Convention and Necessity

Essence is expressed by grammar. Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is. The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn't do. (PI 371-374)

Many contemporary philosophers read the later Wittgenstein as propounding a transcendental view. The transcendental reading takes our forms of life to be unified fixed limits on what counts as human. Furthermore, since whatever we say about our forms of life must be said from within them -- "there is no stepping 'outside' forms of life to survey them" -- there are limits on what can be said about them. Nicholas Gier, Jonathan Lear, Lynn Baker and Ross Mandel (among others) argue that Wittgenstein is a transcendental philosopher who is concerned with the conditions for the possibility of thought and experience. Gier, Lear and Baker argue that Wittgenstein's transcendental method allies him with post-Kantian philosophy. They acknowledge important differences between Kant and Wittgenstein: for example, Wittgenstein rejects the Kantian idea of "things in themselves" underlying experienced reality. Ross Mandel reads Wittgenstein as a transcendental philosopher, but not as a post-Kantian. Rather, he insists that Wittgenstein's emphasis on the philosophy of the familiar requires a transcendental account:

To explain just how our concepts and behavior can possess such [metaphysical] force, it is necessary to provide a transcendental account. Such an explanation aims at demonstrating the possibility of our everyday conduct in terms of certain necessary, underlying structures. (Mandel, p. 262)

Those who read Wittgenstein as a transcendental philosopher agree that our forms of life are not conventional. For if forms of life were conventional, they would be arbitrary, and if they are arbitrary we might have had different forms of life. Since the transcendentalists claim that our forms of life are invariant, necessary, and fixed, they are committed to repudiating their arbitrariness, and thus their conventionality.

I will argue that the transcendental reading is undermined by careful attention to what Wittgenstein said he was doing. Wittgenstein's view is unique and radical in ways the transcendental interpretation completely misses. His later work is, I think, an extended attempt to distract us from our longing for transcendence-for "the crystalline purity of logic"-by issuing endless reminders that our forms of life, our concepts, are based on uncontroversial, but nonetheless arbitrary, facts about natural history, education and practices. We human beings share forms of life which are, on the one hand, contingent and arbitrary, and, on the other hand, are the sole source of the "hardness of the logical must." (PI 437) Wittgenstein embeds necessity within convention.
Wittgenstein's view is that conventions, arbitrary customs, practices and shared senses are all that could provide the boundaries between sense and nonsense, between what is possible and what impossible. Necessity and conventionality are not mutually exclusive ideas in Wittgenstein. To say that a statement is necessary is to say that it plays a role for us, that of being held certain, which means that we have agreed not to question its truth. This is the basis of what is truly radical in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. And to the question how this could possibly work, his eloquent answer is "because we have a deep need for it to work." Hence, in a sense, necessity for Wittgenstein is psychological, not logical. This gives his later view a surprisingly Humean twist.

Consider:

"The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessity into a proposition." (PI 372)

The transcendentalists distort the concept of "arbitrariness" in Wittgenstein. They think it means "the result of unconstrained choice." I will argue that Wittgenstein meant something different by 'arbitrary', but that what he meant emerges only in his remarks on grammar. These remarks are curious, subtle and teasing, and show that grammar is conventional, based solely on human agreement backed by certain facts of our natural history, and highly resistant to change, even imaginable change.


The grammar of an expression provides three things: (i) criteria for its correct use, (ii) its relations to the grammar of other expressions, and (iii) its roles in our everyday language games. The received view is that for Wittgenstein the meaning of an expression is its use in the language. He nearly says as much in *Philosophical Investigations*.

For a *large* class of cases--though not for all--in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (PI 43)

Meanings are rules for use:

...A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it.

For it is what we learn when the word is incorporated into our language. That is why there exists a correspondence between the concepts 'rule' and 'meaning'.(OC 61-62)

But as can be seen by his qualification in the PI passage ("though not for all"), Wittgenstein had misgivings about simply identifying meaning with use. For, as he points out in *Philosophical Grammar*, we might know how words are used, and still fail to understand them.

Wouldn't it be possible for me to know the use of the words and yet follow it without understanding? (As, in a sense, we follow the singing of birds). So isn't it something else that constitutes understanding--the feeling "in one's own breast," the living experience of the expressions?--They must mesh with my own life. Well, language does connect up with my own life. And what is called "language" is something made up of heterogeneous elements and the way it meshes with life is infinitely various. (PG 65-66)
Grammar links language with our lives, and thus with our forms of life. Like forms of life, grammar stands at the terminus of explanation. Forms of life and grammar are the "bedrock" against which our spades are turned.

The term 'forms of life' is highly controversial. The transcendental reading insists that there could only be one human form of life, for if forms of life were multiple, it would be possible for other human beings to have different forms of life than we do. This reading receives superficial support from the fact that, in the published works, four of the six references to "form of life" use that phrase in the singular.

And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (PI 19)

...the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (PI 23)

"So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"--It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life. (PI 241)

Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (PI p. 174)

What has to be accepted, the given, is-so one could say-forms of life. (PI p. 226)

Why shouldn't one form of life culminate in an utterance of belief in a Last Judgment? (Lectures and Conversations, p. 58)

Forms of life are shared natural and linguistic responses resting on broad agreement in judgments, and in corresponding behavior. It is important to keep in mind that, for Wittgenstein, "language" and "the actions into which it is woven" are inextricably tied through the concept "language-game." (PI 7) This linkage between our lives and our words is highlighted in the idea of a shared form of life. Stanley Cavell writes that: "Sharing a form of life is a matter of sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, sense of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation..." (Stanley Cavell). Cavell's description is telling but skewed toward the mental side of the concept of forms of life. (As we shall see, Jonathan Lear picks up on this mentalist construal, and dubs those who share forms of life "like-minded." He thereby wrongly suggests that to share forms of life is to share a subjectivity rather than practices, language-games and customs.)

Wittgenstein uses the phrases "forms of life" and "one form of life" once each, but these suggest that he does not think of a "form of life" as a monolithic entity which all humans share in its totality. Further evidence that it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that these passages are anomalous and discountable are the passages in which he imagines tribes of people whose forms of life differ from ours in some particular respect to illustrate how we are to think about that difference. For example, he asks us to consider people who are brought up "to give no expression of feeling of any kind." They have been harshly, severely trained to regard emotions as childish, something to be gotten rid of, hidden. Anyone who complains of pain "is ridiculed or punished." These people would differ from us; they have been conditioned differently, and their training has extinguished emotionally expressive behavior-perhaps even emotions themselves. This training produces people who have a different form of life, in this respect,
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from ours. We can intellectually and imaginatively grasp what the difference consists in, but only in part how it would feel to be one of them.

I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts. For here life would run on differently. -- What interests us would not interest them. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which essentially different concepts are imaginable. (Z, 387-388)

This last sentence is key: imagining people with "an education quite different from ours" is the only way to succeed in imagining "quite different concepts," which, in turn, means imagining life "running on differently." If our concepts seem natural, even inevitable, to us it is because we have been so educated. This thought experiment is directly opposed to the transcendental idea that people who are in any respect different from us would not be human. More tendentiously, it opens up the possibility that we ourselves would be quite different had we been educated in wholly different ways.

Wittgenstein proceeds to imagine interacting with these people. He suggests that our characteristic emotional lives would seem by turns shocking or comic to them. And their concepts would differ; e.g., among these people there would be no such thing as pretending to be in pain.

Shamming, these people might say, "What a ridiculous concept!" (As if one were to distinguish between a murder with one shot and one with three.)
Complaining is already so bad that there is no room at all for shamming as something worse. One disgrace is invisible to them because of the other. (Z, 384--386)

But are these people merely different from us? What if someone said "These men would have nothing human about them" because "we could not possibly make ourselves understood to them. Not even as we can to a dog. We could not find our feet with them." (Z, 390) To this Wittgenstein revealingly replies that "there surely could be such beings who in other respects were human." (Z, 390) This remark explicitly rejects the idea that being human requires being just like us in all respects. It leaves open the distinct possibility that we could share some forms of life with these emotionless people; for example, we might be able to work with them on technological or agricultural projects. Wittgenstein's willingness to countenance partially shared forms of life shows that complete similarity to our forms of life is not a limiting condition on counting as human beings. It also shows that there is potential fragmentation, variety, overlapping and crisscrossing of forms of life. This undercuts the uniformity and homogeneity of the transcendental reading of that notion.

II. The Arbitrariness of Grammar

Grammar links language -- in Wittgenstein's characteristically broad sense -- with our lives and thus with our "form of life." Grammar is inseparable from our forms of life, from how we respond, feel, think and live in the world. Yet Wittgenstein insists that grammar is "arbitrary." For Wittgenstein, this means that it cannot be justified because it has no point, no purpose, no function beyond itself. Grammar cannot be justified, for example, on the grounds that it allows us to better represent reality:

Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary. (PG 184).
Grammatical rules are neither correct nor incorrect, neither true nor false. They do not represent reality, hence they do not represent it well or badly. We cannot look to the world for justification of our grammatical rules because the direction of our gaze is guided by the very rules whose rationale we seek. The point of saying that grammar is arbitrary is to undermine any attempt at justification:

One is tempted to justify rules of grammar by sentences like "But there really are four primary colors". And the saying that the rules of grammar are arbitrary is directed against the possibility of this justification, which is constructed on the model of justifying a sentence by pointing to what verifies it. (Z 331)

In their unjustifiability, grammatical rules resemble rules of a game.

'The rules of a game are arbitrary' means: the concept 'game' is not defined by the effect the game is supposed to have on us. (PG 192)

The rules of chess are arbitrary; that game might never have been invented. What is not arbitrary is the relation between chess and the rules of chess. If you wish to play chess you must play by the rules of chess. (That is an example of a grammatical proposition.) The rules of cooking, on the other hand, serve a purpose. Breaking the rules means you cook badly. If you break the rules of chess you are not playing chess badly; you are playing something else, or nothing at all. Grammatical rules are more like the rules of chess than the rules for cooking: if you follow grammatical rules other than ours "that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else." (Z, 320) We can't even justify grammar on the grounds that it facilitates communication, for communication is not the point of language:

[We can't say] "Without language we couldn't communicate with one another".... We can indeed say "without a mouth human beings could not communicate with each other". But the concept of language is contained in the concept of communication. (PG 193)

Grammatical rules "are arbitrary in the same sense as the choice of a unit of measurement." (PG 185) For the purposes of measuring any unit will do. Of course there are pragmatic reasons for choosing one over another; it would be unwieldy to measure distances between towns in inches. But here again we can use Wittgenstein's "imaginary tribes" technique to imagine people for whom measurement plays a very different role, e.g., those for whom measurement is a form of religious ritual. For them, unwieldiness is not a relevant factor. Indeed, they may insist that the more difficult the technique, the more devotion they express. And since measurement does have a point for them beyond itself, they will be able to justify their choice of a technique by appealing to its ritualistic significance. There will be a right and a wrong way to conduct the ritual.

Wittgenstein also compares the arbitrariness of grammar to the arbitrariness of a style of painting in order to show that 'X is arbitrary' does not entail 'X could be changed if we wanted to.' He asks

For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure" (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly? (PI, p. 230)

We cannot choose a style of painting at pleasure. It is a question of what we are used to, of what is familiar to us, and this in turn depends on how we have been trained:
I say the sentence: "The weather is fine"; but the words are after all arbitrary signs—so let's put "a b c d" in their place. But now when I read this, I can't connect it straight away with the above sense. I am not used, I might say, to saying "a" instead of "the", "b" instead of "weather", etc. But I don't mean by that that I am not used to making an immediate association between the word "the" and "a", but that I am not used to using "a" in the place of "the"—and therefore in the sense of "the". (I have not mastered this language.) (PI 508)

So if I learnt the language in which 'abcd' meant that—should I come bit by bit to have the familiar experience when I pronounced the letters? Yes and no. A major difference...is that [in this case] I can't move. It is as if one of my joints were in splints, and I am not yet familiar with the possible movements, so that I as it were keep on stumbling. (Z 6)

Grammatical rules are arbitrary but they do not appear so. Mere habit—what we are "used to"—does not seem sufficient to explain the "hardness of the logical must." How could necessity be based on conventions, on what is familiar to us?

III. Conventions

Baker admits that forms of life "are in a certain sense conventional." She sees this conventionality as a function of the fact that "forms of life rest on agreement." (278) Calling forms of life "conventional" is meant to highlight three features of them: first, forms of life are distinct from empirical regularities, or laws of nature. We can easily imagine laws of nature to be different than they are, but -- according to Baker -- it is not possible to imagine having different forms of life. Second, calling forms of life conventional emphasizes "that they go no deeper than the contingent fact that human beings find it natural to proceed in the ways that we do." Third, forms of life cannot be used as "a theoretical or explanatory concept." This follows from their being distinct from empirical regularities. We do not discover forms of life by induction, experimentation and hypothesis, so it is senseless to invoke them to account for anything. (279)

I agree with Baker's first and second claims, but not with her third. Appealing to our forms of life often does function in an explanation, as its terminus. "For what has to be accepted, the given, is -- so one could say -- forms of life." (PI p. 226) What counts as an explanation is, of course, relative to the context and the audience. Sometimes appeals to empirical regularities or laws of nature are explanatory termini. We appeal to the law of gravity to explain why things fall, but asked to account for that law, we can only explain in more detail what it means to say that gravity is a law, what a gravitational field is, what the relation between the earth and other celestial bodies has to do with it, etc. And if asked why all that is true, we can only say "because that's the way this universe is" which is both an explanation and a rejection of all further questions.

So does it depend wholly on our grammar what will be called (logically) possible and what not, -- i.e. what that grammar permits?" But surely that is arbitrary! -- Is it arbitrary? -- It is not every sentence-like formation that we know how to do something with, not every technique has an application in our life. (PI 520)

Only those sentence-like formations that our language affords are useful to us. For example, I cannot "say "bububu" and mean "If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk," because "It is only in a language that I
can mean something by something." (PI, p. 18) Even some sentences that look meaningful turn out on inspection to be useless: Wittgenstein offers "A thing is identical with itself" as an example. (PI 216)

Transcendentalists regard the unjustifiability of grammar as evidence that nothing can be said about grammar -- it can only be gestured at. For example, Jaakko and Merrill Hintikka\(^7\) ascribe a principle to Wittgenstein which they call "language as the universal medium."

One can use language to talk about something only if one can rely on a given definite interpretation, a given network of meaning relations obtaining between language and the world. Hence one cannot meaningfully and significantly say in language what these meaning relations are, for in any attempt to do so one must already presuppose them. (p. 2)

Here's the transcendental reading again: there are things about language that we cannot say, because saying them uses the very language we are talking about. This is wrong from top to bottom. Wittgenstein does not talk about "meaning relations" not because doing so would not be meaningful, but because meaning is *not a relation*. However, he does talk about grammatical propositions, and he gives numerous examples of them. Wittgenstein says things about "language as a whole", and he does so "in language."

If the words 'language', 'experience', 'world' have a use [and they certainly do], it must be as humble a one as that of the words 'table', 'lamp' 'door'. (PI 97)

Nor is this "second-order" talk:

One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word 'philosophy' there must be a second-order philosophy. But it is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word 'orthography' among others without then being second-order. (PI 121)

The things he says are contributions to the grammar of the language he speaks in the process. Early Wittgenstein thought there was a paradox in this. Later Wittgenstein does not.

Baker insists that there is a paradox: she writes that "Whatever is said about forms of life-whatever is said about anything-can be said only within the context of forms of life." (281)

Hence:

It is part of our form of life that we suppose that horses and giraffes, colors and shapes exist independently of our form of life. But if our practices support the idea that the world exists independently of us (and *a fortiori* independently of our practices), then the dependence of that idea on our practices shows itself in what we count as sense, and is not to be stated in remarks about our practices....

In sum, the role that the idea of a form of life plays in Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning severely circumscribes what can be meaningfully said about forms of life. The sharp line between what can be said and what can only be shown drawn in the *Tractatus* was moved, but by no means erased, in the *Investigations*. (282)

Baker claims that forms of life constrain what can meaningfully be said, and that it is this "reticence" on Wittgenstein's part that accounts for there being so few references to forms of life. Baker misses two key ideas in the passages just quoted. First, she is doing exactly what she is telling us cannot be done: she is
stating a fact about the relation between our practices and the assumption that the world exists independently of us. Nor does she appear to be talking nonsense while she does so. Second, there is no limit on what can be said. There is a limit only on what can be said meaningfully. And that is not a transcendental limit, but a very ordinary mundane one -- it is the limit provided by what we are used to, what techniques we have mastered.

In other words, when we reach the place in doing philosophy where we appeal to forms of life, we have reached, not transcendental limits, but bedrock. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do." (PI 217) That is not to justify "what I do," but simply to point it out. But in the context-that of trying to answer questions about our forms of life-that is all the justification we have available. We can no more explain our forms of life than we can explain why we think or bring up our children.

Does man think, then because he has found that thinking pays? --Because he thinks it advantageous to think?
(Does he bring his children up because he has found it pays?) (PI 467)

We do not lack an explanation of why human beings bring up their children or measure things. When there is no misunderstanding there is no need for explanation. (PI 87)

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do." (PI 217)

Like appeals to grammar in accounts of meaning, appeals to forms of life in accounts of human practices are appeals to bedrock. Thus it is misleading for Baker to say that Wittgenstein may not use "forms of life" as explanatory.

After rehearsing the three senses in which forms of life are conventional, Baker argues that Wittgenstein is in fact an anti-conventionalist on the grounds that forms of life are not "arbitrary"-they are neither freely chosen nor subject to easy change. But as we have seen, Wittgenstein is comfortable with saying that grammar is arbitrary, even though they are neither freely chosen nor subject to easy change. It is a contingent fact about us that we find these practices natural, but contingent though it may be, it is a remarkably stubborn fact. For Wittgenstein, arbitrariness is perfectly compatible with bindingness. Hence he would reject Baker's proffered identification of arbitrariness with "freely chosen" and "easily changeable."

Consider why a proof compels assent. Wittgenstein's answer is that a proof sets up a rule which we agree to be bound by:

I go through the proof and say: "Yes, this is how it has to be; I must fix the use of my language in this way".

I want to say that the must corresponds to a track which I lay down in language. (RFM, pp. 165-166)

But why do I respond in this way to a proof? What is it about a proof that compels me to accept the results as certain? A proof sets up a rule. "The effect of proof is, I believe, that we plunge into the new rule." (RFM, p. 244)
But why do we accept some proposed rules and not others? Because we accept some propositions as certain.

To accept a proposition as unshakably certain -- I want to say -- means to use it as a grammatical rule: this removes uncertainty from it. (RFM, p. 170)

But why do we accept some propositions as unshakably certain? This is the same as asking why we have the forms of life we do have as opposed to others. The answer is that we just do. This is where explanations come to an end.

It will be objected that surely it cannot be a matter of convention that some states of affairs are logically possible and others are not. To say that logical possibility is a product of our natural history is not "compatible" with "the hardness of the logical must." Wittgenstein's reply is that the hardness of the logical 'must' concerns how necessary propositions are used; they are not used as empirical truths:

Are the propositions of mathematics anthropological propositions saying how we men infer and calculate? -- Is a statute book a work of anthropology telling how the people of this nation deal with a thief etc.? -- Could it be said: "The judge looks up a book about anthropology and thereupon sentences the thief to a term of imprisonment"? Well, the judge does not USE the statute book as a manual of anthropology. (RFM, p. 192)

Mathematical propositions are not used as anthropological generalizations, any more than legal statutes are used as anthropological descriptions of our communal attitude toward criminals. If legal statutes were merely anthropological generalizations there would not be the same penalties for failing to adhere to them. The penalties are severe for violating laws of the state, and for violating the rules of grammar. The penalty isn't merely that one then says things that others cannot understand; it is ostracism, alienation or madness. Human agreements are all that stand between us and chaos. This is the essence of Wittgenstein's treatment of necessity; necessity is the result of human agreement, and such agreements are binding. The bindingness of agreements in judgments, in the uses of words, in forms of life, does not show that they aren't conventional; it shows our "deep need" for these conventions.

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of depth. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. ----Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (PI 111)

The transcendental interpretation has it that grammar is a priori. There are several senses of that word, the most common being that an a priori account is purely conceptual and rests on no empirical facts at all. Wittgenstein acknowledges the force of calling something "a priori," but gives this a conventional twist.

... But if it is a priori, that means that it is a form of account which is very convincing to us. (PI 158)

Given the connections between grammar and forms of life we can see that for grammar to be a priori in Wittgenstein's sense would not mean that grammar and forms of life are immutable, for this would mistake the fact that our agreements are binding for necessity in things themselves. The transcendental
interpretation is always in danger of mistaking a communal binding agreement for boundary conditions on human life.

You have a new conception and interpret it as seeing a new object. You interpret a grammatical movement made by yourself as a quasi-physical phenomenon which you are observing. (PI 401)

We create the appearance of a prioricity by projecting the intransigence of grammar onto the world, whereas we should project it onto the human psyche. That, in a nutshell, is the error exemplified by the transcendental interpretation.

Gier thinks grammatical propositions are analogous to Kant's synthetic a priori propositions. He notes that the transcendental method is characterized by an inquiry into essences rather than facts and, since essences are necessary, he sees Wittgenstein as involved in a "resurrection" of the Kantian synthetic a priori in which the "forms of presentation and the world they reveal are inextricably related." (Gier, p. 13) But in fact Wittgenstein was highly suspicious of synthetic a priori propositions. Morris Schlick asked Wittgenstein in 1929 what he would say to a philosopher like Husserl "who believes that the statements of phenomenology are synthetic a priori judgements." Wittgenstein replies that in a sentence like "An object cannot be both red and green" the 'cannot' expresses logical impossibility. That is what makes it a priori. Yet the sentence is also supposed to be synthetic; i.e., it represents a possible state of affairs. Wittgenstein objects that this pair of requirements is incoherent:

Since a proposition is the negation of its negation, there must also exist the proposition 'An object can be red and green.' This proposition would also be synthetic. As a synthetic proposition it has sense, and this means that the state of things represented by it can obtain. If 'cannot' means logical impossibility, we therefore reach the conclusion that the impossible is possible. Here there remained only one way out for Husserl -- to declare that there was a third possibility [i.e. that a proposition is both necessary and empirical]. To that I would reply that it is indeed possible to make up words, but I cannot associate a thought with them. (WC, 67-68)

Wittgenstein's later view on the logical status of grammatical propositions grows out of the central idea of this argument, that if the negation of a proposition lacks sense, then so does the proposition itself. Both the negation of a grammatical proposition and its assertion lack sense. This oddness is a sign of their unique role in our linguistic practices.

"This body has extension." To this we might reply: "nonsense!" -- but are inclined to reply "Of course!" -- Why is this? (PI 252)

We are inclined to reply "of course!" because we cannot imagine what it would be like for it to be false. This unimaginability is "a defense against something whose form makes it look like an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one." (PI 251) With grammatical propositions we not only cannot imagine their opposites: we can't imagine the thing itself. "Every rod has a length" is a grammatical proposition. If I try to imagine that every rod has a length, I picture a rod, with the intention that this picture portray the grammatical connection between being a rod and having a length. This picture plays a different role from the one it would play were I comparing the length of this rod with another:

For here I understand what it means to have a picture of the opposite (nor need it be a mental
But the picture attaching to the grammatical proposition could only shew, say, what is called "the length of a rod". And what should the opposite picture be? ((Remark about the negation of an a priori proposition.))(PI 251)

The picture of a rod seems to show us, over and over again, that "every rod has a length." The pictures we find when we "look into ourselves as we do philosophy" are "full-blown pictorial representations of our grammar." They are "Not facts; but as it were illustrated turns of speech." (PI 251) The pictures are harmless, except in doing philosophy, when the temptation to either empower them with superhuman necessity or reduce them to mere empirical truths is overpowering. But we are not discovering the fixed limits of human thought when we discover that there is no such thing as a rod with no length. We are discovering the grammar that grounds our talk of rods, lengths, measurement and even imagining.

For Wittgenstein essences are grammatical; it is grammar that tells us what the essence of anything is. (PI 371-373) The essence of reading, calculating or understanding is to be discovered by looking at the grammar of the language games in which we talk about them. Essences are as conventional as grammar. Wittgenstein acknowledges that many would see a conflict between convention and essence:

If you talk about essence--, you are merely noting a convention. But here one would like to retort: there is no greater difference than that between a proposition about the depth of the essence and one about -- a mere convention. But what if I reply: to the depth that we see in the essence there corresponds the deep need for the convention. (RFM, p. 65)

Gier does not take seriously enough Wittgenstein's account of essences as grammatical, nor of the conventional basis of necessity, nor of the fact that the logical status of a proposition is determined by its use, by its role in our language games.(14)

For Wittgenstein grammatical rules .... are not arbitrary in the sense that they depend on acts of human will. The grammar contained in language-games and forms of life is already given; generally we are not free to change it. (Gier, p. 13)

I have already addressed this point. The reason we are not free to change our grammar is because it is entrenched, because our grammatical propositions play the role of unshakably certain truths for us. We are not free to change them because our commitments to them are very deep. They constitute what, for us, is "given."

More convincingly, Gier charges that Wittgenstein rejects a standard conventionalism of the sort represented by this remark of J.L. Austin's:

We are absolutely free to appoint any symbol to describe any situation, as far as being merely true goes. (18)

Wittgenstein does reject this casual conventionalism. We are not "free to appoint any symbol to describe any situation". We cannot say "bububu" and mean "If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk" because "It is only in a language that I can mean something by something." (PI, p. 18) Austin's remark ignores the fact that we must already possess a language in order to be able to appoint new symbols or change the
meanings of old ones. Gier is correct that Wittgenstein rejects Austin's conventionalism, but of course Wittgenstein's sense of convention is quite different from this. In Wittgenstein's sense, we have a deep need for conventions.

Jonathan Lear also reads Wittgenstein as a transcendental philosopher and, like Baker and Gier, takes this to mean that Wittgenstein denies that grammar and forms of life are conventional. We explore the logical limits of our world "by moving around self-consciously and determining what makes more and less sense." (Lear, p. 385)

all genuine possibilities must occur within the world. The world forms the context within which different possibilities make sense. (Lear, p. 384)

We share a form of life and a world in virtue of being "like-minded": that means that we share routes of interest, perceptions of salience, and feelings of naturalness. As I mentioned above, Lear's mentalist construal of shared forms of life (being "like-minded") is misleading. It wrongly locates our forms of life in shared subjectivity, rather than in shared practices, customs and training.

The limits of the world defined by our mindedness are transcendental because there is no alternative to our being minded as we are.

The notion of people being 'other-minded' is not something on which we can get any grasp. The possibility of there being persons who are minded in any way at all is the possibility of their being minded as we are. (Lear, p.386)

[T]here is no genuine possibility of having fundamentally different routes of interest and perceptions of salience, for that is the spurious possibility of becoming other-minded. (Lear, p. 386)

Lear thinks it is nonsense to speculate about what other forms of life might be like or what we might have been like had we had other forms of life. Other forms of life are as impossible as other sets of logical laws. "Q would not follow from P and If P then Q if everyone had been other-minded" does not express a real possibility because no one could have been other-minded. Our agreeing that Q follows from P and If P then Q is not agreement in conventions but in forms of life.

Logic itself does not "take us by the throat" and force us to a conclusion. That we feel we are being taken by the throat and forced to a conclusion depends upon the fact that we are minded as we are. But however tenuous a fact our being minded as we are may at times appear, it is not a fact that could genuinely have been otherwise. Of course, the context in which a certain inference can be said to be logically necessary must be a context in which we all tend to "agree." The difference between Wittgenstein and the conventionalists can be summed up as follows: the conventionalists state a falsehood; Wittgenstein tries to point beyond to a transcendental insight. (Lear, p. 387)

The conventionalist "falsehood" is that what we take to be necessary truths would not be necessary had we been other-minded. Lear is right that Wittgenstein tries to point beyond empirical truths, but the insight is not, as Lear supposes, the transcendental one that we agree on those matters in which we discern necessary truth. Wittgenstein's insight is just the opposite: we think we discern necessary truth in just those matters on which we agree.
For Wittgenstein explanations come to an end in actions, not in the grasping of propositions whose truth is certain:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; -- but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting which lies at the bottom of the language-game. (OC, 204)

Yet we try to convince someone who does not share our language-game by saying "But don't you see... ? " "This is just the characteristic expression of someone who is under the compulsion of a rule." (PI, 231)

Under the compulsion of a rule the rule compels us; we must proceed as it dictates. But we are under the compulsion of a rule because we are playing the game that the rule governs. To someone who does not participate in that language game or that practice there is no compulsion. We do not accept rules because they compel us; rules compel us because we accept them.

Wittgenstein's views are neither casually conventionalist nor transcendental. His views on grammar, necessity and forms of life put him squarely at odds with the transcendental interpretation while his recognition of the depth of our conventions puts him at odds with the idea that our conventional practices are easily changed or that alternatives to them are readily conceivable. I have argued that conventions play, for Wittgenstein, a role that other philosophers have thought of as transcendental limits on human experience. At the boundary between sense and nonsense we find grammatical artifacts of our own conceptual history, preserved in the forms of expression that we find ready-to-hand. These cannot readily be imagined to have been different, for they rest on patterns of human agreement whose alternatives have never been tried. Yet they could have been different if our natural history had gone along another course. When the conventional content of Wittgenstein's notion of necessity is filled in it becomes clear that he is a transcendental philosopher only in the most Pickwickian sense.

Kathy Emmett Bohstedt
University of Tennessee at Knoxville

Notes:

1. I will use the standard abbreviations for Wittgenstein's published works: PI (Philosophical Investigations), Z (Zettel), PG (Philosophical Grammar), LC (Lectures and Conversations), OC (On Certainty) and RFM (Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics).

2. There are exceptions, of course, most notably Donald Barry Forms of Life and Following Rules (E.J. Brill: 1996) and Karsten Harries "Two Conflicting Interpretations of Language in Wittgenstein's Investigations" Kant-Studien 59 (1968), pp. 397-409. Barry rejects the transcendental reading. Harries sees both realist and transcendental qualities in "tension" in PI.

3. I will follow Wittgenstein's usage and refer to both our form and forms of life.


5. This point is nicely made by Donald K. Barry, whose excellent book *Forms of Life and Following Rules* (E.J. Brill: 1996) I discovered as I was finishing this paper.

6. As does Newton Garver, for instance.

