

## ***Philosophical Investigations 628***

### **Knowing One's Way About**

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*So one might say: voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise.  
And now I do not mean you to ask "But why isn't one surprised here?"  
[Philosophical Investigations, 628]*

The question arises, why does Wittgenstein not mean us to ask why one isn't surprised here? Is this merely an arbitrary prohibition?

Consider other cases in which one is not surprised; cases in which someone might ask and answer the question. For example, after a chess game, one player asks the other, "Were you surprised by my 38th move?" and the other replies, "No, I had already calculated all possible replies to my 30th." Or he replies, "No, it was the only good move you had." Or, "No, it was just the sort of move you make in those sorts of positions. (I'd have been surprised if you hadn't)."

For example, you meet someone in the place where you work and someone else asks you whether you were surprised to see him; you reply, "No, he's the janitor, he works there, I've often seen him there. (But I shouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't been there)."

For example, you perform some feat flawlessly, someone asks you if you were surprised that you did it, and you reply, "No, I've been practicing all day/week/my life."

For example, something happens which surprises other people but not you; someone asks you why you weren't surprised, and you say, "I saw a man light the fuse backstage, so I was expecting it."

For example, something happens which requires a certain immediate action, you perform this action, and someone else, surprised that you did it without surprise or hesitation (he would have been surprised at himself had he done it), asks you, "How did you figure out so quickly how to operate the fire escape?" You reply, "I made a point of it when I first moved into the apartment."

For example, something happens which requires certain skills and presence of mind in an emergency; someone else, surprised that you handled the situation with such aplomb (he would have been surprised at himself had he done it), exclaims, "My word! You saved that woman's life! But how did you

know it was a blocked windpipe? We all thought it was a heart attack." You reply, "I was prepared for it. The Red Cross gives a course every year."

These are some cases in which one is not surprised and one could say why: because it happens frequently (to him), because he does it frequently, because he had been forewarned, because he had worked it all out in advance, because he was expecting it, because he had practiced doing it, because he had had special training, because it was characteristic, and so on. Other cases could be imagined.

But these answers to the question why you are not surprised at raising your arm would be misleading, at best, or nonsensical. You are not surprised at raising your arm not because you thought it all out in advance, like a chess master. Nor because you made it a point to raise it once before; nor because you have been practicing arm-raising all day; nor because you expected to raise it (nor because you expected it to rise). Nor would one say, "No, I wasn't surprised at raising my arm. I quite often raise it."

There are overlapping language-games here, and if you ask why you are not surprised at raising your arm, you are liable to get an answer which belongs to one of the parts which, although familiarly related, is not in the overlapping area. The why-answers are answers to another sort of question than "why weren't you surprised at your voluntary action?"

Imagine cases in which one is surprised at one's voluntary action. For example, after hitting a bulls eye, one might exclaim, "Oh my gosh! I did it!" But here we should say that one voluntarily drew the bow, not that one voluntarily hit a bulls eye. What was surprising was not the voluntary action, but the success of it.

Voluntary action is also very often characterized by effortlessness; ordinarily, no muscular exertion or mental concentration is required. But suppose, your arm has been crushed in an accident, it has been unsuccessfully operated twice before, you have nearly given up hope of ever having the use of your arm again, but after a third operation you do move it and exclaim, "Oh look! it's moving!", or, "I can move my arm!". (Recall the mad scientist's exclamation at the climax of the film *Dr. Strangelove*: "Mein Fuehrer! I can walk!" he shouts as the doomsday machine goes off.) When there is some special reason to suppose that you cannot perform some ordinarily voluntary action, or can perform it only with difficulty, by dint of effort and concentration, then the exclamation of surprise at a voluntary movement is not out of place, and it may not be out of place for someone else to ask why one is surprised. Someone who does not know the situation, who does not know what trials failed, may reasonably ask, "Why were you so surprised at moving your arm?", and he may be answered that certain conditions led one to expect that the attempt would be especially difficult and might fail.

Someone with muscular sclerosis, whose limbs shook uncontrollably, once said to me that he had no difficulty shaking hands with anybody, for his hands shook anyway; the difficulty was getting his hand near enough to the other's to

clasp it. The simplest movements, such as setting objects down without dropping them or knocking them over, were extremely difficult for him; moreover, his steadiness fluctuated from hour to hour. It should not be unintelligible to us that he was sometimes surprised at his own actions: scratching where it itched was for him the equivalent of hitting a bulls eye.

For example, one might not be able to wiggle one's ears, one might try to learn to do this and during the learning phase one might come to move parts of one's scalp near the ears and mistake this for wiggling one's ears; one might look in a mirror and be surprised to see that one's ears were not wiggling, though one was indeed making the other movement which one took (sight unseen) to be wiggling the ears. One might then try various 'muscular experiments', glancing in the mirror, and so on; finally, if one does it, it would not be out of place to exclaim, with surprise, "Look! I can do it!" Through concentration and effort, one has learned a new voluntary action. When pilots, motorcyclists, scuba divers, dancers, acrobats, snowboarders, and other athletes have to learn new voluntary actions and then practice them until they become new automatic reflexes, surprise will not be out of place.

Normally, raising one's arm does not require any effort and does not involve a further consequence (such as hitting a bulls eye) the success of which is uncertain. However, we can imagine a case in which raising one's arm might be surprising even though it did not require any effort and did not aim at the achievement of some further effect. For example, your military commander says, "I want three volunteers for a suicide mission", and you raise your arm. This might surprise even you--not the mere motion, but that you had the courage (or the stupidity) to do it. Here, raising your arm has a special significance: it commits you.

Imagine another soldier noted for his bravery being surprised at how difficult it is for him to raise his arm; he, perhaps, grits his teeth and forces his arm up ("Everyone will think I've gone soft. What's the matter with me today?") But, normally, one's reputation is not at stake when one raises one's arm.

These examples are special cases; there are circumstances or complications which render them special. Presumably, this is not the sort of case to which Wittgenstein's remark is meant to apply. Presumably, the remark is meant to apply to cases in which there is no pathological condition or other reason to suppose that the action is difficult or impeded or uncoordinated or unfamiliar or commits you to hardship or stress; in that case it is characteristic not to be surprised, and you should not ask why because the why-answers apply only to the special cases. In the language-games of voluntary action, the why-answers are reserved for specifying in what respects a case is special.

You will be misled if you insist on a special-case answer to a general-case question. You are liable to suppose that in all cases of voluntary action, the voluntariness consists in something which pertains only to a special case; you may, for example, be led to think that voluntariness must consist in 'inner trying', like the brave soldier who 'wills' his arm up-- and then it looks as if one needs a faculty (freewill) to explain this and an argument proving that such a

faculty exists [see PI 36]. It is to avoid falling into the trap of assimilating different kinds of cases to one single case, that Wittgenstein asks us not to ask certain questions: where he has reason to suspect that asking the question will generate misleading answers, or where--as with voluntary action--it has, in the history of philosophy, already generated misleading answers.

628 is an instance of knowing when to stop [PI 133].

### **Imaginary Mechanisms Behind the Scenes**

Professional academic philosophers are not readily satisfied with an account, such as I have given of section 628, which consists of giving examples. They are tempted to seek another sort of account; they want an *analysis*. Rather than investigating the network of other actions and expressions into which a given expression fits, they are tempted to look for a principle of explanation different in kind. They want a *reason why* voluntary action does not have the element of surprise, not a list of voluntary actions some with and some without surprise. Philosophers want depth; width disappoints them. Their need for explanations tempts them to invent imaginary mechanisms behind the scenes. This temptation deserves investigation.

One may be tempted to think that one was not surprised by one's voluntary action because one *willed* it, one knew it was coming. But suppose a man sees a pretty girl and spontaneously winks at her. That is a voluntary action, but he did not know she was coming, so how could he have known the wink was coming? Spontaneous actions can be voluntary; therefore foreknowledge cannot be essential to voluntariness. It is not that one's foreknowledge of one's actions might be wrong. It is rather that foreknowledge does not always occur. And even if it did, it would only shift the problem from the action to the foreknowledge: we should have gained an answer to the question why you were not surprised at the action, but we would then have to ask why you were not surprised that you knew in advance or that you had the intention.

Why are you not surprised at willing, not only not surprised at acting? Why should we find willing explanatory? How is it that we are so certain that willing itself needs no further explanation? For Augustine and other early Christians, willing was pre-eminently problematic: 'why does the will see the truth (the Gospels, the resurrection, etc.) and yet refuse to believe it?' 'Why do I know the good, yet fail to do it?' The answer was that the will had been corrupted (by original sin). In Christian theology, willing is not the end of an explanation, but the beginning of a profoundly troubling mystery. We should not take it as self-evident that explanation stops at the will.

There is a temptation to think that what makes action voluntary, in general, is some one thing which lies behind each voluntary action, something in the phenomenology of the act: a volition-experience or a faculty (an inner mechanism or unmoved mover). There is the same temptation, Wittgenstein noted, to think that the meaning of words, in general, is something which lies behind each word, something in the phenomenology of speaking (intending to

say, mental pre-duplication of the act, etc.). One is tempted to think that there must be something *else*, different in kind from voluntary actions and spoken words, something hidden, which only philosophical analysis reveals. When one takes a single case and generalizes it, hoping to find in that one case the factor presumed to be common to all cases, one readily overlooks obvious counter-examples.

Negligence and inadvertence are obvious counter-examples to the supposition that actions are necessarily preceded by 'mental causes'. Nothing even remotely like a volition or intention to do something negligent or inadvertent lies behind them. It is precisely the *lack* of due attention which makes negligence negligent, and culpable.

### Penetrating & Critical Analyses

Philosophers are tempted to say that what marks voluntary actions is that one *wills* them. And now, one wants to ensure that one's will is *free*, that it is not determined by any outside influence. And so the problem of freewill vs. determinism looms up. A vast amount of intellectual horsepower has been expended on this problem since Augustine. But what is it that determinism is supposed to take away from us? We know what, in ordinary circumstances, would constitute a lack of freedom. Let us consider some examples.

If a person intends to do something, and some others wish to prevent this, they may attempt to dissuade him by threatening him or people important to him. This, we would say, is a case in which the person is not entirely free; he is under duress. He could still do as he intends, but others have threatened to make the consequences of it unpalatable to him.

There are also cases of compulsion, either physical or psychological. If someone forces a gun into my hand and squeezes my finger onto the trigger, *I* have not shot the gun, *he* has. That would be a case of physical compulsion. The curious thing about psychological compulsion is that people sometimes suffer it unknowingly. Numberless cases have been well-documented of people who engaged in compulsive behavior (hand washing or whatever) all the while insisting and genuinely believing that their behavior was entirely rational, justified, and free. Self-deception and delusion may combine with compulsion. Some people are aware of their compulsion but feel helpless against it. Still others have drifted into it by degrees and only reluctantly recognize it (drug addicts, for example). These are cases in which we say that a person is not entirely free. In the case of smokers and drug addicts, we commonly say that they could choose to stop ('if they wanted to'), but they lack the perseverance to stick to the decision ('but they don't want to, not really'). In such pathological cases, we say that the first step to breaking the compulsion is recognizing that it is a compulsion, and this may require professional help.

There are other cases in which people say that they 'have no choice'. A judge, after hearing the evidence, may sentence a criminal to life imprisonment,

saying, "the law leaves me no choice". No one would say that the judge is under duress or compulsion. He *could* render a different sentence, but he knows that this would be questioned by his professional colleagues and probably overturned by a higher court. "The law leaves me no choice" means something like: "I could make a different decision, but a different decision would be inconsistent with principles I am charged by my office to uphold." Similar cases could be imagined, not specifically judicial ones, where a principle is at stake. A Catholic may refuse to have an abortion, saying, "I have no choice but to carry the pregnancy to term"; she *could* decide to have an abortion, but not with a clear conscience, not without repudiating principles she has chosen to live by. No one speaks of compulsion here, but rather of determination, commitment, duty.

When someone says, "I was determined to do it" it does not mean that some outside influence forced him to do it, but just the reverse, that no outside force could have diverted him.

Unless there is reason to suppose that a person is under duress or physical or psychological compulsion, or that addiction or obsession or self-deception is in play, or some other known exception, an action is presumed voluntary. That is the normal case. Compulsion, duress, and the others, are special cases. The supposition that most people most of the time act under compulsion is a nonstarter, although here, too, cases of mass hysteria are known.

Philosophers, however, are not concerned about these cases. Under the rubric of "determinism" philosophers imagine something quite different to physical or psychological or political compulsion. Not merely the supposition that some people some of the time act under compulsion, but that all actions all of the time are subject to an irresistible force, that all people all of the time are deluded about the voluntariness of their actions. In short, that there are no *actions*, only causal re-actions. So the question here is not, why are you not surprised in a particular case, since, obviously, your surprise or lack of surprise would have physical or physiological causes on the same level as the causes of your raising your arm. The question here is, does the supposition of an all-encompassing metaphysical compulsion make any sense? What is it that determinism is supposed to take away from us, given that all particular cases (cited above) remain unaffected whether determinism obtains or not?

### **Reviewer's Comments**

The above was submitted to a professional academic journal for publication. The editor kindly relayed the reviewer's notes, which are reprinted below *verbatim*:

The paper begins with an abrupt quotation from the *Philosophical Investigations*, followed by an interpretive question. The author sets up some kind of issue about the concept of voluntary movement and the interior mental life. He goes on to define his topic by undertaking an examination of many cases in which voluntary action might be conjoined to surprise or not. This

section ... leaves the reader mystified as to the author's aim. Toward the end of [this section] the author does link the rambling discussion with Wittgenstein's eschewal of mentalistic answers to questions about intention. But the link is cursory and brief—completely outbalanced by the wandering examination of instances.

The author's second part explicitly introduces the traditional topic of freewill and determinism, diagnosing the debate as a case of not knowing when to stop. He argues that Wittgenstein obviates the ground of their difference. This analysis has several insightful *aperçus*, but its focus remains somewhat diffuse. In stretches ... the author begins knitting his argument into related remarks in which Wittgenstein exposes the hollowness of mentalism and introspective validation of philosophical expressions.

Part iii begins with a rodomontade against commentators on the *Philosophical Investigations*, recommending close consideration of examples rather than whatever it is that the unnamed offenders have been doing. These remarks shade off into reflections on philosophical method and the purportedly nonsensical status of much philosophizing. The essay ends with a brief defense of ordinary language.

The grounds on which one should assess this paper are a bit difficult to determine. There is little in it to suggest that anyone other than Wittgenstein has ever thought about these issues. .... The paper has an idiosyncratic quality. It does not really locate itself in a broader discussion. In spite of this, the paper does carry the reader along. Its perspective on Wittgenstein is basically sound, but it is not penetrating or critical. The author relies far too heavily on the 'no philosophical theses—leave everything as it is, ordinary language is already ok' strand in the later Wittgenstein, but a critical attitude to *that* would destroy the whole method. There are other, more systematic, and more consequential critiques of the hegemony of the mechanistic concept of causality than appear here. Wouldn't the paper be better if it took account of them? Yes, but it wouldn't be, any more, at all the sort of paper it is. In this paper, the process of thought is not reworked for presentation into an expository format for the reader's benefit. Rather, the format follows the philosopher's own processes—initiating question, exploratory examination of cases, articulation of an issue, resolution, and peroration on the significance of the process. Once one realizes the pattern, the initial jumble is intelligible, if not justified.

In summary, although I think this is a pretty good paper of its sort, I do not feel warranted in encouraging you to give it publication space. Wittgenstein scholars will find that the author has got the master's thought pretty well, though he has not probed its seams or understories. Others may find the paper an engaging excursus through some central motifs in Wittgenstein's philosophy, but one which leaves them without the sort of insights they had hoped for.

### Reply to the Reviewer:

1. The reviewer found the quotation at the beginning "abrupt." It seemed to me a good way to specify the scope of the paper.
2. The reviewer found the paper "*rambling*" and "*wandering*," Translation: the paper does not exhibit the turgid academic style to which most reviewers are accustomed. The paper does not "wander"; it hangs on to its point like a pitbull. The point, which somehow mystified the reviewer, is surprise and voluntary action, *and why one shouldn't ask why*. Perhaps the reviewer was expecting a proof of the form 'if p then q, p, therefore q' (if voluntary then no surprise, no surprise, therefore voluntary—and, oh, by the way, don't ask why).
3. The reviewer was disappointed not to find a penetrating analysis of freewill vs. determinism. But this was not the author's intention; just the opposite: to cite the freewill/determinism issue as an *example* of a penetrating analysis which has generated philosophical nonsense, an argument which has got caught in the mechanism of validation. The example clearly relates to 628, to what 628 warns us not to do.
4. The reviewer chastises the author for chastising "*unnamed offenders*." I had in mind Baker & Hacker's well-known 'concordance' (and the people who find it deep, critical, penetrating): it is filled with sweeping generalizations, inserted hidden superstructures (tree-diagrams), and attempts to mash Wittgenstein's remarks into 'if p then q' format. The proponents of imaginary mechanisms are numberless and well-known; one might just mention Chomsky (to get people's dander up).
5. The reviewer chastises the author for failing to mention "*anyone other than Wittgenstein*." Had Wittgenstein mentioned anyone in 628, it would have been pertinent to have discussed it in the paper.
6. The reviewer finds the author's style "*idiosyncratic*." True, the author avoids the turgid academic style to which professional philosophers are accustomed. (Note, for example, how infrequently the author uses philosophical filler-phrases such as "this is precisely..." "the sort of...".)
7. The reviewer chastises the author for failing to "*locate himself within a broader discussion*." True; the author does not pay homage to the hacks who preceded him. Academic protocol requires that he flatter potential reviewers by footnoting their recent articles. In the context of this paper, the broader discussion would be: let's continue with 627 & 629 in a similar vein, namely, by paying attention to particulars.
8. The reviewer chastises the author for failing to provide "*penetrating or critical insights*" into Wittgenstein's philosophy. Is only that which is penetrating or critical deserving of the name "philosophy"? Is only that which is argumentative insightful? Is only that which takes the artificial form 'if p then q, p, therefore q' tenable as a philosophical method? Have you critically asked these questions about your own philosophical method, Mr. Reviewer? Wittgenstein did.
9. The reviewer chastises the author for failing to take a "*critical attitude to ordinary-language philosophy*." True; the title and scope of the paper is not 'A Penetrating & Critical Analysis of Wittgenstein's Method' nor

'Probing the Seams & Understories of the *Philosophical Investigations*', but, more modestly, '628'.

10. The reviewer states that the paper would be better if it took account of "*other more systematic critiques of causality and determinism*". The author disagrees. The title and scope of the paper is not 'A Survey of Twentieth Century Thought on Freewill, Determinism, and Causality', but, more modestly, '628'.
11. The reviewer remarks that "*the process of thought is not reworked for presentation into expository format for the reader's benefit.*" If by 'expository format' the reviewer means 'if p then q ...', then he is right. The author has not forced the issue into this artificial format (for the reader's benefit).
12. The reviewer continues, "*the format follows the philosopher's own processes.*" Does he mean that the author's thinking is like *The Master's* thinking? Such effusive praise appears to be in bad taste, or a careless slip. Should he be taken to mean that he would not have recommended that Wittgenstein be published either?
13. The reviewer concedes that the author's comprehension of Wittgenstein's philosophy is "*sound*". Is a sound comprehension of Wittgenstein so commonplace nowadays that it does not merit attention?
14. The reviewer at last comes to the realization that what the author has presented is "*intelligibility, without justifications.*" By Jove, Watson, that's it! Why is the reviewer not satisfied with this result? Why does he view it as no result at all? Compare *Zettel* sections 313 to 315; *Philosophical Investigations* sections 109, 122, 123, 125, and 133.
15. The reviewer laments that the paper is "*without the sort of insights [one] had hoped for.*" What sort of insights had the reviewer hoped for? Sweeping generalizations and hidden superstructures? If that is what the reviewer had hoped for, then the author recommends Baker & Hacker.
16. The reviewer sums up by saying that it is not a bad paper, just not "*the sort of paper which that sort of journal would ordinarily publish.*" This is a fair and competent review of the paper, from an editorial perspective, and although the reviewer did not recommend that the paper be published in the journal to which it had been submitted, it is not completely unsympathetic to the author's claims. It's not a bad review, just not the "sort" of review demanded by that "sort" of paper.
17. **Now, for those who still insist on coming away with a whacking great *insight* into Wittgenstein's later philosophy**, let it be this: if you take the trouble to familiarize yourself with particulars and how they fit together to form a nexus of overlapping ordinary and special cases – what Wittgenstein called *knowing one's way about*–, then you will find that the itch to invent imaginary mechanisms behind the scenes, insert invisible superstructures above things, or reduce things to a single onmi-explanatory factor, subsides. And then you will see the reality as it is, instead of how you think it must be. You will also find that a number of philosophical puzzles cease to be troubling. Not because they have been solved in the manner in which professional philosophers tend to expect (the 'if p then q' format); but because they are seen to have

been based upon misunderstandings, faulty generalizations, imaginary mechanisms, an itch for an illusory type of clarity, etc. etc. This paper presents an example of how to go about familiarizing oneself with cases of voluntary action and surprise. My suggestion is that we continue in a similar vein with other sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* which are concerned with faulty generalizations, imaginary mechanisms, the itch for an illusory type of clarity, how names name, simples and complexes, the hardness of the logical must, etc. etc., and by this means come to understand Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The reader should not expect this form of understanding to be summarizable in a tidy insight or axiom; he should expect, instead, to have to work hard, and continuously, to be freed from an especially subtle form of temptation. The 'result' is not a conclusion, but mental discipline. "Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself... On one's way of viewing things." -- Wittgenstein, 1931.

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