HOW WOULD IT LOOK IF... ?

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It sometimes happens, particularly in analytic philosophy, that an argument is produced by someone for or against a particular proposition, and that this argument seems both to be valid and to be of an interestingly original kind, but that there follows little agreement regarding under what circumstances arguments of the same kind are valid in general. A couple of celebrated examples are the 'paradigm case argument' and the 'polar opposites argument'. In this paper, I want to discuss a further instance of this sort of puzzlement.

In a discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, G. E. M. Anscombe tells the following story :

> He once greeted me with the question : 'Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun went round the earth rather than that the earth turned on its axis ?' I replied : 'I suppose, because it looked as if the sun went round the earth.' 'Well,' he asked, 'what would it have looked like if it had *looked* as if the earth turned on its axis ?' [1]

The implications of this remark are much wider than its apparently *ad hoc* character would suggest, and connect with central strands in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and in contemporary epistemology generally. Unfortunately, there exists no unanimity concerning just what these implications are, though all seem to be agreed that in the above context it is appropriate,

1. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. London, Hutchinson, 1959, p. 151.

and that, *mutatis mutandis*, it would constitute an appropriate reply to similar naïve judgements about the way things appear. Miss Anscombe adds little more than that the question 'brought it out that I had hitherto given no relevant meaning to "it looks as if" in "it looks as if the sun goes round the earth".' It will be my intention here to try and say a little more.

1. The Simple Consistency Thesis

An example of the use of just this device in recent philosophical debate is the following. Colin McGinn has argued that science sometimes contradicts 'common-sense' beliefs, and that one instance of this is the contradiction between the common-sense belief that certain physical objects are solid, and the knowledge, obtained from scientific investigation, that they are really granular. Thus, according to McGinn, such objects cannot be regarded as *being* the way they *appear*. [2] Against this, O. R. Jones appeals to Wittgenstein's remark above, maintaining that :

> What we normally regard as a solid block of alabaster is granular and full of cavities only in the sense derived from the context of atomic theory. Given that it is grainy and full of cavities in just that sense, how should it look ? Surely, it should look just the way it usually does. Now, McGinn holds that this is how it would look if it were 'solid', in the sense of being materially dense and continuous, and did not have the grainy, gappy character implied in atomic theory. Let that be granted, but surely that is also how it should look if the atomic theory is true. The atomic theory, as compared with a solid-continuum theory...predicts nothing different as to the way the alabaster should look to the naked eye. [3]

Here again, the Wittgensteinian move seems to have much force, and I would be the first to agree with Jones that the appearance of physical objects cannot be taken to suggest a theory of their microstructure. What does concern me, however, is the proper force and scope of this kind of manœuvre. Let me, for the purpose of argument, give an example of what seems to me an *im*proper employment of it. Suppose a person comes upon

2. Colin McGinn, *The Subjective View*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, Ch. 7.

3. O. R. Jones, The Way Things Look and the Way Things Are, in : *Mind*, Vol. XCIV, No. 373 (Jan. 1985), p. 108-10.

the body of a man whom he takes to be dead, but who is in fact merely in a very deep coma. Suppose further that the comatose man dies as a result of being treated as a corpse. When he is brought to account for it, the person in question says 'Well, he certainly appeared to be dead'. Now suppose that the lawyer prosecuting him replies 'But how would he have appeared if he had appeared to be in a deep coma ?'. Must we accept that, since the appearance of the man is consistent with both explanations, he could not have *appeared* to be either dead *or* comatose ? 'Common-sense' tells us that it is quite accurate to say that he appeared to be dead (and if we elaborate the example to include, for instance, the information that the man's breathing and heart-rate were almost zero, this becomes even clearer).

What I think this shows is that the import of the Wittgensteinian remark is not, as many people seem to have supposed, to be regarded as embodied in the following principle, which I will call the Simple Consistency Thesis, or C :

> 'It appears that p' is true if and only if a state of affairs S obtains, and S is evidence for an hypothesis p, and the proposition that S obtains is inconsistent with any possible rival to p.

If we were to find ourselves committed to C, we would be in an unenviable position, for, if we assume that there is always *some* rival hypothesis consistent with the appearance (even if it is only an elaborate practical joke, an hallucination, or a Cartesian demon), we would in effect be denying that there is ever such a thing as the way things appear.

Now taking the expressions in their ordinary meanings, this is obviously untenable, and is surely not what Wittgenstein himself intended. The point is surely more that there *may* be no such thing in a given set of circumstances as *the* way things appear ; that the way things appear depends on a variety of background assumptions (perhaps connected with a 'form of life', or at least with certain standard ways of understanding and describing things) ; and that we must not assume a 'brute' appearance (or 'look', if we want to stick with the visual case) of things, if this means the way things appear in isolation from some such framework or other.

2. Two Kinds of Appearing

The trouble is that this account also seems to do violence to common sense, but in a different way. For common sense would seem to tell us that there is indeed a 'brute appearance' or 'brute look' of things. For example, two things might look *exactly* like each other in a way which an observer can recognize independently of predisposition or culture. Leibniz, by his own account, seems to have believed that no two leaves could look exactly alike (i.e. be indiscernable) if they really were two and not one and the same. [4] To minds less prejudiced by Leibnizian metaphysics, there seems to be no reason at all for thinking that two different things should not be indiscernable (unless, of course, their spatial positions at a given time are taken into account — and this is hardly a matter of the way they *look*). It is perfectly natural to suppose that two things *can* sometimes look exactly alike in a way which has nothing to do with culture or background ; and to suppose this is to accept an absolute or 'brute' sense in which things may appear a particular way.

At this point, we need to appeal to a distinction made by J. L. Austin, between an *evidential* and a *non-evidential* sense in which a thing may appear one way rather than another. [5] This is clearest in the case of 'looks'. To say 'He looks like his father' is not to evince evidence that he *is* his father, whereas to say 'He looks like a Frenchman' may be to evince evidence that he is a Frenchman. There is, in other words, a difference between something's appearing *as though it were* F, and its appearing *to be* F. Now there is indeed a 'brute' sense connected with the non-evidential use, but not with the evidential use. For there is no such thing as looking (appearing) *exactly as if something is the case*. This is bound to be true, since all sorts of appearances may be consistent with a given state of affairs.

4. See Leibniz's 4th letter to Clarke (Jun. 1716), paragraph 4 : "There is no such thing as two individuals indiscernible from each other. An ingenious gentleman of my acquaintance, discoursing with me, in the presence of Her Electoral Highness the Princess Sophia, in the garden of Herrenhausen ; thought he could find two leaves perfectly alike. The Princess defied him to do it, and he ran all over the garden a long time to look for some ; but it was to no purpose. Two drops of water, or milk, viewed with a microscope, will appear distinguishable from each other."

5. J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, Ch. 7.

Let me give an illustration connected with a common example in the theory of perception. There is *something* about a coin lying flat on a table which looks to an observer not directly above it, like an elipse—*exactly* like an elipse. Now suppose we ask 'But how would it look if it looked as if it were a circular coin lying flat ?'. Clearly both states of affairs (ellipticality, and circularity-plus-obliqueness-to-the-observer) are somehow consistent with the appearance. But the question has no force unless there is some pressure on us to think that the apparent ellipticality (whatever it is) constitutes evidence for the coin's being elliptical in fact. And usually there is not : the kind of appearing represented by the apparent ellipticality is not the evidential kind at all.

Thus in the non-evidential use of 'appears' (or 'looks'), a thing may look *as it would if it were* elliptical, or dead, or solid, without this being taken as evidence for its being so. Where the thing looks *to be* elliptical, or dead, or solid, the reason lies not in some greater degree of exactness, but in the connection between the state of affairs and certain standard criteria of ellipticality, or death, or solidity.

3. An Alternative Thesis

Where does this leave us ? Well, it now seems as if we can adopt a view according to which the way something evidentially appears is a matter of accordance with criteria, whereas the way it non-evidentially appears is a kind of brute fact. This latter will still be a *relational* fact, concerning the way a thing appears *to me* or *to us*, but will not depend on context in the way the former does.

For example, in order to decide whether a man looks ill, or looks like a soldier (evidential), I have to apply criteria of illness or soldierliness ; whereas in order to decide whether this oak leaf looks like that one (non-evidential), I do not have to apply any criteria at all, but merely to compare them closely. The likeness in the latter case lies entirely in the observational state of affairs itself, at least if we include the observer as part of it.

Returning then to the Wittgensteinian argument, it is tempting to conclude something like this : that although 'How would x appear if it ap-

peared G' is a suitable counter to the remark that x *evidentially* appears F, it is not an appropriate response to the claim that x *non-evidentially* appears F ; and that this is so because non-evidential appearances need not be mutually exclusive in the way that evidential appearances are. It should be obvious why this is tempting. To say that an ink blot non-evidentially looks like a butterfly and also to say that it non-evidentially looks like a bow tie involves no contradiction : provided we don't think that evidence is being presented for its being both of these two things, it can harmlessly look like both at the same time. Similarly, a non-evidential appearance cannot exclude an evidential one, or vice versa ; to say that something non-evidentially looks like a butterfly and also evidentially looks like an ink blot is equally harmless. But to say of something both that it evidentially looks like an ink blot and also evidentially looks like a blood stain does seem to involve a contradiction, for the thing cannot *be* both. In short, it seems that the same appearance cannot be evidence for contraries. On this view, we could now formulate an alternative to principle C, which applies only to evidential appearing. This I will call C′ :

> 'It (evidentially) appears that p' is true if and only if a state of affairs S obtains, and S is evidence for an hypothesis p, and S is not evidence for any hypothesis which excludes p.

This would seem to do justice to the Wittgensteinian insight in a way which rids us of the absurdity inherent in C.

4. Appearance and Evidence

Unfortunately, however, I think that C′ is just as unacceptable as C itself. The reason is connected with the concept of evidence. It has been observed that there is both a strong and a weak sense in which one thing might be evidence for another. To stick with our previous terminology, we will say that a state of affairs S *strongly supports* an hypothesis p if it makes p *more probable than not*, and that it *weakly supports* p if it simply makes p more probable than p would be in the absence of S. In numerical terms, strong evidence for p renders the probability of p greater than 50 %, whereas weak

evidence for p merely renders the probability of p greater than its antecedent probability. Now two things suggest that we need only concern ourselves with the weak concept of evidence.

Firstly, it is not entirely clear that a respectable sense can be given to the notion of strong evidential support, at least outside a handful of special cases. Suppose we play a game in which we each draw a card from a pack in turn, and have to guess whether it is from a red suit or a black suit. The fact that more black cards than red have already been withdrawn from the pack is *strong* evidence that my present card is a red one (though, as evidence goes, it is still not terribly good). But once we leave aside cases where the situation lends itself to quantification from the start, things become harder. It may well be rational to suppose that Smith's having done no studying this year constitutes strong evidence that he will fail tomorrow's examination, i.e. makes it more likely than not that he will fail. But how can we quantify the extent to which Smith's wearing a tie supports the proposition that he has a date this evening, or the extent to which his having a high temperature supports the hypothesis that he has influenza ? Even in the case of the examination, we do not derive our certainty that he will fail from the judgement that his likelihood of doing so is greater than 50 %. Rather, we assert the latter (if we are willing to do so at all) on the basis of the former intuitive and unquantified judgement.

Secondly, and more importantly, the evidential sense in which it is said that something appears to be F does not turn on any particular understanding of the concept of evidence, or of the kind of evidence in question. It depends only on *some* sort of support being given by the appearance to the hypothesis, as opposed to the non-evidential sense, in which the appearance is not being invoked in support of anything at all.

But if we need only consider the weak concept of evidence, and indeed if we are to take account of it at all, then C′ will be false. Consider the following case. A ship's lookout spots an arm protruding from the water near the ship and shouts 'Man overboard !', whereupon the first mate asks what has brought him to this conclusion. The lookout says 'See that arm in the water—it certainly looks as if there's a man overboard'. 'Maybe,' replies the mate, 'but how would it look if it looked as if there were a woman over-

board ? Surely it would look just like that'. The fact is that the waving arm is evidence for two conflicting hypotheses, the hypothesis that there is a man in the water, and the hypothesis that there is a woman in the water : both are more probable than they were before. Nor is this example a mere trick. If the lookout were to observe a scrupulousness of language rarely encountered at sea, he might have shouted 'Person overboard', and later asserted confidently that *that* was indeed how things appeared to be. But the appearance surely constituted evidence for other hypotheses still. There being a tailor's dummy overboard, or a mermaid nearby, are both more probable than they would be given an empty expanse of sea. Of course, he might have shouted 'Arm-like object in the water !' without drawing any conclusions : but then he would be merely reporting the (non-evidential) appearance itself, and no evidential sense of 'appearance' would need to be invoked.

If, then, there are cases where the same appearance can be evidence for two conflicting hypothesis, we cannot accept C′, except perhaps in the rather suspect case in which it is the strong kind of evidence that is meant.

But does this not destroy the Wittgensteinian position altogether ? It seems at first as though it does, for we now have :

(a) a non-evidential kind of appearance claim against which the Wittgensteinian response was never intended to work,

(b) a strongly evidential kind of appearance claim, against which the response would work, but which is both questionable as a category and also stronger than anything we need to consider, and

(c) a weakly evidential kind of appearance claim against which the Wittgensteinian response seems to rest on a fallacy—the fallacy of accepting C′.

I want to argue, however, that the Wittgensteinian-type argument, properly understood, still stands, and that the above process of elimination actually helps us to understand what the genuine point of the original remark is.

5. The Role of Criteria

Here, we need to make a distinction which has not been made above, between an appearance's being *capable* of counting as evidence for some proposition at all, and its *actually* counting as evidence for that proposition in a particular community. For example, I said that an arm protruding from the water is evidence (even if not very good evidence) for the presence of a mermaid. But in what sense could it be said to count as evidence of mermaids for a Martian, or someone belonging to a culture which does not possess the mermaid legend ? It is, of course, potential evidence from their point of view, in the sense that *if* they were to acquire the concept of a mermaid then it would count for them as evidence for the presence of one. But in their present state it cannot, for they are not even capable of entertaining the proposition which it is meant to support. This distinction between potential evidence and actual evidence is crucial for understanding evidential appearance claims.

For to say 'It appears that p', where 'appears' is evidential, is not just to claim that there is a potential reason for thinking that p, but to claim that there is good reason (defeasible, but none the less good) for thinking that p. It is to claim that the appearance not only can be but should be, accepted by any rational person sharing the same system of concepts, as supporting p. Evidential appearing is, in other words, always a matter of actual, rather than merely of potential evidence. And what states of affairs actually count as evidence for what propositions, is very much dependent on the cultural predispositions of those assessing them.

But how does this help us ? For, as in the case of a man in the water versus a woman in the water, there will still often be conflicting hypotheses for which the same state of affairs counts as *actual* evidence in a given community. What I now want to suggest is that the way something evidentially appears is not merely a matter of brute appearance plus evidence. That is, we must reject the implicit assumption that was made in the last section, that there is no more to the evidential use of 'appears that p' than the claim that it non-evidentially appears as though p, plus the claim that this non-evidential appearance also supports p. The assumption that evidential appearing can be cashed out in this way is in fact the cause of the impasse in

which we found ourselves above. Once we reject it, we can see that there may be a sense in which things can evidentially appear as if p, without evidentially appearing as if q, even though the way they appear is not only *consistent* with both p and q, but *actually supports* both p and q to some extent or other.

How can this be ? I said earlier that how things appear depends on certain standard criteria. The notion of criteria was clearly very important for Wittgenstein, and is especially so in this context. Roughly speaking, criteria, as opposed to mere evidence, are built into our language in such a way that they are internally related to the concepts we employ. Thus, for example, lack of pulse and absence of breathing are criteria of death, whereas paleness and stiffness are merely symptoms or evidence. If we were to take away the idea of absence of breathing and heartbeat from the concept of death, we would have little left of the concept, whereas this would not be the case if we took away the idea of paleness and stiffness. The former are part of what we mean by someone's being dead, whereas the latter are not.

Now criteria are not necessarily indefeasible. If *all* the relevant criteria are present, then certainly there would be something odd about saying that the concept is nonetheless not applicable. But what we are not justified in asserting is that where some state of affairs S is a criterion of p's being the case, S cannot obtain without its being the case that p. What we *are* justified in asserting, however (and this is the relevant thing here) is that where S is criterial of p and not merely evidential, S cannot obtain *without its appearing that* p. Without such criteria, we would indeed be in the position of never being able to say that things looked one way rather than another, for there would be no evidential appearances at all, but only a great unstructured mass of data capable of being taken as evidence for all manner of different hypotheses. Built into our criteria, of course, are *expectations* about how the world is going to turn out to be. The ship's lookout was probably quite right to say that there looked to be a person overboard rather than a mermaid or a dummy, for the latter states of affairs are so unlikely that it will hardly ever be true to say that it looks as though they are the case. People overboard, however, are quite common, and furthermore, having arms and hands is one of the criteria of something's being a human being.

Something could have them and not be a human being, but nothing could have them without *looking* like a human being, at least *prima facie*.

6. The Wittgensteinian Point

To return again to the dialogue which gave rise to the foregoing, it now seems that the correct way of interpreting Wittgenstein's remark is along the following lines. It cannot appear as if the sun revolves around the earth or as if the earth goes round the sun—not simply because both are consistent with the (non-evidential) appearance, but because, unlike the case of death, of solidity, and of roundness, there are no criteria built into our language, for deciding which of two rival cosmologies looks to be correct. Nor, to return to the dispute between Jones and McGinn, are there such criteria for deciding how the microstructure of matter appears to be given the look of medium-sized objects.

But is it really true that there is no sense in which it did *look* to people once as though the sun went round the earth ? Do not such things as the undetectability of the earth's motion constitute the criteria which weighted, for them, the issue in favour of geocentrism ? Possibly this is so, and I am not sure that Wittgenstein wanted to deny this either. The point is, however, that if we accept this, we cannot at the same time say, with the young Miss Anscombe, that people thought the sun went round the earth *because* it looked as if it did ; at least if we want to treat this as an explanation. For this simply invites the question 'And *why* did it *look* to them as if it did ?'. Appeals to how things look in this culture-laden sense are not sufficiently 'brute' to count as end-of-the-line explanations. And the information requested by the new question will be just the same as that required by the original one. Thus someone who says 'They think that p because it looks as if p' is, in this sort of case, saying something which is either false or uninformative.

7. Conclusion

I promised at the outset that this topic would have consequences which feed into the mainstream of present-day thinking about knowledge and

belief. The connection which I had in mind between this and broader philosophical issues is, briefly, the following. If we accept the view presented above of the point and purpose of Wittgenstein's remark, we are able to see how it relates to the kind of non-foundational epistemology which has enjoyed popularity since the publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and essay *On Certainty*. For the 'foundations' of knowledge assumed by the traditional empiricist are cut away. The 'brute' appearances on which our total knowledge of the world is supposed ultimately to rest, turn out to be either too 'brute' to be evidential, or else not 'brute' enough to be foundational.