Wittgenstein’s ‘Kantian Solution’

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The limit of language is shown by its being impossible to describe the fact which corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence, without simply repeating the sentence. (This has to do with the Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy.) (CV 10)

Starting with an interpretation of that cryptic remark from *Culture and Value*, this chapter is an effort to bring out the – profoundly transformed – Kantianism in Wittgenstein’s mature thought.

1. ‘The harmony between thought and reality’ (Z 55)

I think that what Wittgenstein had in mind by ‘the problem of philosophy’ must have concerned the nature of that correspondence between language, or thought, and reality that makes language *language* and thought *thought*. And I think the solution to the problem would have to be a broadly ‘Kantian’ one, in that the ‘correspondence’ in question would be *transcendental* rather than empirical – that is, not itself the sort of correspondence with reality that makes true thoughts *true* but rather the prior relationship to reality that makes true or *false* thoughts *possible*. Kant’s ‘transcendental logic’ has to do with this ‘possibility of truth and falsity’; it is comparable to what Wittgenstein called ‘the logic of language’ in the *Tractatus* and ‘grammar’ in the *Investigations*. Kant’s ‘transcendental dialectic’ has to do with the diagnosis and cure of the illusions a philosopher is likely to succumb to when contemplating transcendental logic; it is like the ‘conceptual therapy’ so prominent in Wittgenstein’s works:

Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations.

The fundamental thing [is] expressed grammatically … . (Z 458–9)
Wittgenstein would try to get metaphysicians to see the theories they propose (whether conservative or revisionary) as misleadingly expressed and misunderstood systems of grammar. He would try to persuade them that, ‘[l]ike everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language’ (Z 55).

A true proposition corresponds to the facts of the world; a false one does not. But since even a false proposition means something, it too must have some relation to reality. Shall we say that a false proposition corresponds to a logical fact – the logical possibility of its truth? No, for then we’ll have to ask whether the proposition asserting the logical possibility is itself true, that is, corresponds to the ‘logical fact’ in question – and so on ad infinitum. There is a relation between thought and the world deeper than that of a true thought’s correspondence with the fact it describes; but it clarifies nothing to picture that relation as a meta-correspondence existing between a proposition (true or false) and the meta-fact (the ‘logical possibility’) that makes it true.

Suppose I falsely think that my dean’s car is not really chartreuse in colour. The relation between my false thought and reality shows itself, not in some meta-fact, but in the everyday, humdrum fact that when we want to explain to someone what the word ‘chartreuse’ means in the sentence ‘Her car is not chartreuse,’ we point to something that really is chartreuse. A thought’s fundamental relatedness to reality is an internal relation: it is expressed in the grammar of the language used to express either it or its negation – and not in any further proposition.1

A proposition ‘contains its own sense’, its own possibility of truth – its own truth conditions. Adapting an example from PI 354, this means: if a proposition runs It’s raining then its verification is called ‘the fact that it’s raining’. Suppose I happen to be walking down a path with a stranger and it starts to rain. ‘Damn, it’s raining!’, I say, pointing to the drops pouring down from the clouds. If the stranger responds, ‘What do you mean?,’ what else could I do but say it again, hopefully in a language she understands better than English?

2. ‘Justification comes to an end’ (OC 192)

It is not always possible to describe the fact that would verify a proposition without simply repeating it. When we’re engaged in philosophy, however, we’re apt to find this impossibility, this ‘limit,’ hard to acknowledge. We want to describe the fact without simply repeating it, or some ordinary-language equivalent. Why? Because we think we should be able to justify, not just to restate, those important things – so