One feature of Wittgenstein’s manuscripts of the 1940s that will strike the reader is the fact that the notion of a concept is nowhere in his writings examined with more intensity and frequency than in his later manuscripts on the philosophy of mathematics and in those on the philosophy of psychology. I use these labels with a good deal of hesitation, but they serve the purpose of identifying the manuscripts I mean. The same manuscripts show an unusual frequency of certain compound expressions like Begriffsverwirrung (conceptual confusion), Begriffswelt (conceptual world) and, in particular, Begriffsbildung (formation of concepts).

A notorious remark is Wittgenstein’s observation that concept-formation is the limit of the empirical.\(^1\) Taken out of context, this brief statement is far from clear. But even if one takes its context into account, it is more a concise way of expressing a number of questions than an explanation of difficulties that have bothered us for a long time. One point that seems clear is that the formation of concepts is something that we, as a collective body or sub-group of human beings, achieve. Another point that is obvious in Wittgenstein’s eyes is that concepts are a matter of our use of language. In a lecture he says that ‘a concept is a technique of using a word’, and similar formulations can be found in his manuscripts.\(^2\) An image that is used repeatedly is that of concepts channeling our experience. We get the impression, Wittgenstein says, that concept-formation conducts our experience into particular channels, so that one experience is now seen together with the new one in a hitherto unfamiliar way. What corresponds to this is that a change in concepts – a transition from one concept-formation to another – will involve that the abandoned concept remains present in the background.\(^3\) A typical consequence of the introduction of a concept is that now we feel justified in
using the word ‘must’ where, without conceptual connections, we used to say ‘This is the case’ or ‘That will happen’. To speak of conceptual necessity – to use the word ‘must’ in this way to express inexorability (die Unerbittlichkeit des logischen Muss) – seems to signify that we cannot depart from a certain concept: that we cannot leave the path it traces out for us. But in characteristic fashion Wittgenstein adds the question whether it would not be better to say that we do not want to depart from this concept.4

Of course, this is the sort of remark Wittgenstein typically makes in the context of examining our notion of a proof and what we expect proofs to be able to accomplish. This is not my topic, but it will be helpful to remember his remarks to the effect that in mathematics a new proof will affect our concepts and eventually change them. Such a proof will play a particular role, the role of a paradigmatic procedure, and as such it will be stored in the archives of our language, as Wittgenstein says.5 Accordingly, one expects that proofs and the concepts shaped by them can serve as standards of conceptual clarification and thus help to remedy conceptual confusion.

In Wittgenstein’s view, the clearing up of conceptual confusions is a central task of the philosopher. But the nature of concepts is not a matter that was systematically discussed by the champion of family-resemblance concepts and the idea that many of our concepts have blurred edges. Still, as I pointed out, Wittgenstein’s remarks on the philosophy of psychology, just as his writings on the foundations of mathematics, are generously sprinkled with observations on concepts and concept-formation. Perhaps the most striking passage is a well-known remark, namely section xii of Part II of the Investigations. I shall now quote a slightly modified translation of this section and then proceed to highlight a few points that seem particularly noteworthy.

If concept-formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn’t we be interested not in grammar, but rather in that which is its basis in nature? – We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest is not reflected back into these possible causes of concept-formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). Rather: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the