

A Live Language: Concreteness, Openness, Ambivalence

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Wittgenstein has shown that that life, in the sense that applies in the first place to human beings, is inherently linguistic. In this paper, I ask what is involved in language, given that it is thus essential to life, answering that language—or concepts—must be both alive and the ground for life. This is explicated by a Wittgensteinian series of entailments of features. According to the first feature, concepts are not intentional engagements. The second feature brings life back to concepts by describing them as inflectible: Attitudes, actions, conversations and other engagements inflect concepts, i.e., concepts take their particular characters in our actual engagements. However, inflections themselves would be reified together with the life they ground unless they could preserve the openness of concepts: hence the third feature of re-inflectibility. Finally, the openness of language must be revealed in actual life. This entails the possibility of conceptual ambivalence.

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In § 454 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes (further quotes are also from the *Investigations*):

‘Everything is already there in ... ’ How does it come about that this arrow → *points*? Doesn’t it seem to carry in it something besides itself?—‘No, not the dead line on paper; only the psychical thing, the meaning, can do that.’ — That is both true and false. The arrow points only in the application that a living being makes of it... (Wittgenstein 1963)

Everything lies open to view in language... What does the *PI* re-view there? It is of course a review of various specific possibilities for human life and language. However, at the same time the *PI* is also a review of the close relationships between language and life which make any such review possible. In brief, it may be said that life—in the sense which pertains in the first place to human beings—requires language,

but also that language must be *such* that it makes life possible; or, switching to the terminology of concepts, that concepts must be capable of supporting our lives. What, then, must be true of language or of concepts for them to support life? Taking this question to lie at the heart of the *PI*, I draw from the text a series of interdependent features that are required for concepts to be able to ground life. I begin by acknowledging that concepts, whether conceived as belonging to language, to public life, or to the individual, serve as a ground for actual life. On the basis of this reply, I elaborate a series of implications that depicts concepts as open and as moored in our ongoing concrete life. While the series of implications is drawn from Wittgenstein, the discussion will finally lead us beyond the topics emphasised in the *PI*. A notion of *conceptual ambivalence* will be posited, in which concepts become living attitudes rather than just a ground for human engagements. It will be argued that the possibility of such ambivalence is necessary for human life and for language.

I will be speaking, thus, alternately of language and of concepts. Speaking of concepts should distance us from being caught up with the fate of a word or a phrase in favour of concerning ourselves with a piece of language that characterises some notion. Our main example, in what follows, is the concept of *subsistence*, a *livelihood*, or 'a living'. The focus on concepts is not intended as a hypostatisation, and in particular I am going to move freely between speaking of concepts as belonging to the individual and as belonging to the public sphere.

In asking how language and concepts are related to life, life must be conceived of as concrete; and to deal with concrete life, we will have to focus on *engagements*. In the present paper, this heading includes intentional engagements of every order, such as personal short- or long-term actions, thoughts and feelings, and mental attitudes such as attitudes of desire or judgement; it also includes intersubjective engagements such as conversations or conferences. The following is a brief sample list of some engagements which are grounded in and partly constitutive of the concept of 'a living': looking for work (which would permit one to earn a living); complaining about the difficulties of making a living; exploiting a person, knowing that he depends on a means of sustaining a livelihood; and making the judgement that such exploitation should not take place. Wittgenstein tells us that we cannot understand human engagements without attributing to agents the mastery of a language and of particular concepts. His reminder presents language as simultaneously belonging to life and constituting its ground. Language belongs to life in the sense that whatever we say, do, or want, we contribute to language and to its relevant parts. Language captures life, while life makes some sense for us who live it; and this sense-bearing character of life is just what language provides. This is also why there will be no need to distinguish in what follows between literally linguistic engagements, such as saying something, and other

engagements, the latter being still backed-up, as it were, by linguistic behaviour.¹

Language thus provides a grammar with which we say what *can* be thus said—I borrow half of this formulation from the *Tractatus*, where it refers to logic. By their being grammatical, our verbal and non-verbal engagements already provide a sense in which language *grounds* life—a sense which I shall here without qualification embrace. As life and ground, concepts can be thought of as threads of actual and potential life: threads made of, and by, our specific engagements. The concept of a livelihood is spun, in the manner in which a thread is spun, from our daily efforts in its name, and from its place in our choice of studies; it is spun from conversations in which the hardships of making a living are spoken of, as well as from government decisions in which the question of the subsistence of the citizens is ignored. I thus take the ‘thread’ metaphor, used by Wittgenstein in order to contrast family resemblance with concepts, back to concepts. However, both the word ‘concept’ and the metaphor are assigned in this talk a Wittgensteinian meaning that is not precisely Wittgenstein’s.

Two preliminary remarks on concepts and grammar

Before we can consider further the relations of engagements and concepts, two points central to Wittgenstein’s move from logic to grammar should be presented. One point is that the move to grammar is a move away from concepts in a (broadly) Fregean sense, be they conceived of as functions from objects to truth values, or as closely related with predicates, towards concepts as threads of life. However, a concept in the former sense is part of the concept as a life thread. For example, it is part of the concept of a cup of espresso that certain things are justly judged as cups of espresso. Moreover, truth is importantly parasitic: i.e., truth can easily be made relevant to any engagement that manifests a concept. Thus, drinking of a cup of coffee can be captured by sentences like ‘John drank a cup of coffee’ or ‘John would say if asked “I have just drunk a cup of coffee”’, etc. This is important for two opposed reasons: first, as a caution not to take the parasitic character of truth as entailing a possible reduction of concepts to some revised Fregean concepts. The second reason is that the discussion in terms of truth always suggests itself, and aspects that belong to or that are criticised by post-Fregean accounts of concepts will also appear below.

The second point stressed in Wittgenstein’s move to grammar will be at the heart of our discussion. Namely, that while grammar grounds life—and, moreover, precisely insofar as it is its ground—grammar itself belongs to life in two senses. It belongs to life, firstly, in the sense

¹ I embrace David Finkelstein’s insight (2003) that a Wittgensteinian analysis of language must comprise an analysis of life, which is not only linguistic.

that to speak and live grammatically is to become part of broader threads of life. Secondly, the relation of an actual engagement with a concept or with a part of grammar cannot be formulated under a presumption that grammar is completely pre-given. When I suggest the metaphor of the threads of life, I in fact already accept that grammar is lively in these ways. However, our actual course in this paper must in some measure beat a retreat, in order to achieve sharper understanding. We shall reconsider the lively character of grammaticality from a slightly changed perspective. We shall begin by asking what grounding by language involves, replying in a manner that increases the tension between a ground and a life. In virtue of this tension, the answer—which thus forms the first feature in our series—will, however, have to lead us to a more subtle web of relations.

*Language and life—The first feature:
language as background to intentionality*

It is part of the notion of a concept, and thus an additional aspect of its grounding character, that, generally speaking, holding a concept is not an intentional engagement. Thus I read the Rule-Following paradox—namely, as a repudiation of the picture of a rule as waiting for those who apply it to give it a meaning, or in other words as a repudiation of the idea that to follow a rule one has to intend it. To quote from § 219 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule *blindly*’. The living with a concept is not defined by a system of rules, but a similar point is still true. When I manifest a concept in my engagement, in general I manifest it blindly. Concepts and language would collapse if complaining about making a living as a rule included taking an attitude to, or thinking about, what a living would be. This point—one which is close to Cora Diamond’s analysis of the rule-following paradox (1991)—is our point of departure, and we shall adhere to it in what follows.

*The second feature:
the openness of language*

At the same time, we have to be cautious; for concepts must be ‘live’ in order to comprise grounds for human engagements. They must be the foci or domains of our life, giving in a nutshell the actual and possible engagements that manifest them. Thus we should be wary of understanding concepts in a way that would reify them, annulling human life by the same token. If concepts precede intentionality, won’t intentional life become the dead instances of a mysteriously pre-given sense? For suppose that all that a concept is or can be is predefined: what does such an account of concepts make of the relations between mastering the concept and the actual engagement? Engagements, concepts, and

their relations would all thereby be collapsed. When a person seeks for the means of subsistence, or when she describes her difficulties in finding them, this would perhaps be tantamount to certain 'movements' that somehow suit this 'concept', perhaps in a way similar to the movements of the wind, conceived by us as manifesting the character of a breeze.

Language must ground life, but if grounding entails pregiveness then grounding fails. So it better not entail it. The key, supplied by Wittgenstein, consists in the openness of language.² Its openness is realised, first, in clear concept changes. For example, neoliberal conceptions of socioeconomic life have changed the concept of a livelihood, 'inviting' people to apply the judgement 'it's a living' to jobs and work offers for which such a judgement would not have been considered in more unionised days.

The openness of language is also realised, more generally, in the concrete character that an engagement finds in a concept or gives to it. Thus, a middle-class person says of another of a different class that 'she cannot make a living' with one inflection (perhaps meaning 'she cannot feed her children'); and of herself and her friends she says similar things with another inflection ('no morning espresso for me nowadays'). The point is that concepts in the sense required *are* what we make of them and take them to be in our engagements, and thus when a certain engagement is considered, the question may arise as to the making and taking that depicts this engagement as manifesting a certain concept.³ The concept of a living is constituted in the various forms given to it by people who already share it.

The second feature re-formulated: concepts are inflectible

It is useful to speak of *inflection* in order to refer to the concept from the perspective of a specific engagement (or a domain of engagements). Inflection may be seen as a twist on the concept in question. It neither replaces concepts nor complements them. Coffee, for example, is inflected in factories as a plant, as grains and as a product. However, at least for those who make the money, that inflection involves the fact that a certain drink is prepared from the grains mentioned, that

² Meir Buzaglo (2002) lays the emphasis on the openness of concepts, depicting conceptual expansion as part of rational human life, from mathematics to ordinary language. Openness also has a central role in Stephen Mulhall's reading of the PI in 2003.

³ This does not prevent engagements from manifesting concepts in pre-decided modes. In particular, part of the character of various concepts is that they have a core domain of application, defined by certain limitations. It would not belong to mathematics (as it is now conceived) to allow that 1 and 1 *sometimes* make 3, and when someone is engaged in a calculation, not only does she inflect 3 as different than 1+1, but as necessarily so.

this beverage has an important place in the habits and the life style of consumers, possibly that it is also the preferred morning drink of the concept holders in question, etc. All this appeals to further inflections—and here we may evoke Rush Rhees, who took the problem that undermines the ‘builders’ language’ (in the beginning of the *PI*) to be that of lack of interrelations with different parts of language, in which the relevant concepts are differently inflected (Rhees 1970). It is important that some of the further inflections appealed to in an inflection are, as in the example, more or less anticipated. It is also important that an inflection of a concept does not appeal to every actual or possible inflection. Thus, perhaps the workers in some places are ignorant of the coffee ‘culture’ whose existence their work sustains. They may later learn of it and re-inflect by the same token their concept of coffee, whereas presently this future inflection is also not appealed to.

One thing that these examples should already make clear is that the notion of an inflection does not depict inflections as intentional. What about the other point of the explanation, regarding inflections as concepts under a twist? What is involved here perhaps requires further discussion, for it may be natural to endorse a certain aspect of the notion of inflection and thereby in fact reify inflections, even if they are supposed to be the live forms of a concept. It appears to me that Charles Travis’s work takes this double direction. Interpreting Wittgenstein, Travis is impressed with the possibility that the concept would take up its character in the circumstances of use. Travis’s concepts are Fregean sharp concepts relativised to a particular occasion. Thus he might say that if someone says ‘This is coffee’ in regard to a particular liquid matter, she presupposes on the occasion a concept whose extension is the cups and jugs of coffee (rather than cacao or some cleaning agent). As such, Travis’s concepts may not agree with the above description of inflection, even if it were reframed, as much as possible, in regard to functions from objects to truth. Yet Travis’s occasions retain the vague identity that occasions have in everyday life, and, furthermore, he acknowledges that if the diverse uses of a word are understood, then they are not reduced to mere homonyms.⁴ The following implication in our series distances inflections from homonyms and characterises inflections and engagements as vague. By contrast, as the last feature in the series makes clear, Travis’s account in fact identifies concepts with homonyms. We shall now see that if the openness of language and concepts that enables them to ground life is tantamount to inflectibility, then the analysis in terms of inflections may not serve as a reduction of openness. From there, we shall proceed to endorse conceptual ambivalence, a phenomenon for which no room is left in Travis’s account.

⁴ This is stressed in (Travis 2000: 185). The rest of the paragraph refers to (Travis 2008) and to the introduction to (Travis 2000).

*The third feature:
concepts are re-inflectible*

Is it then essential to conceive of inflection in terms of a concept with a twist? And, if it is, in what sense is this properly essential? We have seen that the openness of language is tantamount to the inflectibility of concepts, but we have not examined how this pair of ideas—of openness and inflectibility—should be understood. It may seem that an open concept amounts to a multiplicity of inflections. The problem, however, may now be clear: namely that the relation of an inflection to the concept that transcends it entirely disappears, and with it any reason to speak of a unitary and open concept. It may be helpful to reconsider the case of the middle-class person who, in her judgements as regards the hardships of making a living, measures a living in terms of espresso in regard to herself and in terms of bread in regard to a poor acquaintance. If openness is reduced to multiplicity of closed inflections, it is as if two different concepts pertain to each of her judgements; as if another person cannot ask her: why then one rule for you and another for others? Or as if this question is a matter of a third concept of a living that has nothing to do with those two already presumably acknowledged concepts.

Indeed it is important that we can *add* the last question. That is, it won't be sufficient to accept some sophisticated version of closed inflections and closed relations of engagements. For, in any version that equates inflectibility with a multiplicity of closed inflections, we can neither ask for a rise, nor reject someone else's demand, nor have any good old grammatical cup of coffee. To see why, let us recall how we have been led to see that language, as the ground of life, must be open. We accepted the requirement of a language as background rather than part of intentionality. However, in so far as we supposed that as a background, language completely precedes the actual engagement, it was no longer clear how the engagements borrow any sense from language. Hence, openness—i.e., inflectibility. However, if the concept of a 'living', or that of 'coffee', are reducible to their 'inflections', do we not merely move from a reification of an a priori language, to its reification at the level of concrete use, as if any engagement should be juxtaposed with its particular concepts or inflections of concepts?

It is thus impossible to determine univocally and conclusively how a given engagement inflects a concept. In fact, no positive qualification could fix an engagement entirely, not even the engagement of one person, and not even when we think of it—so far as is possible—only from a first-person point of view. Consider one's dismissive reading in the papers, on a certain Thursday, of the sufferings of the unemployed who just sit in cafes all day long: is this reading disparate from one's general attitude to the working classes? Is it a disparate engagement from one's own sitting in a café at the time of reading? If one then goes back

to work only to hear that one has been fired, the past engagement may be seen in a different light. Has it changed? We cannot give univocal answers if we wish engagements to reveal the person as engaged with something; and engagements are, if anything, more indefinite when more people are involved in it. Furthermore, they are more indefinite as there is always the possibility of more people getting involved, including such people as we would be, were the examples in this talk concerned with real people—that is, including those who make inquiries or judgements about the engagements.

The point is that to analyse engagements as indefinite is again to deal with the liveliness indispensable for a concept if it is to render an engagement with sense. When we wish to speak of the ‘same engagement’—an idea that introduces a difference, but one in which the engagement nevertheless remains the same—we present the engagement as taking some different course in language, or letting language somehow back it up differently.⁵ Thus, it cannot be conclusively determined how a concept is inflected. Now, if we think of an inflection as a mini-concept, we may sometimes have to worry how the inflection itself is inflected. Other cases would similarly suggest a split of inflections in the first order, while these inflections can always require further splitting. My conclusion, however, is not that we ought to distinguish between first-order and higher-order splits of inflection, but rather that an ontology of inflections is a bad idea.

In any case, the third point arrived at in our series is that how a concept is inflected is open to change and re-interpretation, and may be indefinite. In the words of Wittgenstein, in § 62 in regard to the orders ‘Bring me the broom’ and ‘Bring me the broomstick and the brush which is fitted on to it’:

You may say: ‘The point of the two orders is the same’. I should say so too.—
But it is not everywhere clear what should be called the ‘point’ of an order.

Indeed, Wittgenstein guides us far away from any explication of his ‘meaning is use’ slogan in terms of mini-meanings underlying definite uses. Let us read § 83.

Doesn’t the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw.

And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along.

⁵ This ‘backing up’ will not always be formulated in terms of one and the same concept.

*The fourth feature:
conceptual ambivalence*

What is the language that life requires? It is, in addition to what we have seen, a language whose concepts can raise ambivalence. Before developing the reply, however, a clarification of this question may be called for, namely, that this question is tantamount to asking what natural language requires. It is not necessary for formal languages to be capable of ambivalent use and their terms or concepts do not have to be re-inflectible or even at all inflectible.⁶ The reason that the series of features does not apply to formal languages is that the concept of language is inflected as relative in the relevant contexts. In other words, formal languages constitute domains within natural language. Of course, formal languages are typically developed as independent domains. However this is again a relative independence: it only means that certain dependencies are prohibited. Thus, when a formal language is mixed with other uses of its terms and with other expressions, this would not itself be seen as part of the formal language. At the same time, formal language (and actual formal languages) must always presuppose other dependencies. For instance, the logician uses informal language in developing a formal language, the interests served by this formal language must be backed up by our broader language, etc.

So what *is* the language that life requires? Where has the series led us? It is a language whose rules are followed blindly, as in 219, but it is not a language with fixed rules or, more generally, with a pre-given definite grammar. If some games may be described in terms of a fixed nature, this is because such a description does not stand alone, but rather the game is part of a life in which our engagements flexibly and without final determination inflect concepts. § 83, added to § 219, leads us far. Yet there is further to go. The very meaning of openness poses a difficulty. For, as openness goes beyond any engagement, the question arises of how openness can *necessarily* belong to our life and talk. Even if it is impossible to reduce open concepts to univocal definite elements, might we not arbitrarily define the engagement, its context, and the inflection of relevant concepts? What lends sense to our talk of the same old engagement in regard to cases and possibilities in which the concept is inflected differently? What is it in language that gives us undeniable permission to meaningfully ask our middle-class protagonist: why do you acknowledge only discriminatively that a person cannot make a living? Namely, how *is* it possible to refer to her above-mentioned engagements, yet under a different inflection of the concept of a living?

One answer would be to note that this is how we live, and that just *is* the game of life and language: neither engagements nor their inflection

⁶ I thank Bill Child for bringing up the issue of formal languages in a private exchange.

of concepts are fixed. And this of course is true. We must ask, however, how the openness of a concept enters into how we live, rather than merely into a story told about us. Indeed, in recent decades the character of language as ground for life has been systematically confused with certain *modes* of language that discuss or represent human life, namely folk-psychology or -theory, images and interpretations. Thus, Daniel Dennett (1987 & 1996) has argued that there are only theories. However, the reduction of *human life* to theories is presupposed across cognitivist philosophy: Wilfrid Sellars 1962 is an especially influential example.

Here, then, is another way that the necessary blindness of our use of language threatens a collapse of life and language. Since we do live and talk, there must, therefore, be some qualification to the blind use of language; moreover, the qualification must take a particular direction, i.e., towards a way of having concepts that exposes their openness. To put it briefly, the openness of language is anchored in the possibility of what I propose to call conceptual ambivalence. When one is conceptually ambivalent, one's engagement is bound up with two contending inflections of the concept, and neither any of them, nor their contention, could be omitted.

Now, the order of presentation of the entailment of conceptual ambivalence may also be inverted: the non-exhaustive character of any inflection is part of our life only if a person must, in her concrete engagement, sometimes go beyond an inflection that her engagement all the same takes up. And, further, when an inflection is both held and challenged by someone, and is held only to the extent that it is challenged, then the inflections and conflict are, by the same token, intentional engagements. It follows that our unintentional sharing in language must be acknowledged as the general rule that always allows exception. '[T]here is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*' Wittgenstein writes in § 201. There is also a way that *is* an interpretation. And there are other ways to be intentionally engaged with rules, or more generally with language. We should remember that Wittgenstein again and again posits the blind use of language precisely in the context of learning a certain use and of the possibility of misunderstanding. To imagine a doubt is not to be in doubt, he tells us in § 84, but can doubts only be imagined? Or must we sometimes be in doubt? The relations of engagements with language require that we are sometimes engaged with language. I think that it is because Wittgenstein takes this requirement seriously that Kripkeian and Dummettian interpretations of Wittgenstein, according to which grasping a rule is intentional, are even possible.⁷

⁷ In Kripke 1982, this interpretation is part of the problem that the paradox exposes. In Dummett 1959, the intentionality is entailed by Wittgenstein's solution, according to which one adopts a convention in every use of (mathematical) language.

Let me then clarify the notion of conceptual ambivalence. The first question is why conceptual ambivalence, as that phenomenon of opposed inflections that is required by the openness of language, implies that blindness is qualified by it. In fact, to have spoken of the contention of inflections as a form of ambivalence has already been to regard it as intentional. Ambivalence is a mental attitude, or—in slightly different terms—it is the holding of opposed mental attitudes *as* opposed. Now, this is precisely what we need, namely, that one would be engaged such that from one's own point of view, as thus engaged, one is inflecting a concept and challenging the inflection. We need concepts to be held as tension-fraught attitudes. Yet what could this mean? After all, concepts are not intentional and in particular they are not mental attitudes. Of course to speak of concepts in terms of attitudes is by the same token to enter into the territory of concept inflection, and this is part of the answer. However, we also know that concept inflection is not in general intentional: when someone is engaged in checking whether some job provides a living, her inflection of the concept of a living does not comprise a second engagement on her part. Otherwise, inflections would only add a second set of engagements, and all our difficulties in regard to the relation between concepts and engagements—difficulties that have led us to conceive of concepts in terms of inflectibility in the first place—would reappear between concepts and inflections.

Although concepts or inflections are fundamentally unintentional, sometimes we hold concepts as attitudes. The concept is then not merely inflected in some direction, but rather the very inflection engages the agent. How is this to be understood? First, we should shift between thinking of intentional inflections as the concepts and as attitudes towards the concepts (or, again, as attitudes towards the inflections themselves). Secondly, we have been concerned with the dual direction of fit between concepts and engagements, according to which engagements *make* and *take* the character of the related concepts. At the intentional level, this dual direction of fit equates the inflection with an attitude of a particular sort, namely value judgement.⁸ To inflect a concept intentionally is, by the same token, for the agent to judge that she⁹ ought, in that context or in general, to give such a character to the concept, or

⁸ This is based on my analysis of judgements in terms of interdependent dimensions, one of them a cognitive dimension and the other similar to emotions and desires. On the cognitive dimension, the judgement aims to acquire a pre-given objectivity—in our case, as to how the concept should be taken. The particular inflection is taken to be appropriate. On the non-cognitivist dimension, to judge that the object is of a certain value is to treat it as of such value. This means in our case that the inflection of the concept is treated as appropriate. What would it mean to treat an inflection as appropriate? In the simplest case—which is ours—it is nothing other than to inflect the concept accordingly. The two-dimensional analysis of judgements, and more on their relations to concepts, can be found in Razinsky 2014.

⁹ That she ought, or that one ought.

that her inflection of the concept is right. 'It's a living' is sometimes said qua 'you should learn to think of livelihood this way'.

In conceptual ambivalence, moreover, we have two attitudes—or, if you wish, one ambivalent attitude. When I say that conceptual ambivalence (i.e., the contention of inflections that are both manifested together in the engagement of a person), is *ambivalence*, I make a grammatical point. For, if an inflection is inflected as challenged, it is not blind.¹⁰ The two inflections compete to be the right inflection for the concept under the engagement in question. Suppose someone is ambivalent whether to pay another person as a salary the lowest sum that he would agree to take. Such engagement reflects and finds expression in ambivalence as to how to inflect the concept of livelihood at that person's expense—in other words, whether to inflect the notion of a 'living' as involving having access to bread, or to espresso.

Another example may be drawn from Travis's exposition of his idea of 'an understanding' in the introduction to *Unshadowed Thought*. Travis there refers to a door over two stacks of milk crates serving as the desk in a certain poor student's room. Is there a desk in the student's room? It depends on what you mean by a desk. In some cases a desk is an item of furniture deliberately produced as one. For instance, a richer student may tell his mom, 'I don't have a desk in my room at the minute. I have ordered one, but until they bring it from the store, I'm doing homework on a door laid over two stacks of milk crates'. In other cases, anything functioning as a desk is a desk. It is however just as ordinary—and here we must go beyond Travis's framework—that these two inflections are both involved in the inflection of the concept of a desk. This may happen in many ways, not always constitutive of ambivalence between the inflections. For instance, the richer student might say 'right now I'm using a funny sort of a desk but the real desk is going to arrive in a few days'. He seems quite settled how 'a desk' should be understood in the situation, namely in a way that makes of a door over milk crates a liminal referent. Consider, however, someone who uses the milk-crates desk regularly. Now he is going to host a 'respectable' relative who would need to complete a talk paper during her stay. He wants her to understand the situation in advance, and in explaining it to her, he is engaged in conceptual ambivalence as to the inflection of the concept of a desk. In other words, he ambivalently counts and yet does not count the-door-and-two-stacks-of-milk-crates as a desk. 'You know, there is some desk there, but it is of a funny sort', he might tell her, or 'there is a bed and some comfortable chairs. There is of course also a desk, it works for me alright. Yet, I must admit that it is not a real desk...'

¹⁰ Here I refer to an inflection as made, and by the same token challenged, by one person. An interpersonal engagement may also be indispensably bound up with some contention of inflections (it does not have to be univocally decided what the character of the contention is). This is how many disputes must be understood.

A remark in parentheses: conceptual ambivalence is not only very common, but it is an essential feature of various phenomena. I elsewhere argue that the scientific enterprise is bound up with conceptual ambivalence: every theory, or the scientific community holding it, is conceptually ambivalent in regard to methodological concepts (for instance, the concept of explanation) and to ‘material’ concepts (such as that of electron). Secondly, ethics is bound up with recurrent opportunities for conceptual ambivalence regarding the value concepts in question. Thirdly, the logic of desire and fulfilment invites cases of conceptual ambivalence in regard to the concept of ‘a fulfilment of so and so’s desire that such and such’.¹¹

I have argued that language requires the possibility of conceptual ambivalence, and that conceptual ambivalence is a concrete engagement that reveals the openness of a concept. Let me make it clear, however, that conceptual ambivalence is not tantamount to such openness. On the contrary, in cases of conceptual ambivalence, as in any other case, we inflect the concept in a certain concrete direction—concrete and tension-fraught in the case concerned; And to be inflected in a concrete direction entails that the concept or inflection may always be transcended by other inflections. Paradoxically, if conceptual ambivalence was openness, it would exclude openness. The point in speaking of conceptual ambivalence as exposure to openness is different, however: when one ambivalently inflects a concept, the two inflections are both necessary. Yet they cannot be combined into one inflection. The concept is inflected, by and from the point of view of our protagonist, in each of the two ways, each of them is held *qua* a suggestion that the other be excluded. Yet it is not excluded. Instead, each inflection disrupts the other, and thus it exposes that the concept is not tantamount to the contending inflection.

Conclusion

It might be worthwhile to make explicit two of the more silent dialogues in which this paper engages. First, this paper might have begun by insisting, with Rhees, that Wittgenstein’s ‘builders’ do not have a language, and moving from there to ask what language must be in view of the existence of real people. Rhees offers two explanations for why the builders’ language is not a language. One of these explanations—that the builders’ concepts’ lack interrelations with other inflections of such concepts—has played a part in the present account. What about the other lack that he identifies—along with Raimond Gaita (1991), who goes back to Rhees’s paper—namely the lack of a genuine conversation between people? My reply is that this lack is indeed crucial, and that while our present series ends with a phenomenon of individual life, a different course would draw a mutual constitution between meetings

¹¹ See Razinsky 2014 for the second claim and Razinsky 2015 for the third claim.

and relationships, our individual lives, and the language that backs up human life.

The other dialogue to be mentioned includes Donald Davidson and his account of the interrelations between mind and language. Although his focus is individualistic, and although he is hostile to ambivalence, Davidson's work on basic rationality, language and irrationality is all about human life being linguistic, and language being the domain and background of human life. On Davidson's account, however, concepts are themselves mental attitudes, and are symmetrical with beliefs and desires. While the Wittgensteinian asymmetry is important, this paper has argued that in fact it encompasses the truth in Davidson's view—namely, that Wittgenstein defends an inherently fragile asymmetry.¹²

We can end by returning to conceptual ambivalence—and to Wittgenstein. Does Wittgenstein move from the inflexibility of language to conceptual or to linguistic ambivalence? I shall only point towards Wittgenstein's simplest answer, which is a 'yes' that is striking in its unaccentuated and innocent tone. For he remarks in § 677 regarding a similar phenomenon 'one does indeed also say "I was half thinking of him when I said that"'.¹³

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¹² Davidson's individualistic approach, his exclusion of ambivalence from basic rationality (by including the consistency of attitudes in the *charity principle*), and his understanding of concepts as attitudes can be found in Davidson 2004. The present paper is related to Davidson also in borrowing from him the view of mental attitudes as intentional dispositions (in this I disagree with the interpretationalist understanding of Davidson's account of attitudes).

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