Let us compare two small bits of data. I’ll give each as a short paragraph.

The first is something we philosophers say, and we find it almost impossible to resist granting its truth. We, and by we I mean you and I, and other philosophers, talk about language a lot. Further, we suppose that any time we talk to each other or converse with each other, any time one person says something to another or promises or sings catches or asks a barista for a cup of coffee, we philosophers think and say that this involves language, that there is language present in the talking and conversing and asking and singing catches. We think this is an exceptionless truth despite our usual paranoid vigilance about exceptionless truths. I’ll summarize this by saying, We think that whenever we talk or etc. then there’s language.

The second is the bit, the datum, that the first is not consistent with ordinary language examples. There are of course many different cases when there’s no philosophy going on in which we talk about language or languages, and we can imagine some explanation of that talk in the examples. Let’s make a list of abbreviated cases:

a. We are singing a catch in Portuguese and someone new to the group asks, “What language is that?” Later, at home, we report that we are learning to sing catches in other languages. If someone asks, “Really! Like what?” we include Portuguese in a short list.

b. The children are conversing in particularly crude ways, and we warn them, “Watch your language.” A child furrows his brow and says, “Huh??” and seven-year old Hannah explains: “Don’t say shit, say poop instead.” The conversation switches to poop, and we cast our eyes heavenward and stare at the liquor cabinet.

c. I walk across the street from the conference and ascend the steps into the grand Engineering Library of the University of Leipzig, and ask the man at the entrance desk, “Are there any public computers here where I can check my e-mail?” He says, slowly and haltingly, “I am sorry, I have little English. Deutsche? Parlez-vous Francaise?” I kick myself once again for this stupidity on my part, and apologize, and say, overly defensively, “Except for English, the only languages I know are dead ones.” He shakes his head and I retreat.

d. A teacher in a literature class assigns an essay analyzing the language in the scene in Shakespeare’s play in which Cleopatra comes on stage for the first time. One student asks another, “Language?” and is told, “You know–metaphors, similes, imagery, rhetorical figures of speech, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, that stuff.”

e. Ryle reminds us that if a farmer orients a new hand to the language of poultry, he is not talking about what the hens say but rather is talking about the vocabulary used by those who raise turkeys and chickens and guinea fowl and such.

f. Java has not, perhaps to the surprise of those who look in from outside, displaced Fortran as a computing language. To an outsider listening in we explain a bit about the various means by which computers are made to do what they do, with perhaps some comments about how the thirty-year history of CPU chips, from ones which handled one 8-bit instruction at a time to chips which can handle two 64-bit instructions at the same time, has changed the programmer’s job. If the outside’s eyes have not glazed over yet, we talk about how many slices of contemporary time would fit into one slice of time for the Z-80 chip, but how a Fortran instruction from then can still be used by a machine now.

g. Working with a group to draft an official document, we keep returning to the first paragraph because the language is not quite right. The supervisor jokes (this might be too philosophical a joke), “What? You keep lapsing into Cajun?” and is told as explanation that the paragraph is too broad and gaseous, that we need terms which are more narrow and more clear.

We have to note the limits or boundaries of those cases. Those cases, that is, are conspicuously not all cases of when we talk or etc. It is in particular kinds of circumstances that talk of language will make sense to the people in the case, even though we philosophers peering into the examples with the silhouettes of language taped to the lenses of our flashlights will see those outlines in every case.

I take it that in the examples above some kind of talk of language arises or could arise, that each example is a case of what we would say when, that each then is an ordinary language example of language. Let’s contrast them with a different kind of example in which such talk would not arise and try to give the moral of that story (this is difficult, as it turns out, and you might as well be forewarned.) Contrast the following, then, with all the examples above, not just c. which gives it its structure and its clearest contrast.

i. Suppose I am not I, but rather you, that is, someone fluent in German. You, then, walk across the street from the conference and ascend the steps into the grand Engineering Library of the University of Leipzig, and ask the man at the entrance desk, in German, “Are there any public computers here where I can check my e-mail?” He tells you that there are computers on the second floor, but only for those who have a University account and login. There are, he continues, network connections for laptops, but those too require one be authorized as a user by the University. This does not apply to you, let us say, so you retreat.

Now, let’s acknowledge how little is needed to change this example so that it would give rise to talk about language in the example, without forgetting that these changes are, however small, changes. I sometimes call these matters the contagion of context. The thinnest of threads will connect one example to another, such as example c. above to this one, i, and thereby help make sense of the talk, e.g., of language, which occurred in one example and now does not occur in the other unless we build in these changes. Had I, the real I, accompanied you to the Engineering Library of the University of Leipzig, we might very well find remarks about
language apropos, of several different kinds. I might say, I may finally learn German when I get back, after decades of kicking myself for learning only dead languages. You may take a verbal jab at me: So, Johannes, you ever consider learning a language people speak?

And many other kinds of context may bleed over into these examples. Sometimes we wear our occupations on our sleeves, generate contexts that way. If I am, or if you are, a linguist, we may carry that sample case of wares with us all the time. We will see language examples anytime something interesting happens or anytime an example shows something we are teaching or working on, from Grimm’s Law to bilabials to relationships of socioeconomic class and forms of address to typologies of enclitics. For some of those we will or would say something about language. Other occupations may give rise to other cases. A literature teacher reading memoirs from administrators may ruefully notice the memos are not by Shakespeare and wonder who teaches people to write this leaden language.

But in these cases in which some talk of language could be made sense of, already a subset of the cases in which we have conversations, there is a split between how the philosopher looking through the blinds into the examples will see the language in the examples and how the language in the examples would be remarked or explained by those in the room. “Leaden style of language?” the basketball coach in the staff lounge asks. “What’s that mean?” and the lit teacher reads part of the fishing passage from *Antony and Cleopatra* and then a passage from the memo. “It is as if the principal has to put on gloves and an overcoat to think,” she says. “This prose is SOO dreary. Why can’t he liven up how he writes?” If one thinks of a continuum of styles in language, Shakespeare is near one end and the principal is near the other. But none of this talk of language in the examples brings up any philosophical account of language—nothing about signs, communication, intentions, illocutionary act potentials, reference or meaning. The explanation of any talk of language—already, remember, talk which would not occur in many, many cases—is not the philosopher’s talk. And what shall we make of these absences? There is no talk of the philosopher’s concept of language, and in many cases there would be no talk of language at all. Talk of language would change the subject or be baffling to those within the example unless the philosopher breaks the window with her flashlight and offers the philosophical account resting not on the example but on something else, perhaps a philosophical picture of language.

Again, what shall we make of those absences? Here’s a suggestion, though it requires careful handling: in those examples in which there is no circumstance or situational factor which would make sense of the talk of language, there is no language. If someone is a linguist of the right obsessive-compulsive character, or if someone is a literature teacher or if someone is writing for a literature teacher, or if there is a whole lot of potty talk going on, or if a committee is worried about how something has been worded and wants to change it before it is released, or, and so on, then sure, there’s language. If not, not.

I’m going to pass by some issues. The case is not really made, and I realize that. The ordinary language examples do not provide a proof. Instead, I take them to raise, as they always do, issue about a burden of proof, issue about the need for opposing arguments, issues about begging the question or circular reasoning, issues about substantives sending us looking for substances, about overextending grammatical analogies, about whether we have been misled by pictures. The main issue, though, is whether there are arguments for the claim that language is present in all our conversations, and whether those arguments rest on non-question-begging support. I’m going to invite you to consider the possibility that there are no non-circular arguments for the claim that language is present in all our conversations. Instead, we think such things because of the picture of language we see in Augustine, Locke, Peirce, Frege, Russell, Carnap, Fodor, Katz, Kripke, Derrida. It is the picture of language as a system of signs used for communication. The little drawing in Ferdinand de Saussure’s notes for his course in general linguistics expresses this picture. Two people face each other—except that they are not people, really, but only heads—and there are dotted lines from lips to ears. That picture helps to conjure up problems for the philosophy of language, roughly consistent with the opening paragraph of John Searle’s *Speech Acts*. What is language, really? How do acoustic blasts get meaning? How might words relate to the world?—And all that hoary mob. And this picture is not just a Western picture. Though my colleagues in Eastern philosophy like to take jabs at our dichotomies and Cartesian dualism, this same picture is visible in the Buddhist arguments for the conventionality of language.

Passing by those issues, where some honest work really is required, allows me to proceed to the topic at hand by means of the following steps. Suppose that we think our conversations are instances of language in part because of pictures. Suppose, that is, that pictures lie at the root of some of these philosophical problems, as Wittgenstein sometimes tells us. Now we have a metaphilosophical question: to what extent are those insights about pictures philosophical and to what extent psychological?

Though I am strongly tempted to give a general answer, to say that here is a place in our conceptual geography which belongs to both kingdoms rather than to neither, I’ll urge specifics or examples instead. I’d like to think about another example, this time from ethics, in which we might see the poisonous influence of a picture influencing philosophical thinking but also reaching outside philosophy to infect our practical reason. I think that we can see both philosophy and psychology working there, but whether it is more one than the other matters much less than the need for therapy which is revealed by our investigation. And that therapy, at any rate, will not be psychological but philosophical. It is a therapy requiring philosophical investigations of the kind Wittgenstein points out for us, even if his own often failed.

Let’s take up a case now in which there could be an issue about how we ought to act. Because of the existence of ethics, there are related issues about rules vs. particular relevant arguments, about whether ethical theories can be a guide to how we ought to act, and meta-ethical issues about why we should be good and how to appraise competing theories or codes. I hope to show by means of this example that pictures might mislead us in philosophical ways but that those ways of being misled might have noxious consequences which extend beyond academic philosophy. Because I am using an example and the plausibility of that example as main parts of my support, that example goes on at tiresome length. I’m working to have the talk of pictures arise out of considering the case, but that requires we take the scenic route.
Suppose you are leaving a tavern, late night/early morning, with a few pints of beer under your belt. Your car is parked in a lot nearby, off the street because your insurance is expired (and so is the car registration) and you don’t want the police to notice. You get in, back out of your space, crunch into another car, get out and look. Yours has minimal damage; the other car has some serious dents on one rear fender and the trunk. It’s an ordinary car, nothing expensive nor beat up. The car looks to be driveable, nothing pressing against a tire; you don’t smell gasoline. You look around. The lot is deserted, no houses with a good view of the lot, no alarms or lights going on. You know the law, which requires you leave your name, license number, address and phone number under the wiper blade.

The next move in this example may mark you as among a small minority of those who have had such a thing happen to them. You consider what to do, and think about why, as best you can given the light haze in which you are working.

Some in classroom discussions of this case endorse the claim that it is perfectly okay not to leave your name and number, and, hearteningly enough, they offer reasons. You are not going to get caught, you have extenuating circumstances which may make the punishment (losing your license for a year) excessive for the misdeed of driving with lapsed insurance and registration (that is, the punishment is likely not to fit the crime), and why would you leave your info anyway? A few, usually uncomfortable in the role of moralist, resist that line of thought. In my experience, those who resist the idea that it is okay to leave the scene without leaving information have a hard time articulating grounds. One might expect them to cite ethical theories, but the closest they usually get is something like the Golden Rule, admittedly a good move. I suggest the main reason to resist and reconsider comes from Socrates, with help from Freud’s lesson that we often believe not on the basis of arguments but on the basis of desire, since no attempt has been given to articulate the relevant arguments except for those which serve to rationalize the decision they desire. We can put that more stongly, as a claim that those who think it’s an easy decision to run are likely to be deceiving themselves, and so are likely to think they know what is okay in the case when they do not.

One main issue for philosophers is not only (shall you leave your name or shall you run?) about the particular case. The more general issue is How should we make moral choices? In other words, (to give this question in terms of possible answers from ethics) should we appeal to moral theories or codes (either absolutist ones like the Ten Commandments and Utilitarianism and Kantianism and virtue ethics, or relativist accounts claiming morality is what we’ve been trained to accept by our culture, or Oscar Wilde’s answer that there’s no right or wrong; what’s right’s what’s right for you), or should we leave those theories and accounts alone and worry about the arguments relevant to the issues as they arise in the particular examples? This is then an issue about the status of rules, the status of abstract accounts including theories, and the status of particular cases.

This issue is related then to others. Because weight of law and common moral training both endorse one of the choices (you should leave your name) as the good choice, a related issue is about the basis for those—why should I be good?—which comes trailing clouds of the Ring of Gyges and questions about how it pays to be good. It is also related to one of the overall problems in ethics, how shall we tell whether a theory is a good one or not, and how do examples and theories relate to each other? In the ethics classes I teach, we learn the theories and then learn how, or attempt to learn how, to evaluate the theories by comparing what the theories would tell us about a case with what we can get by processing relevant arguments with no theory to guide us. (Some students, and some pros, will resist, thinking this last possibility is impossible without criteria. Some will think that our concept of good argument is a product of culture or training, forgetting we can question or attack our cultures. Some will think that ethics then is impossible. It can be a shock to their system to find that some arguments can reveal others as bad arguments with no criteria at all, and that careful work with examples can show a different possibility for how ethics can exist.)

Some then will acknowledge a problem with doing this processing of all the arguments, but the problem, they think, is not a fatal flaw. Instead the problem or difficulty is support for advice to work even harder to articulate all the relevant arguments and all the objections along the way to deciding what to do. This problem is eluded in that lesson I attributed to Freud that we often believe not on the basis of arguments but on the basis of desire; that is, we tend to like the arguments which tell us what we want to hear. In the example, some of us want to run away without leaving our name and number on the car we’ve backed into, and so when we give and endorse the arguments in favor of thinking that it would be okay to run away, there is a danger that we think running is okay based on our desire rather than based on the arguments. We might, that is, be fooling ourselves. The cure for this delusion, not a foolproof cure, is to rethink the arguments, to work harder to give and to consider the ones we don’t like. That is, we need to set up all the arguments, not just the ones that say what we want. We re-examine our beliefs, following Socrates’ advice to re-examine our life.

The issue, then, includes the common difficulty of thinking through how to make moral choices when we are biased. That difficulty, though, is not a philosophical difficulty so much as it is a reason for being honest and thorough.

We are trying to see if the position will stand that goes, we should articulate all the arguments and all the objections addressing the issues as they arise in examples. By stand we mean, will doing that result in morally good decisions?

So far in this example of backing into someone else’s car, the support is left for us to work out, in the form of our articulating all the relevant arguments in the parking lot case. This looks risky to those who are confident that following the arguments where they lead will bring us to a good alternative. It may be they are too confident. After all, I’d want to be able to justify running away. And when I take a first quick look at all the relevant arguments, it looks as if I’ll be able to carry it off.

This suggests a couple of possibilities regarding those who believe in following the arguments where they lead. The conviction that if there is a good thing to do in the case then it will be the alternative best supported by the relevant arguments looks like a kind of religious faith. It seems possible that it rests on delusion, on wanting it so bad that the speaker has convinced herself, whether it’s true or not. The main other alternative is that the speaker takes good just to mean whatever alternative is best supported by the relevant arguments, in which case she should not too hastily assume that leaving my name under the wiper is what will emerge
as good. This paragraph then is a remark about relationships among intuitions (to the extent that we have an intuition that leaving my name is morally better than running away), moral goodness, and the relevant arguments. We’ve already reminded ourselves that wanting the arguments to support our intuitions makes it harder to weigh the arguments we don’t like. At this point, doing a good job of getting all the relevant arguments out into the open is looking more and more difficult. But getting all the arguments out into the open is also more crucial to thinking through the case. Further, this case has implications for the larger philosophical issues of what good is, how we make moral decisions, why should we be good, and what’s theory got to do, got to do with it.

Some reasons for running away have already been concisely summarized. So far they look stronger than any arguments for leaving my name under the wiper. The law requires it, sure, but nobody saw—I might as well have the Ring of Gyges, for all the force the law has in the case. I’ll feel bad if I run, granted, but not near as bad as I’ll feel if I forfeit my driver’s license for a year, or watch my insurance rates skyrocket, if and when I can afford to buy insurance again. Maybe I’ll feel my dad or mom looking over my shoulder and feel his or her or their disappointment, or I’ll have some other form of conscience troubling me—and it’s true that I hate that, but not enough that it will make me put up with the hassle that comes with handing my fate over to the other car’s owner.

So far, then, those who believe in following the good arguments where they lead have a losing case. No one has a good reason to leave her/his name if the situation is like the one in the example. Everyone would run, and she/he would be right to run. This is based on the arguments so far.

I’ll now articulate arguments for the other side. I am interested in noting a kind of breakthrough which can occur in which Wittgenstein’s pictures seem to play a part. I leave out most of the comments about how hard it is to make the example stand still, how hard not to provide details which slant the example toward a result we want. For example, if the parking lot is between two warring gangs’ turfs, and the car you back into is a lowrider AMG Mercedes with gold rims and a Virgin Mary on the back window deck, that makes some other arguments relevant which are not relevant in Arcata, where I live, an archetypal small American college town, a place one might find in Norman Rockwell paintings if he added marijuana. But of course if the key to what is good is the relevant arguments, then that other case does not open any doors for relativism unless those arguments are relevant here too. And if those arguments are relevant, then we are no longer talking about the same case. That is, if in the case as described you decide to leave without putting your information under the wiper because you don’t want to become involved in a gang war, you should consider as an objection that you have no reason to suppose you might get involved in a gang war, any more than you have any reason to suppose you are a brain in a vat or have been deceived by an evil genius. The case as described also leaves some other things open and some things not. It is likely that you in the case, since you have let your insurance and registration lapse, may be a morally compromised person already before the curtain rises. But it’s possible that this morally compromised status is less severe, if for example you are a philosopher and a space cadet, and by the time a colleague pointed out to you that you have expired tags you were short of money to renew insurance and registration, but you really will get it taken care of when you get paid for your night class for the extended education program. Not that that takes care of grounds for judgment—the case is open to both possibilities.

When we think of people who would not run, some of that thinking may confirm us in supposing we could be right to run. Consider religious fundamentalists who cannot think for themselves—maybe they would not run away, they would leave their names just because they have been told to do so, but that could make us want to be unlike them, give us another reason running is okay. We might feel confirmed as well by thinking of people who are scared that they are bad people and so in every case like this they have something they have got to prove, so that putting their name under the wiper is really only an urgent pretense at being good, a way of saying, “Sceee??? So there! I really really REALLY AM a good person, not scum like everybody else! Not scum like I might think!” Also, people who don’t think about it at all, and just put their name under the wiper without processing any arguments, who do what they do like a dog thatfetches, or salivates, on command—they may leave us wanting to be unlike them for the sake of autonomy. We’ve noted that thinking of the relevant arguments already may make the example odd or unusual. If most people would either leave a name or not leave a name but would do so automatically without worrying through the relevant arguments, that does nothing either to recommend the process or to call it into question.

We can wonder about arguments for the other side. Surely not everyone who would leave her/his name under the wiper is a dolt. All the dols probably have already sneaked away. Hmmm, does that mean I am like them if I too sneak away? In this case it is not so clear that the thing we have been taught is good is not good. That is, there is some plausibility to the idea that it’s good if you leave your name. We can try to figure that out. What might be good about leaving my name?

God help us, the first thing that occurs is talk of social contract. That goes as follows. We are all better off if we fuss up in such cases, since anger is reduced, repairs might get worked out with less stress, it deters me in coming years from doing stuff like this if I get my license back, the car’s owner is not thrown off his or her routine so much. I confess I don’t care for social contract theories (partly because the roles of arguments in forming the alleged contract are often ignored) and so don’t much like this line of reasoning, but there seems some kernel of truth to it. If we help soothe and facilitate human relationships then that might help us when we need those relationships. We can imagine our car might be damaged and that we will hope that the driver has had modeled the good we hope for, and has been taught to leave her name.

And then here’s something else, which starts to come in with mentioning the other car’s owner, with mentioning that person slowly enough to remember he or she will have a reaction to coming out to find the dented car. This is not quite social contract, though it surely has some relation to empathy and to a basis for the Golden Rule.

I’ll switch here to first person, put myself into the example. There’s me and there’s the other driver. I was thinking of her or his interests as completely separate from mine by leaving her (let’s say, for short) out of the story. I thought of the story as being about me and some car, and the car and its owner have pretty much the same status in the story. I thought of the car’s owner as some stranger, with no ties or relationship or common interests with me at all. If I were to find out that the owner is one of the people in one of my philosophy classes, for instance, or that she is someone from the bar where I’ve been drinking, or that the owner is
someone who is a friend of mine or a friend of a friend or a cousin or my mom’s buddy or the checkout lady at the hippie grocery store who smiles and makes wisecracks or is someone that a guy in the bar just told me about, who just got back from Iraq and her husband left her with a Dear Joan note and a cleaned-out checking account–anyway, that list seems it could go on for some time. If the car’s owner has some connection to me, even a slight connection, and me to her, so that I think of her as within the situation just as I am within the situation, then that changes things, gives me something like a reason to leave my name and to ask on my note please don’t report this, let’s work out terms so I can pay for the bodywork. Prompted by this line of thought, it occurs to me that I don’t know that it is some stranger. And even if it is, I don’t know that we won’t later have some connection. Two years from now perhaps I’ll be at a party, great food, my kind of music, jokes, having a terrific time, and I sit down on a couch with some people and some guy is answering a question, explaining why he’s still driving that old Toyota with the beat-up back end and the trunk he can’t get into. The odds are against it but the damage to the case for running away has been done by thinking of the car’s owner as another person like me, someone with the possibility of being in the situation with me.

At this point it becomes hard to weigh all the considerations. I’ll still have to be brave to leave my name, but now that starts to look like a reason to leave my name too. That implies another thing, that not leaving my name is weaselly or cowardly. And now that’s a reason against running. The balance may be shifting.

Now I’d like to return briefly to the problem of thinking of myself in the situation as separate from the other car’s owner. I wonder why I so automatically do that kind of thinking. That kind of thinking goes as follows. I’m the one who backed into some stranger’s car. The stranger and the car, as I said above, seem to have almost the same status, the status of some object unconnected to or outside of my life. My interests are separate from hers. I’m me, I live in here, and I have no idea what’s up with her. This is starting to sound familiar. One possibility, then, is that what I see as relevant in the case is guided by a picture or model of human beings that overemphasizes individualism. I’ve been raised in a Cartesian dualist culture, in which each person’s experiences, values, preferences, interests, perceptions, interpretations, and faith and ethics are sealed up inside a hermetically tight boundary, the individual’s body. I’m not sure how to argue this except to raise the possibility and ask you if you recognize it, that Cartesian dualism puts blinders on me so I am less likely to see connections or commonalities with other people. There’s also a not-my-table evasion of responsibility available to me as a philosopher–arguing this picture may guide us is not my table; it belongs down over there on the wrong side of the tracks, in the Psychology Department. But it is not crucial what the source of this pathology is as long as I can overcome it and see better the arguments which before were behind the scrim.

In discussion of these remarks some have worried that they rely on intuitions. The mention of psychology is a reminder too that the status of intuitions is still unresolved. We can sketch one alternative, though, which robs intuitions of any magical power but which still allows that they can be relevant and be a help, though they too are testable by holding them up to compare with the relevant arguments, so that it becomes less urgent to investigate them. That alternative goes as follows: intuitions, like the intuition that leaving my name rather than running is morally a better thing to do, could be the result of a process that happens below the level of awareness, and that process might include taking account of arguments or might be an expression of training. The training might be good training, or not. This would be consistent with finding that some people have more trustworthy intuitions than others (philosophical training seems disastrous to our intuitions, and philosophers forget that intuitions are testable by citing what we would say when). Good training in this case means training which fairly reliably leads us to views which are consistent with the results of going over the relevant arguments. Good training and the resulting good intuitions might offer a shortcut or an end run, an alternative to going through all the arguments. The shortcut might take the form of something like a feeling, e.g., a feeling that leaving my name is the right thing to do. It will still though be testable by holding it up to compare to the result we get going through the relevant arguments.

I’m not sure I’ve provided enough support, but I’ve got some, a fair amount really, support now for the claim that arguments can help us decide what to do. Arguments can reveal whether it is a delusion to think it is clearly okay for me to leave without putting my name under the wiper. What looked like overreaching before, a confidence that the good alternative would be the one best supported by the arguments, now looks more reasonable. Arguments can bring us to recognize that, I thought I knew but now I see that I did not. And, the support for that claim took the form of me doing the dirty work for the claim by articulating as much as I could the relevant arguments and the relevant objections (more can still be done, of course), and then weighing them against each other. Further, this claim is consistent with the view articulated earlier that what good means is just what is best supported by the relevant arguments. And “relevant” requires that we go case by case, issue by issue. Further, this approach will serve as the standard against which any other view, theory, or code has to be evaluated, since it is what we have when the question arises of how to appraise the code etc.

A last note about related issues, then. If that last view is at all correct, then some philosophical problems are not solved so much as dissolved. The white-bearded question, raised early in the Republic, “Why should I be good?” and given bite by Nietzsche and still tempting to university students now, is revealed as resting on a mistake, a mistake of insufficient imagination. That is, it rests on a supposition that being good and the reasons for being good are separate, as though there must be a payoff of some kind for being good. Kant was moving in on this, and so later philosophers who see that there is something wrong with that supposition have little choice but to be Kantians. But even Kant still makes a mistake, of supposing that there must be a thing, The Good or Goodness, which has definable characteristics or properties, or for which there are necessary and sufficient conditions, a thing which can be present or absent across contexts and which can be recognizable by the rational mind and then chosen. But if The Good (to borrow a term from this corrupt tradition) is what emerges in each case as best supported by the relevant arguments, then in each case it’s already got the reasons for being good not just attached but integrally bound up in its identity. And of course we have in a by-the-way moment already gotten past another geriatric question, “What is The Good, really?” as nothing but dust in our eyes. Finally, we have material for new and quite different answers to the question, “What is Ethics for?” We need not work toward the right Dear Abby’s
Guide to How to Live. We need not adjudicate between competing theorists as though our job were to distribute Plato’s estate to the most worthy descendants. Ethics will instead be several things—a small reference library, help to cultural literacy, a couch to which we bring some troubles for therapy, a reminder of some intellectual frailties to which we are subject, an opportunity for confession and repentance. A catalog of intellectual temptations. Sharing.

This view is not, emphatically not, a contextualist view, though people sometimes dismiss me as a contextualist. Saying why I am not a contextualist is a little more difficult than Russell’s task of saying why he is not a Christian. Here’s a part. To the extent that contextualism involves the view that, for instance, the meaning of a word is dependent on context, then contextualism suffers the disastrous flaw of knowing what the word is separate from its context. That implies that contextualists still think that words are signs, that is, that words are, as just about everyone from Locke to Augustine to Russell to Derrida to Bakhtin to Korzibsky says, objects which stand for other objects, physical objects or (Russell) sets of physical occurrences which stand for occurrences which are not physical. We are stuck in a film series even longer than the Star Wars series: *Locke II: The Twenty-First Century Sequels*. DeRose and other contextualists I know have a small thing right, that meanings are not given to us by rules which are overarching across the universe, but they have a large thing very wrong, which is that words are recognizable and their identities fixed across the universe, and this too seems driven by a picture, the Cartesian picture we see in Locke but also the more subtle picture we see in the physicalists and behaviorists, in which the mental side is less of interest because something is wrong with it and so we are only going to look for our keys over here under the streetlight where we can see better. Contextualism then is like the Gettier effort, a demonstration of the limits of a picture but from the inside, with no conception of what might lie outside that picture.

The Wittgensteinian traditions offer only a few accounts of where philosophical problems come from. Over-extended grammatical analogies, oversimplification as not only the occupational disease but the occupation, hunting for substances named by substantives, and pictures: these offer overlapping stories. None of these accounts make philosophy look like the queen of the sciences. Pictures, as in Gordon Allport’s famous account of his visit as a young man to Freud in Vienna (Allport told this story repeatedly, apparently without realizing Freud was right), always come off as “schmutzig,” dirty, or at least as primitive and small. The nobility of philosophy is salvageable only if we also remind ourselves of the nobility of therapists. Philosophy can be a helping profession. (Perhaps it will be the queen of the helping professions, edging out the Roto-Rooter operator and the composition instructor.) Wittgenstein’s struggles to reveal hidden Cartesian influences and hidden Platonic influences by pointing us toward inconsistencies between our temptations and what we would say when—his struggles are testimony to the difficulties and the urgency of this helping effort.

______________________________

I wish to thank the organizers and presenters. This was the best conference (the most heartening, most interesting, the least time-wasting, with the best questions) I’ve attended in thirty years of philosophy conferences.

Please send comments to jwp2@humboldt.edu.