradiction from them. Surely this is not something about which we can simply legislate.

This reinforces the thought that not anything goes. At most any consistent thing goes—consistency itself being an external feature of some practices and not of others, a feature determined independently of us by mathematical reality. Ground-level scepticism in general seems impervious to Platonism. But in the specific case of ground-level scepticism about consistency (and about various related proof-theoretical features of our mathematical practices) it seems not to be. Is this the one respect, then, in which our mathematical practices cannot prop themselves up, and in which any Wittgensteinian philosophy of mathematics must be mitigated?

My own view is that a thorough-going Wittgensteinian philosophy of mathematics both can and should resist this line of thought. In general, a Wittgensteinian philosophy of mathematics will emphasize the divide between the ground-level and the meta-level. Wittgenstein himself is adamant, for instance, that philosophers of mathematics have no business questioning or interfering with anything in mathematics.[9] Not even consistency, I think, should provide any kind of exception to this.[10]

But neither do I think that a Wittgensteinian philosophy of mathematics is hospitable to the principle 'anything goes'. What it is hospitable to is something more like the principle 'any "grammar" goes'.[11] The problem, of course—a problem to which Wright adverts in the first of his postscripts, and which he discusses at the end of his Whitehead lectures (Essay 11, sect. VII)—is how to tell what counts as 'grammar'.

[9] E.g. Wittgenstein (1974, Pt I, sect. 124), and Wittgenstein (1978, Pt V, sects 52–53).

[10] I cannot argue for this now. For the beginnings of an argument see Moore (1998, sects 3 and 5); and for some relevant comments on consistency by Wittgenstein see e.g. Wittgenstein (1978, Pt III, sects 78 and 82 ff.).

[11] This may itself be part of the 'grammar' of 'grammar': see further Hacker (1986, Ch. 7).

6. Mathematical practice and grammar

There is a graphic illustration of this problem in Wittgenstein's own doubts about the uncountable. In *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* he writes, 'One pretends to compare the "set" of [sets of natural numbers] in magnitude with the set of [natural] numbers … I believe, and hope, that a future generation will laugh at this hocus pocus.'[12] What is the reason for this scorn? Is Wittgenstein expressing simple ground-level scepticism of some sort? Earlier he voices his unease as follows: 'The dangerous, deceptive thing about the idea … "The set [of sets of natural numbers] is not [countable]" is that it makes the determination of a concept—concept formation—look like a fact of nature.'[13] Here there seems to be a confusion of levels of the very kind I have just said he abhors. What seems to be motivating him is his opposition to Platonism, his philosophy of mathematics. Yet somehow this has issued in doubts about a specific idea within mathematics. Surely, by Wittgenstein's own lights, if there is any reason to criticize this idea, then it must be a mathematical reason. And surely, if there is no such mathematical reason, then we are entitled to give the same kind of impatient retort to the first of Wittgenstein's remarks above (that one 'pretends' to compare one set in magnitude with another) as he himself might have given if the legitimacy of a more homespun measuring technique had been at issue: 'One *pretends* no such thing. One does it.'

But matters are complicated by the fact that, even granted the divide between mathematics and the philosophy of mathematics, there remains an issue about where any given mathematical practice stands in relation to this divide. This is because, for all we know, some of our mathematical practices are themselves infected with a certain amount of philosophy (cf. the first of Wright's postscripts, sect. IV). Thus there are those, famously, who see our acceptance of the law of the excluded middle as symptomatic of a tacit Platonism.[14] Who knows but that our acceptance of standard methods of comparing infinite sets in size is symptomatic of something similar?

This is where the problem mentioned at the end of the previous section is manifest. Not everything in our mathematical practices reflects uncontaminated mathematical grammar. How are we to tell what does?

[12] Wittgenstein (1978, Pt II, sect. 22). Wittgenstein's own example concerns the set of real numbers rather than the set of sets of natural numbers, but it is plain that he would have said the same about both.

[13] *Ibid.*, sect. 19.

[14] See e.g. Dummett (2000). And cf. Wittgenstein (1978, Pt V, *passim*). Cf. also Wittgenstein (1974, Pt I, sect. 254.).

7. Limits of explanation

I have already suggested that, even in a mathematical context, 'grammar' is not simply a matter of internal consistency. Nor, once we reject Platonism, can we think of it as a matter of 'external' consistency (the consistency of our practices with something independent of them). The 'great question', as the blurb on the dust jacket of Wright's book intimates, is what remains.

But here we must prepare for disappointment. For if the general tenor of Wittgenstein's later work is correct, then, whatever remains, and however we recognize it, we cannot hope to provide some general philosophical account of it. This is a clear lesson of Wright's book. And, as Wright indicates, it is a lesson that he himself took a long time learning. He writes as follows about the closely related project of providing a general philosophical account of rule-following (p. 6, his emphasis):

> Appreciating the problem [sc. the problem with providing this account] … does of course, depend upon a willingness to allow *constitutive* questions—What makes it the case that …? What could constitute the fact that …?—as legitimate philosophical currency, and hence implicitly credits philosophy with the power to provide satisfying, non-trivial answers to such questions… [It] only dawned on me much later that there is as much evidence in Wittgenstein's text for *impatience* with this kind of question as argument … that the Platonist direction is a cul-de-sac.

Philosophy, on a Wittgensteinian view, is not in the business of determining the constitution of 'grammar'. Its business is rather to help us, in a piecemeal way, to keep as firm a grip as possible on specific grammars when reflection threatens to loosen that grip by tempting us into violations of them.

Philosophy is not even in the business of determining the constitution of specific grammars. To ask, for example, what it *is* for twice two to be four, or what *makes* twice two four, if it is not to ask a mathematical question (for instance, about how that equation can be derived from the standard recursive definitions of addition and multiplication) nor a linguistic question (for instance, about our use of the statement 'Twice two is four') is to ask a mere pseudo-question. Similarly, to ask what makes it the case that a certain rule is infinitely applicable, if it is not to ask how we know an associated set to be infinite or something of that sort, is to ask nothing but a pseudo-question. And to think, not just that these are genuine questions, but that they are genuine questions whose answers have an explanatory role to play as far as our handling of each of the relevant grammars is concerned, is to aggravate the offence by lapsing back into Platonism. Nothing both makes twice two four and makes us think that twice two is four. Nothing both determines the steps that are to be taken in accord with a certain rule and determines us to take them. It would be something close to syllepsis to suggest otherwise. If there are rails to infinity, then they are part of mathematics. They cannot explain anything *we do* in the way in which physical rails can explain our movement through space.[15]

None of this precludes our reflecting on the various contingencies that must obtain in order for us to operate with some specific grammar, the various facts of nature that make it possible for us to do so. Part of the reason why not anything goes for Wittgenstein is that not anything is of a type to be sustained by these contingencies, which include, most notably, the contingencies of our shared forms of life.[16] Wright has much to contribute to the discussion of these matters. But I cannot resist taking issue, before I close, with the contribution that he makes in what I see as the least satisfactory essay in the collection.

8. Private language

Famously, one of the 'things' that does not 'go' for Wittgenstein is a 'private language', a language enabling a person to describe his or her immediate private sensations in such a way that no-one else can understand it.[17] There can be no 'grammar' that is private in that sense. In Essay 8 of his collection Wright considers whether, in sections 258–260 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein has a cogent argument for this view. He concludes, 'Probably,' (p. 279). But I do not think that he succeeds in substantiating this conclusion, either philosophically or exegetically. (One thing that should arouse our suspicion is the notably un-Wittgensteinian appendix to the essay, which seems completely out of place.[18] But that is a relatively minor consideration. For by his own admission, Wright pursues the technicalities in this appendix 'somewhat as a *jeu d'esprit*' (p. 218).)

[15] Wright's extremely fecund notion of 'width of cosmological role', to which he adverts in this book (p. 370) and which he develops further in Wright (1992, Ch. 5, sect. V), can serve as a corrective against the temptation to expect explanatory work of ideas that are simply of the wrong sort to perform it.

[16] See Wittgenstein (1974, Pt I, sects 240–242, and p. 226).

[17] Ibid., Pt I, sect. 243.

[18] In this appendix Wright indulges in some 'formal pyrotechnics' (p. 218) to investigate the probability that a given number of sensation types will fall into a pattern which corroborates a theory of a certain specifiable kind. See below, main text, for the relevance of this to Wright's argument.

I shall not do anything here to register my exegetical qualms about whether Wright substantiates his conclusion. I shall confine my comments to my principal philosophical qualm, which is this: the argument for the impossibility of private language that Wright considers fails to satisfy the second of a number of constraints which he himself says at the outset any such argument must satisfy if it is to be 'genuinely cogent' (p. 229). This is the constraint that the argument 'must leave communal language alone' (ibid).

The argument that Wright considers is, in outline, both familiar and, it seems to me, unproblematically faithful to the text. (My exegetical quarrel is not with anything in the outline, but with the details.) It runs as follows. Suppose a would-be private linguist—let us call him *A*—resolves to make a daily record, in his private language, of whether a certain sensation has recurred. Then there can be no suitable gap between the case in which he thinks it is right to record a recurrence of the sensation, on any given day, and the case in which it is actually right to do so. But without such a gap, there *is* no 'right' or 'wrong'. And this in turn means that there is nothing *A* is recording. His pretension to be using a private language is discredited.

In section 7 of his essay Wright explicitly addresses the question whether this argument meets each of his constraints. He *seems* to have no difficulty in showing that it meets the second. For there does not seem to be any analogous problem for a public linguist, whose daily record of whether or not a certain type of event has occurred can in principle be confirmed or disconfirmed by other people. This creates a suitable gap between his own conviction that an event of that type has occurred and its actually having done so.

But then Wright considers a counterargument in favour of the possibility of private language. This counterargument surfaces in the writings of Simon Blackburn and Ross Harrison, among others,[19] and Wright accordingly refers to the core idea of the counterargument as 'the Blackburn/Harrison proposal' (p. 265). The gist of the Blackburn/Harrison proposal is that there may be, for *A*—the would-be private linguist—a suitable analogue of the possibility of confirmation or disconfirmation by another person, namely the possibility of *his own subsequent* confirmation or disconfirmation, based on 'well-established generalisations and theory' (p. 217). The bulk of Wright's essay is concerned with establishing that this proposal is unsatisfactory. He argues that the 'theory' involved would have to satisfy certain criteria, and that these criteria would be exceedingly hard to satisfy. In particular, if *A*

[19] See e.g. Blackburn (1984, pp. 299–300); and Harrison (1974, p. 161). Cf. also Walker (1978, p. 115).

chose to record the occurrences of four kinds of sensations (not, by the way, five, as Wright says on p. 218 of the introduction to this section), then the probability of there being such a theory corroborated by these occurrences would, on Wright's reckoning, be 'a paltry 1 in 8,192' (p. 218). It follows that whether or not a private language is possible is radically contingent in a way that Wright finds absurd. He writes (p. 270, his emphasis):

> One who believes in the essential privacy of large parts of his mental life will surely want to suppose that his capacity to record its character in terms no one else can have reason to think he understands would be *in no way contingent* on the particular form of the patterns, if any, of concomitance which the various event types display.

Now I am no apologist for the possibility of private language; but it is not at all clear to me why someone who *is* will want to suppose any such thing. And here I think Wright is guilty of an error that would have been apparent to him had he thought more about whether the argument against the possibility of private language, as he is now construing it, still meets the second constraint. To be fair to Wright, he does consider this question. And he says that 'it is wildly unlikely' that we could have a suitable grasp of the notion of observational error 'unless this grasp owed more to our membership in a language community in which we have faith in others' judgements than to our engagement in theory-building,' (pp. 270–271). Well, perhaps; perhaps not. A good deal depends on how much is built into the notion of a 'theory'. I doubt that the Blackburn/Harrison proposal needs to build anything like as much into that notion as the quotation from Wright suggests that *he* builds into it. (One thing that is extremely telling is what Wright says a little earlier about our usual criteria for observational error, which he cites as 'discord with others' reports, poor lighting, mislaid spectacles, and so on': namely, that they 'are, at least in part, of a largely non-theoretical sort,' (p. 267).) But that is not really the point. The point is how radical the contingencies are which underlie 'our membership in a language community in which we have faith in others' judgements'. A *vast* amount is required, not only by way of patterned occurrences in our social world but also by way of patterned occurrences in the natural world, for us to belong to any such community. That is itself, surely, a prime lesson of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.[20] So when, at the very end of his essay, Wright summarizes his response to the Blackburn/Harrison proposal by complaining that it makes private language possible 'only in very special, at best unlikely circum-

[20] Cf. Wittgenstein (1974, Pt I, sects 240–241).

stances' (p. 279), surely this invites the following counter-response: 'Yes; and it is only because our circumstances are very special, at best unlikely, that there is any *communal* language.'[21]

9. Conclusion

It would be misleading, however, to finish on such a critical note. Wright does much in this collection to guide us in a broadly Wittgensteinian direction away from Platonism. Through his stimulating combination of exegesis and philosophical exploration he helps us to a better understanding of the very idea of rails to infinity.[22] That there are rails to infinity is a natural picture. And it is a harmless one if we handle it properly. But we do not handle it properly if we think of these rails as constraining the human activities that make it possible for us even to think in such terms, the activities to which I have just alluded; nor if we think of them as fixing, independently of us, what rules we can have. They simply *are* rules we have, pictured in a certain way.

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[21] In so far as it is a matter of conceptual necessity that there can be no language without the obtaining of certain natural conditions (see above, the end of sect. 7), this conceptual necessity is in no way compromised by the utter flesh-and-blood contingency of those conditions.

[22] Essay 6, sect. 3 is particularly helpful.

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