

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?'" [Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §628; hereafter PI]

In her book, *The Routledge Guide to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*ⁱ Marie McGinn addresses the grammar of thinking, imagining, believing, expecting, and intending:

"The point is to note the language-game, and our capacity to participate in it, to look at the circumstances in which we learned to engage in it, to compare how we are trained in this language-game with the training involved in learning other, related language-games, and so on; the concern with *explanation* is what leads us into confusion."ⁱⁱ

As McGinn did not specifically address the grammar of voluntary action and (lack of) surprise in more detail, I propose to do so in this essay.

The question arises, why does Wittgenstein enjoin us not to ask why one isn't surprised here? Is this merely an arbitrary prohibition? Bearing in mind Wittgenstein's observation that philosophers tend to go astray by relying on a one-sided diet of examples,ⁱⁱⁱ I propose to serve up a buffet, plus dessert. Consider cases

in which one is not surprised; cases in which someone might ask and answer the question.

1. 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).'

2. 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).'

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

4. 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 a bang.'

5. 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.'

6. 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 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 practised 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 practising 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. After hitting a bull's 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 bull's eye. What was surprising was not the voluntary action, but the success of it. The same could be said of gambling: one voluntarily rolls the dice, but one does not voluntarily roll a seven, and here too, one could be surprised, not so much at the action as at its result.

Voluntary action is also very often characterized by effortlessness; ordinarily, no muscular exertion or mental concentration is required. 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 Führer! I can walk!' he shouts as the doomsday machine detonates.) 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 trembled 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 and he could not predict it. It is no surprise that he was sometimes surprised at his own actions: scratching where it itched was for him the equivalent of hitting a bull's eye.

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, motorcycle policemen, scuba divers, dancers, snowboarders, acrobats and other athletes, train to learn new voluntary actions and then practise 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 bull's 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 any further effect: 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.

In the canton of Glarus (Switzerland), until quite recently, votes were tallied publicly, in the Rathaus Square, by those present raising their arms. This simple action might well determine the rate of tax on all the farms, and all the villagers would know who was for and against. This apparently simple action could make or break a man's reputation in the village, it could potentially terminate a friendship or start a feud.

Suppose someone says he just got tattooed and I ask him 'where?' and he answers 'on my bottom,' and I reply, 'no, I meant in the tattoo studio down the road or somewhere else?' What determines which sense of 'where' is meant? 'The intention.' Yes, of course, but if you locate the intention in the mind of the speaker, then it becomes a beetle in a box and an interlocutor can only guess at it. What indicates the intention is the fact that I can ask further questions if I don't get the answer I expect. Must I have expected just this answer when I asked (where in town, not where on your body)? No. The same applies to questions regarding voluntary actions, such as 'did you really mean to do that?' (e.g., leave your queen *en prise* in a game of chess, for example; or raise your hand when the colonel asked for volunteers, or raise the tax on all the farms in the village).

McGinn speaks of a normal case and abnormal cases, following Wittgenstein.^{iv} "Abnormal" is an infelicitous choice of words, for it suggests that there is something amiss or defective about these cases. There is nothing abnormal about such cases, they are quite common and ordinary. There are, however, special cases, and what makes them special are complicating circumstances. Just such circumstances as described in this essay.

The examples given in this essay 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 at §628 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 one to hardship or stress or has the potential to alienate the neighbors; in the absence of such complicating circumstances, it is characteristic not to be surprised, and one 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.

One is liable to be misled by insisting on a special-case answer to a normal-case question. It is to avoid falling into the trap of assimilating different kinds of cases to a single case, that Wittgenstein asks us not to ask certain questions: where he has reason to suspect that asking the question is liable to generate misleading answers. "Language sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings. And so we watch one man after another walking down the same paths and we know in advance where he will branch off, where walk straight on without noticing the side turning, etc. etc. What I have to do then is erect sign posts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings so as to help people past the danger points."^v When Wittgenstein enjoins us not to ask a certain question, he is setting a signpost, warning us of a potential pitfall.

"Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation: the difficulty—I might say—is not that of finding a solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it. 'We have already said everything. Not anything that follows from this, no, this itself is the solution!' This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an *explanation*, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a *description*, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. The difficulty here is: to stop."^{vi}

§628 is an instance of knowing when to stop.^{vii}

Concluding Thought

If one takes the trouble to familiarize oneself with particulars and how they fit together to form a nexus of overlapping normal and special cases—what Wittgenstein called *knowing one's way about*—then one finds that the itch to postulate a single omni-explanatory factor which covers all cases of voluntary action, subsides. "A thinker is much like a draughtsman whose aim is to represent all the interrelations between things."^{viii} This essay presents an example of how to go about familiarizing oneself with cases of voluntary action and surprise, and thereby to see interrelations among these cases. The essay continues what McGinn undertakes in her book (cited above).

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Notes

ⁱ McGinn, Marie (1997 and 2013). Routledge, Oxford, ISBN 9-780415-452564, paperback.

ⁱⁱ McGinn, *ibid.*, page 286, my italics.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wittgenstein, L. PI, §593.

^{iv} McGinn, *ibid.*, page 100, following Wittgenstein PI, §141.

^v Wittgenstein, L. (1990). *Culture & Value*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, second edition, ISBN 0-631-12752-6, hardback, page 18e.

^{vi} Wittgenstein, L. (1970). *Zettel*, University of California Press, Berkeley, §314, my italics. See also: *Zettel* sections 313, 315; *Philosophical Investigations* sections 109, 122, 123, 125, 133, 654, 655.

^{vii} Wittgenstein, L. PI §133.

^{viii} Wittgenstein, L. (1980). *Culture & Value*, page 12e.