Facts, Concepts and Patterns of Life—Or How to Change Things with Words

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Abstract: In his last writings, Wittgenstein repeatedly addresses the question of how our concepts relate to general facts of nature or human nature and how they are embedded in our lives. In doing so, he uses the term “pattern of life”, characterizing the complicated relationship between concepts and our lives and how our concepts “are connected with what interests us, with what matters to us” (LWPP II, 46). But who is this “us”, and whose interests manifest in the concepts we use to designate patterns of life? What if certain concepts—or their absence—are exclusionary, discriminatory, or otherwise unjust to those who are not “us”? In this paper, I want to discuss Wittgenstein’s notion of “pattern of life” in its interweaving with facts, human life, and concepts, as well as its political implications. To this end, I will first outline the relationship between facts and concept formation as Wittgenstein drew it in his last writings. Based on this, I will argue that he uses the concept of pattern of life to capture the complicated relationship between concepts and human nature or “social facts”. Going beyond Wittgenstein and drawing on recent feminist epistemology, I will raise the question of the political implications of our patterns of life and concomitant social “conceptual injustices”. Finally, I will show how imagining facts otherwise and other conceptual worlds can help us to reveal the prejudices and injustices of our concepts and can lead to conceptual change and new patterns of life that may ultimately even change “things”, i.e., our thinking, judging and acting in the world.

Keywords: facts; concepts; patterns of life; feminist epistemology; conceptual injustice; imagination

1. Introduction

In his last writings, Wittgenstein repeatedly addresses the question of how our concepts relate to general facts of nature or human nature and how they are embedded in our lives. In doing so, he uses the term “pattern of life” characterizing the complicated relationship between concepts and our lives and how our concepts “are connected with what interests us, with what matters to us” [1] (p. 46). But who is this “us” and whose interests manifest in the concepts we use to designate patterns of life? What if certain concepts—or their absence—are exclusionary, discriminatory, or otherwise unjust to those who are not “us”?

In this paper, I want to discuss Wittgenstein’s notion of “pattern of life” in its interweaving with facts, human life, and concepts, as well as its political implications. To this end, I will first outline the relationship between facts and concept formation as Wittgenstein drew it in his last writings. Based on this, I will argue that he uses the concept of pattern of life to capture the complicated relationship between concepts and human nature or “social facts”. Going beyond Wittgenstein and drawing on recent feminist epistemology, I will raise the question of the political implications of our patterns of life and concomitant social “conceptual injustices”.

Finally, I will show how imagining facts otherwise and other conceptual worlds can help us to reveal the prejudices and injustices of our concepts and can lead to conceptual change and new patterns of life that may ultimately even change “things”, i.e., our thinking, judging and acting in the world.
My aim in this paper is thus, on the one hand, to present a new perspective on Wittgenstein’s notion of “form of life” and “pattern of life”, and, on the other hand, to show the practical relevance of Wittgenstein’s reflections for political, especially feminist, discussions beyond the exegetical framework. Although I personally do not read Wittgenstein as having a philosophical interest in political or moral, let alone feminist, questions, I nevertheless think that his philosophical reflections can be made fruitful for such questions. In doing so, I am following up on several studies that have drawn such connections between Wittgenstein’s philosophy and feminist approaches (including, e.g., Refs. [2–10]).

2. Facts and Concept Formation: Meaning as Reference and Importance

In his “last” writings, i.e., those written between 1946 and 1951, Wittgenstein discusses in a few places the role of natural factors in concept formation or, put more generally, the relationship between concepts or grammar on the one hand and facts or “nature” on the other. In particular, he is interested in the question of whether there is a correspondence between our grammar and general (seldom mentioned) facts of nature [13] (46). His preferred examples in this context are colors and numbers, since in both cases we not only have single color or number concepts but the color and number concepts each stand in certain relationships to each other and thus form a system. For example, red and green can be considered complementary to each other and the number concepts (in some languages) are based on the number ten. Wittgenstein now wonders: “Do the systems reside in our nature or in the nature of things? How are we to put it” [14] (426)? First of all, it should be said that this question is not to be understood in a causal sense, as if Wittgenstein were concerned with a causal explanation of the concepts or grammar from facts of nature; rather, he is interested in the significance of facts of nature for our grammar or our concepts (cf. [15], (365)). Is it, for example, “in the nature of the colours green and red that they have no intermediate colours” (cf. [16], Ms 137, p. 5a; my transl.)? Unlike a “yellowish red” or a “bluish green”, we do not generally speak of a “reddish green” and would not really know what is meant by this, since mixing red and green merely produces a brownish hue that no longer has much in common with red and green (cf. [16], Ms 137, p. 7b f.). Therefore, in the case of “reddish green”, it seems that we do not have this concept precisely because there is no “reddish green”. However, one can ask why we should not describe the colors of some olives or leaves in autumn as “reddish green”. What kind of color concepts would we have if red and green only occurred in this way in nature, i.e., as in olives or autumn leaves? Wittgenstein imagines it as this:

Red and green the same. I am imagining there being only one shade of red and green. In nature they always blend into each other (as certain leaves do in autumn). They are everywhere found together, one being a variation of the other. The distinction between them is no greater than the one between lighter and darker.

But don’t the people see the difference?! Of course they do. But they have a word, say, “leaf-colour”, which is fairly analogous to our colour names, and means red or green; and they have two modifiers, “sharp” and “blunt”, more or less analogous to our “light” and “dark”, which separate red from green. […] [17] (220)

So how would these people differ from us? Obviously, they can see colors and also distinguish red from green, only this distinction plays the same role with them as our distinction of “light” and “dark”, i.e., if these people then came into our world and learned our language, they could use our concepts of “red” and “green” just as we do. In their world, however, “red” and “green” are only different shades of what they call “leaf-colour”. What we can learn from this example, according to Wittgenstein, is: “The difference between red and green is just not as important to them as it is to us” [17] (221).

However, what does that mean for Wittgenstein’s initial question of whether our color and number systems “reside in our nature or in the nature of things”? His example shows that there can be connections between our concepts and certain facts of nature, but only
mediated by what is important to people in their practice, in their lives, and what they are interested in. Nevertheless, as Wittgenstein makes clear, our concepts of color and number systems do “[n]ot [reside] in the nature of numbers or colours” or in the nature of things [14] (426). Then he continues, “is there something arbitrary about this system? Yes and no”, he answers, “[i]t is akin both to what is arbitrary and to what is non-arbitrary” [14] (427).

This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s earlier reflections from the 1930s, where he held in the Big Typescript that “grammar is not accountable to any reality” since the rules according to which we use terms determine or constitute meaning and are therefore “in this respect […] arbitrary” (cf. [18] (p. 233); my emph.). He explains this as follows: “When one talks about the arbitrariness [Willkürlichkeit] of grammatical rules, this can only mean that the justification that is inherent in grammar as such does not exist for grammar” [18] (p. 235). For, any such justification would be circular (cf. [18] (p. 238))—grammar, after all, is the rules of a language and not of “nature”.

Our language-game of counting, for example, is arbitrary, insofar as the number system in English or German is related to the number of our fingers (cf. [14], Ms 137, p. 61a), whereas, in Japanese and French, the direction of counting on each hand up to ten is also included, so that counting here is based on 20 (e.g., the French word for 80 is quatre-vingt, which means “four times twenty”). In addition, other cultures even include other parts of the body such that counting in the Yupno tribe e.g., is based on 33 (cf. [19], (p. 119 f.); cf. [20] (p. 221)). In addition to these different number systems, however, there are also significant differences in the role of numbers, which is expressed, for example, in differences in the complexity or size of the number system itself: for example, in the Aboriginal languages of Australia, numbers are counted up to three or five (cf. [19] (p. 120)).

In this sense, our systems are arbitrary, however, in a different sense, our systems are non-arbitrary:

The fact that we and many other cultures count in the first place also has something to do with “very general facts of nature”, such as the relative constancy of objects. For, if one imagines a certain group of people lived in a world where “all objects around them were rapidly coming into being and passing away”, these people “could not learn to count” ([16], Ms 136, p. 47a, cf. [14] (191); my transl.). Indeed, it would be highly “unnatural” or absurd if people in such an environment nevertheless had number words, for the language-game of counting objects would have no point here (cf. [21] (142)). There is a trivial sense, indeed, in which our language game of counting—and the immense spread of counting and some elementary color terms as such—is non-arbitrary or not random insofar as it is (also) related to the constancy of objects and other such “very general facts of nature”.

Do I want to say, then, that certain facts are favourable to the formation of certain concepts; or again unfavourable? And does experience teach us this? It is a fact of experience that human beings alter their concepts, exchange them for others when they learn new facts; when in this way what was formerly important to them becomes unimportant, and vice versa. (One finds, e.g., that what formerly counted as a difference in kind, is really only a difference in degree.) […] [14] (727); mod. transl.)

Therefore, even if grammar or concept formation corresponds to general facts of nature, this does not mean that grammar can be explained causally, nor that it can be justified by “nature” or by “facts”—it merely means that grammar does not seem to be completely random in a trivial sense. Grammar is, as Wittgenstein says, autonomous (cf. [18], p. 236)—autonomy, however, is not absolute independence, it is not “complete detachment”. We might have as well other terms and make other conceptual distinctions because of the role our concepts play in our lives, their use or grammar is based on what we find important or interesting; and when our interest changes, the grammar of concepts might also change. As Wittgenstein emphasizes both in the 1930s (cf. [18], p. 236) and in his later investigations, our concepts cannot be justified as the “right” ones or by reference to “facts” or “nature”, our concepts are neither “reasonable” nor “unreasonable”, neither
“right” nor “wrong”—rather, he says, the “belief that our concepts are the only reasonable ones consist[s] in […] [t]hat it doesn’t occur to us that others are concerned with completely different things, and that our concepts are connected with what interests us, with what matters to us” [1] (p. 46). As Wittgenstein makes clear, he does not want to set up a hypothesis with this:

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). Rather: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the right ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize—then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him. ([15], (366), mod. transl.)

Indeed, one cannot say “in the sense of a hypothesis” that “[i]f the facts of nature were different, people would have different concepts” because different cultures and peoples do have different concepts without this being causally related to different facts of nature. The fact that counting plays the extremely important role it does in our lives is rather related to our specific interests, and to how we organize our lives. However, the idea of the human construction of meaning—and thus radical constructivisms—is limited by the “resistance” of nature or what Wittgenstein calls “very general facts of nature”. For instance, “[i]n a country where the sky is almost constantly cloudy, people would not get the idea of doing astronomy” ([16], Ms 136, p. 48b; my transl.). In this way, “our interest is connected with particular facts in the outer world” ([1], p. 46). Conversely, other people make much more conceptual distinctions or even completely different kinds of grammatical distinctions than we do: in Japanese, for example, in addition to the basic number words, different category words are added to the basic number words, i.e., different number words are used depending on whether it is people, thin flat things, machines, small round objects, small or large animals that are counted. However, it would also be conceivable, as Wittgenstein ponders, that other people might have a verb “meaning to write in the first person, to love in the second, and to eat in the third” ([17], 328) or that “a word means something different every day of the week” ([17], 331). To us, such differences would seem unnatural, exaggerated, perhaps capricious; they do not correspond to our nature, to what we naturally are concerned with. However, as Wittgenstein says, “[f]or a world of a different kind”—and this may only be a different lifeworld within our world—“one would find the use of different linguistic instruments natural” ([16], Ms 137, p. 61b; my transl.).

These reflections come to show the intertwining of language and life—or as Wittgenstein puts it: “We could say people’s concepts show what matters to them and what doesn’t” [22] (293). For Wittgenstein, the fact that we have the concepts and conceptual differences that we have and that they play the role they play in our lives—in short, the fact that we use these concepts in this way—is related to “what interests us, what matters to us” [1] (p. 46). Furthermore, as quoted earlier, “our interest is connected with particular facts in the outer world” [1] (p. 46). This is the ambiguity of the term “meaning” as both reference and importance—we refer to something with a word because it is important to us and, conversely, something is important to us because we refer to it with a word. Instead of saying that life is reflected in our terms, it would probably be more accurate to say that “[t]hey stand in the middle of it” [1] (p. 72). The “facts of nature” that are interesting or important to a particular language community manifest in its concepts.

3. Patterns of Life and Conceptual Injustices

The manifold ways in which concepts are embedded in and interwoven with our lives is at the core of Wittgenstein’s later writings. For according to him, “[t]he concept is not only the way we think about the matter. It is not just a way of dividing, a way of ordering. It is part of our actions” ([16], Ms 137, p. 60b; my transl.) and that does not mean “what one man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions” [14] (629).
This background is not monochrome but “as it were pointillised” ([16], Ms 137, p. 54b; my transl.), a colorful jumble, and we might also picture it, as Wittgenstein suggests, “as a very complicated filigree pattern, which, to be sure, we can’t copy, but which we can recognize from the general impression it makes” [14] (624). Such patterns of life, as Wittgenstein frequently calls them in his late writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, are characterized on the one hand by regularity, on the other by indeterminacy, variability, and in some cases incompleteness, and therefore interwoven with countless other patterns (cf. [14] (672) f.; [17] (211); [1] (p. 72); cf. [23] (p. 102). As examples of such patterns, he mentions “deceit” ([14], 651), “pretence” [14], (672), “hope” [17] (365), “grief”, “sorrow”, “joy” [17] (406), “feigning” ([17] (862; mod. transl.3), ”maliciousness” and “thankfulness” [17] (942). As different as each of these examples may be as phenomena, they seem to be of a similar kind of concepts, or patterns: Like forms of life, Wittgenstein uses the term “patterns of life” to emphasize the interweaving of language-games, actions, customs, and situations. In this sense, one can say that both forms and patterns of life mean “a recurring and recognizable order of characteristics of actions, situations and linguistic expressions, which the speakers of a language understand as a structuring regularity within their lives and therefore refer to them by a concept” ([24] (p. 279); my transl.; cf. [25]). However, Wittgenstein uses the term “form of life” very inconsistently: Sometimes he compares “form of life” to language in general, an activity or a regular action but sometimes he calls “form of life” that “[w]hat has to be accepted, the given” [15] (p. 345), the “facts of living” [13] (p. 630) or that what people with different opinions still agree on (cf. [21] (p. 241). This variety of uses has led to a debate about the meaning of “form(s) of life” in either a biological (human vs. animal) sense (cf. [26]) and/or in a cultural or ethnological sense (cf. [27–31]) or as (roughly) synonymous with “patterns of life” (cf. [24,25])4. For the most part, I concur with the latter interpretation, insofar as I think that the notion of “form of life” in its varying uses becomes understandable through the notion of “patterns of life”, and thus the two notions essentially overlap, which I will explain in more detail below.

Considering the examples Wittgenstein gives for “patterns of life”, it might seem as if he uses this notion exclusively to refer “to the regularly recurring behavioral gestures or facial and verbal expressions that characterize our psychological expressions” ([30] (p. 35); my emph.). Although it is true that most of Wittgenstein’s examples for “patterns of life” are in the broadest sense psychological or mental expressions, there are several reasons that seem to suggest—or at least allow for—the inclusion of other cultural and social states of affairs under the notion of “patterns of life” as well (cf. [25] (p. 179): First, one of the main and hardly contested points of Wittgenstein’s late Philosophy of Psychology is that psychological patterns such as “pretence” or “grief” cannot be understood or grasped independently of human’s biological-animal, social and cultural life and the specific situations and circumstances they occur in—in this sense the ‘soul’ for Wittgenstein is “a public affair” [34]. If, now, one wanted to argue that there might be “innumerable cultural forms of life” but that there “can only be one human form of life, a form of life which collectively characterizes all of mankind”, and which “marks the stopping-place of relativism” [30] (p. 39), then it is questionable what exactly constitutes it: First, many “psychological phenomena” cannot be clearly separated from biological factors of our human-animal existence at all—first and foremost Wittgenstein’s favorite example of pain! Second, if there were one human form of life, then it seems most plausible to define it precisely by such elementary experiences as pain, hunger, tiredness, joy, and sadness—but who would dare such an “irresponsible generalization” (cf. [21] (293) to determine which aspects of life characterize “all of mankind”? As for human life, the human form(s) of life or patterns of life, it seems to me that one of Wittgenstein’s main points in his last writings is to show that there is no sharp division between the biological-animal, the social, the cultural—or the psychological but that and how these spheres permeate each other in certain states of affair, such as “pain”, “grief”, “executing an order” etc. Accordingly, in all instances, the explanatory context of the notion “pattern of life” is our concepts’ embeddedness in and complicated relationship to “human nature” or human social and cultural life, which does
not only apply to psychological concepts but also to “greeting”, “praying”, “obedience” or “flirtation”.

This relationship is complicated because, on the one hand, there are certain repetitive characteristics or regularities in such patterns of life, such as the presence of a certain motive or occasion, a certain environment or process, and characteristic modes of behavior and expression in facial play, demeanor and language—and this “regularity of our language permeates our lives” ([1], (p. 72); mod. transl.). On the other hand, it is not a matter of exact regularity, as may be the case with concepts that refer to facts of nature or of the external world in the sense mentioned above, e.g., with color and number words, where under ordinary circumstances it is quite clear which phenomena are called “red apples” or “two apples”—unlike the manifold phenomena called “pretence”, “obedience” or “flirtation”. Rather, patterns of life are variable, indeterminate, and sometimes incomplete (cf. [17] (211) which allow for the “endless multiplicity of expression” [1] (p. 65) and the “complex nature and the variety of human contingencies” [14] (614). The concepts by which we refer to patterns of life are thus elastic which, however, “does not mean they can be deformed randomly and without offering resistance” [1] (p. 24); mod. transl.) but rather that their boundaries are not sharp. Now, Wittgenstein does not want to reduce this conceptual unsharpness “to sharpness; but to capture unsharpness conceptually” ([16], Ms 137, p. 64; ter Hark’s transl. in [29] (p.130)—and this he succeeds in, I think, with the concept of “pattern of life” (cf. [29,35]).

Seeing life as a weave, this pattern (pretence, say) is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways. But we, in our conceptual world, keep on seeing the same, recurring with variations. That is how our concepts take it. For concepts are not for use on a single occasion. [14] (672)

And the pattern in the weave is interwoven with many others. [14] (673)

By means of a concept such as that of “pretence”, certain phenomena, actions, situations, or states of affairs of human life are “picked out” of the “weave of life” and assembled into a pattern—or form of life. However, other people might pick out other phenomena and thus have different concepts, such that it is not self-evident that we recognize their patterns accentuated with concepts as such: “Is it really clear”, as Wittgenstein asks, that other people pick the pattern of life we know under the concept sorrow “out of the other patterns the way we do” [17] (966)? And “[m]ust people be acquainted with the concept of modesty or of swaggering, wherever there are modest and swaggering human? Perhaps nothing hangs on this difference for them. For us, too, many differences are unimportant, which we might find important” ([14] (680); mod. transl.).

As has been explained in the previous section, our concepts show what is important to us, and which phenomena we accentuate in our life. However, if this is so, then the question arises as to who this “us” is or whose interests manifest in “our” concepts (cf. [11,12]). Although it pervades almost all his philosophical writings, Wittgenstein never explicitly explained this “us” or “we” and he seems even less interested in the moral and political implications of such a “we”—especially as conceived opposite to a “they” (cf. ibid.). However, this is of particular relevance in the case of concepts that do not refer to “very general facts of nature”, such as color and number words, but to patterns of life or, more generally, “social facts”: i.e., concepts that refer to social experiences, identity or to social life. For, if it is interests that manifest in concepts, then these concepts and patterns of life do not only show the intertwining of language and life, as stated in the previous section, but they also show that values are intrinsically woven into language. Language can thus be rendered a political instrument of power whose conceptual distinctions draw boundaries that include and exclude and where the presence or absence of certain concepts can stigmatize, discriminate or reinforce social injustices. Therefore, what if one does not find oneself in the patterns of life marked by the concepts of the language one speaks? What if the concepts do not stand in the middle of one’s own life or if concepts do not even exist for what one finds to be an important and structuring regularity in life?
The extent to which such exclusion and injustice become manifest at such a conceptual level has been demonstrated by Miranda Fricker in the case of the absence of certain concepts: she introduces the notion of “hermeneutical injustice” to highlight how “a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience” [36] (p. 1). Her example for such a hermeneutical injustice is the lack of the concept “sexual harassment” before the 1970s, which was introduced to refer to the experience of unwanted sexual advances (harassment), which until then was called “flirtation” in the same way as wanted sexual advances [36] (p. 155). Following on from this, I would like to use the term “conceptual injustice” as an umbrella term for the various injustices that can arise with and through concepts, conceptual distinctions, and conceptual boundaries—or their absence. Cases of conceptual injustice that go beyond hermeneutical (and epistemic) injustice include, e.g., the wrongful exclusion of a person, group, or phenomenon from a concept referring to social facts, such as the exclusion of transwomen from the concept “women” (cf. [17]), the use of the generic masculine for groups of different genders, the deliberate use of inaccurate gender pronouns or first names (deadnaming), the conceptual misrecognition or ignorance of gender diversity in bureaucratic contexts or forms of address, and offensive, derogatory or otherwise discriminatory terms used to refer to certain marginalized groups. Looking at these various forms of conceptual injustice, it is not surprising that the struggle against social injustice is often related to language politics, changing discriminatory expressions and introducing new concepts—to finally change relationships, states of affairs, matters of fact, or more generally, “things” of social life. For the very reason that our concepts, as pointed out above, are elastic and our language(s) flexible, conceptual boundaries can be shifted, and new patterns of life can be accentuated. If there is an important difference between Wittgenstein’s notion of form of life and pattern of life, I think it is that other than forms of life, he does not speak of patterns of life as that what is necessarily to be accepted and what people of different opinions under all circumstances (still) agree on (cf. [21] (241); [15] (345)—rather patterns of life, and with them our concepts, can change (cf. [16], Ms 167, p. 16r) and can be changed. But how is such a conceptual change possible? For it seems clear that a particular difficulty of conceptual injustice, in contrast to other forms of injustice, is the internal connection between concept and thinking. In Wittgenstein’s words:

We’re used to a particular classification of things.

With language, or languages, it has become second nature to us. [14] (678)

These are the fixed rails along which all our thinking runs, and so our judgement and action goes according to them too. [14] (679)

To escape the “hypnosis of familiarity” (cf. [16], Ms 137, p. 9a; cf. [23] (p. 116)) or the usual classification of things and to see our concepts and their possible inherent injustices without prejudice and ultimately to change them, we must leave the familiar, fixed rails of our thinking, judgment, and action. Rather, as I will show in the next section, we must exercise imagination and shifts of perspective to see the limitations or the exclusionary boundaries of our concepts and to find new conceptual possibilities, and new patterns in the weave of life.

4. Imagination and How to Change Things with Words

Wittgenstein mentions the possibility of conceptual change in a few places but hardly elaborates on it. In the following, I will use one of these remarks to explain the connection between imagination and conceptual change for the sake of social justice. Even though Wittgenstein does not express any concern for conceptual change for the sake of social justice, I think his remarks on altering patterns of life and conceptual change, esp. the following from On Certainty, can be fruitfully linked to some reflections from feminist epistemology. In On Certainty, Wittgenstein mentions conceptual change in an interesting but also somewhat puzzling remark:
If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language games lose some of their importance, while others become important. In addition, in this way, there is an alteration—a gradual one—in the use of the vocabulary of a language. ([39], 63)

This remark is interesting since there is a certain inconsistency between the first and the second sentence: The first sentence is, in a sense, about an imagined world. Rephrased somewhat more pointedly, it says that if we imagine facts to be different from what they are, then in this imagination certain language-games lose importance, while others become important—or as cited in the first section, “the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible ([15], 366). The second sentence, on the other hand, seems to take place in terms of content no longer in the realm of imagination, but in the realm of the actual world, or not in the realm of others, but of these or “our” facts. Although grammatically it can function as a continuation of the first sentence, in terms of content, this would not make sense, since the language about which Wittgenstein speaks in the second sentence would then also be an imagined language, which is not the case here. The remark thus seems to say that—again, for the sake of clarity, overstated—that the mere imagining of other facts gradually leads or can lead to an actually altered use of the vocabulary of language. The tricky part of this remark is thus the transition between imagining facts otherwise and the actual change in the vocabulary of the language.

However, what does Wittgenstein mean by “imagining facts otherwise than as they are”?

I think that imagining facts and language-games otherwise is an important part of Wittgenstein’s own methodology in these later writings. We have seen one example of this in the earlier quoted remark, where Wittgenstein writes “Red and green the same. I am imagining there being only one shade of red and green” ([17] (220), first ital. JT). Starting from this imagined alteration of facts, Wittgenstein then considers how people would speak in such a world, i.e., what color terms and modifications people would have for whom red and green would be the same shade, i.e., by imagining facts otherwise than as they are and by constructing “variations of our conceptual world”, Wittgenstein wants to “emphasize differences, and sometimes similarities, that have been blurred so far” and thus, he wants to “draw new boundaries, tear down old ones, to escape hypnosis through a familiar way of representation” ([16], Ms 137, p. 9a; my transl.; cf. [23]). Wittgenstein changes, alters, or distorts our own lifeworld and language-games to see them more clearly, and to obtain a new perspective on them since they are, as it were, too close to be seen clearly or at all. They have, as he famously writes in *Philosophical Investigations* 415, “escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes” [21] (415). To see our concepts and language games clearly, we must take a step back and look at them with the eyes of a stranger thus escaping the “hypnosis of familiarity” (cf. [23] (p. 116)). The purpose or philosophical benefit of Wittgenstein’s method of imagining facts otherwise and “constructing variations of our conceptual world” then is gaining a new perspective on and thus clarity about our own patterns of life and conceptual worlds. In this sense, Wittgenstein writes: “Nothing is more important, after all, than the formation of fictive concepts that first teach us to understand our own” ([16], Ms 137, p. 78b; my transl.). Imagining facts otherwise than as they are, is then less a construction of a weird phantasy world in which anything could happen but rather a way to see one’s own patterns of life and conceptual worlds from a different point of view. This shift of perspective facilitated by imagination also serves the critical function of questioning the correctness, reasonableness, or validity of our own concept formations (cf. [15] (366)): To return to the first example, if we imagine that red and green always occur together as in leaves in autumn, then it becomes intelligible that people have a certain concept, e.g., “leaf colour”, and that it is then important to modify this concept with respect to redness and greenness (instead of brightness and darkness). As a result, it does indeed seem arbitrary that we speak of a “yellowish red” and a “bluish green” but not of a “reddish green”. Therefore, by imagining certain color facts otherwise, we might come to wonder: *Why shouldn’t we describe autumn leaves and olives as reddish*...
green? That is, we might come to see that our color concepts are not the only reasonable, right, or valid ones and that we realized something that others did not (cf. [15] (366)).

I think that Wittgenstein’s imagined facts and fictive language-games at least implicitly but often also explicitly raise this, rather critical question of “Why should it be like this and not otherwise?”10. The phrasing here is no coincidence, for he writes that the questions, “‘Why should…’ and ‘Why should not…’ are philosophical movements of thought” ([16], Ms 137, p. 47b; my transl.; cf. [23] (p. 120)). For, the phrasing of the question with “why should/shouldn’t” is critical and suggestive: it immediately stimulates us to reconsider something supposedly certain, it questions what is natural or self-evident to us, and the things that have escaped our remark because of their familiarity. At the same time, these questions encourage us to imagine how it would be if things were otherwise than we assume them to be and thus open our view to new possibilities, for a new way of thinking. In addition, this is what Wittgenstein ultimately considers to be the use of philosophy: “The usefulness of philosophy. It says: ‘Why should it be like this?’ In so doing, of course, it removes a prejudice” ([16], Ms 133, p. 46e; my transl.; cf. [23] (p. 120)) and a few pages later he adds that these are “questions that are conducive to science because they clear away prejudices” ([16], Ms 133, p. 60r; my transl.)11. By asking “why should it be like that?” and imagining facts and language-games differently, we can come to see that our concepts are not the only reasonable and right ones but that this is a prejudice in favor of our familiar forms of expression and in favor of our specific interests in certain patterns of life (cf. [16], Ms 133, p. 10v).

In fact, in feminist epistemology, there is a discussion, partly inspired by Wittgenstein, and partly by thinkers as diverse as Immanuel Kant, Hannah Arendt, and William James, about the role of imagination or imaginative practices as a shift of perspective in contesting stigmatizations, social injustices and discriminatory linguistic expressions (cf. e.g., Refs. [8,42]). José Medina, for instance, states: “The imagination is an exercise in perspective-taking, a way of inhabiting spaces and relating to others that connects up with our actual world […]” [42] (p. 256). Similarly, Linda Zerilli stresses “the importance of the faculty of imagination and the ability to see from other perspectives for a freedom-centered feminism” [8] (p. 59). Zerilli also emphasizes that imagination has such a critical function by questioning habitual patterns and rethinking seemingly self-evident presuppositions and foundations of thought:

The compelling character of social norms and rules can lead us to treat our social arrangements as necessary, while the hidden nature of that compulsion can lead us to treat them as voluntary. The task of radical movements is to transform the instituted society by putting instituted representations into question (that is, the very presuppositions or foundations of our thought). The reflection such a task involves proceeds not by way of radical doubt but radical imagination […]” [8], (p. 60)

As “the faculty that allows us to bring particulars into an unexpected and potentially critical relation with each other” [8], (p. 61), imagination, then, helps us to see certain conceptual prejudices and injustices as such in the first place—whether for philosophical purposes or political ones, to actually change the concepts—and with them, the things, the conditions in living together with others.12

However, is it possible that imagination as a shift of perspective leads to an actual conceptual change as Wittgenstein seems to suggest in On Certainty (cf. [39], (63))? What kind of conceptual change does Wittgenstein mean here in the first place? It seems clear that he does not mean the kind of conceptual change that happens naturally, so to speak, by itself over time, because such a change is not usually triggered by imagining facts otherwise than they are. However, the kind of change described (in [39], 63) also seems different from the one cited earlier that “human beings alter their concepts, exchange them for others when they learn new facts”, such that e.g., “what formerly counted as a difference in kind, is really only a difference in degree” [14] (727). This case seems different since we do not learn any new facts by imagining them otherwise than they are. Therefore,
let us look at our initial remark and its successors in On Certainty to obtain a better idea of what Wittgenstein might mean by “conceptual change”:

If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important. And in this way there is an alteration—a gradual one—in the use of the vocabulary of a language. [39] (63)

Compare the meaning of a word with the ‘function’ of an official. And ‘different meanings’ with ‘different functions’. [39] (64)

When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meaning of words change. [39] (65)

What we can learn about conceptual change from the synopsis of these three remarks, is first that an alteration in the use of a language’s vocabulary is gradual, beginning with the change of language-games leading to a change in concepts and with that to a change in the meaning of words (cf. [39] (65)). The gradual progress of conceptual change is also echoed in another of Wittgenstein’s remarks which almost looks as if the predecessor of the last one (cf. [39] (65)): “A pattern of life serves as the basis of a word usage. The pattern changes. The language-game begins to falter” ([16], Ms 167, p. 16r; my transl.13). Interestingly, Wittgenstein’s choice of the word Wanken (falter) suggests not only the gradual progress of conceptual change but also that such a change may often be accompanied by uncertainty, a vacillation between old and (various) new ways of expression, which can currently be observed in many languages, for example, in the introduction of gender-inclusive pronouns and concepts. Back to the cited remarks from On Certainty, Wittgenstein further compares the meaning of a word to the function of an official and suggests that an official, i.e., here: a word, can serve different functions, i.e., a word can have different meanings (cf. [39] (64)). By drawing a comparison to an official’s “function” here, he ties the meaning of a word to a specific task, use, or need that it fulfills in or for our lives. Yet, Wittgenstein’s remarks here leave much open and remain unclear, so the following interpretation is inevitably speculative: I think that this must not be understood as if we can explain the existence of our concepts from the need for them. As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein thinks that our concepts stand in the middle of our life, and he admits that often, “[w]e want to explain concepts to ourselves from the need for them. However, this would actually be only the need for a certain way of life, which includes the use of the concept in itself” ([16], Ms 137, p. 61b; my emph.; my transl.14; cf. [12]). To stay in Wittgenstein’s picture, this means that we do not go to an office because we need the official, rather we go to an office because the official in his specific function can fulfill certain needs of practical life. Conversely, this means that when the way of life changes, the functions of an official also change and sometimes even the officials themselves will be replaced if they no longer can fulfill them. I speculate, then, that the conceptual change that can be initiated by imagining facts otherwise or by shifting perspective on our language-games is rooted in the need for a different way of life including the use of the new concept(s). Wittgenstein certainly did not have the removal of conceptual injustices in mind when he wrote these remarks in On Certainty [39] (63–65).

However, going beyond strict exegesis, it does not seem far-fetched to say that a need for a different way of life including the use of a certain concept might often be closely related to the experience of conceptual injustice and hence language politics.

This is not to say that for all cases of conceptual change—not even for all cases of conceptual change in the wake of social justice—imagination or a shift of perspective is necessary: some concepts were replaced because they were simply offensive and obviously discriminatory. However, there are other less obvious cases. For instance, in the late 19th century, women in different European countries started to question why there should be a specific form of address for unmarried women, such as “Miss”, “Fräulein” or “Señorita”. German-speaking feminists pointed out the sexism and absurdity of the concept “Fräulein” by juxtaposing it with the fictive concept “Herrlein” (cf. [43], p. 193). In some cases, new concepts had to be created—as mentioned earlier, introducing the concept of “sexual
harassment” finally expressed the perspective of the harassed women (cf. [36], (p. 155)\(^\text{15}\) and the introduction of new gender pronouns, such as “hen” in Norwegian, expresses the perspective of inter*- and non-binary*-persons.

Nor is this meant to make the causal or empirical claim that all these conceptual changes were the result of imagination. Rather, I want to point out that by imagining facts otherwise and shifting perspective on our own patterns of life and language-games, other patterns and concepts become plausible and other language-games become important. Following Wittgenstein and the feminist epistemologists cited, I want to emphasize that imagining facts otherwise or imagining fictive language-games can lead to a new perspective on our own language practices bringing to light possible stigmatizations, discriminations, and injustices inherent in them. In addition, even though Wittgenstein was not thinking of problems of social injustice in this context, he was interested in the various prejudices inherent in our concepts—and not only the grammatical prejudices (cf. [16], Ms 116, p. 80) but also the prejudices that “our” (whose anyway?) concepts were the only “reasonable” or right ones (cf. [1] (p. 46)).

If you always represent everything by contours, you cannot represent a gradual transition. If one were used to representing all whole objects in straight lines, it would be difficult to free oneself from the prejudice that a curvilinear one could be something other than a fragment. ([16], Ms 134, p. 2 f.; var.; my transl.\(^\text{16}\))

The “hypnosis of a familiar way of representation”—in Wittgenstein’s image: in contours or straight lines—makes it difficult to free oneself from the prejudices that come with this mode of representation and to see the gradual transitions and the curving lines as a whole. As quoted earlier, the linguistic “classification of things […] has become second nature to us” [14], (678) and the “fixed rails” along which all our thinking, judgment and action runs [14], (679). Motivated by the need for a new way of life, I think in this way, “imaging facts otherwise” and thus shifting perspective on our own patterns of life and language-games can reveal prejudices or injustices and lead to an actual conceptual change—and may thus ultimately, change “things”, i.e., our thinking, judging and acting in the world.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

### Notes

1. This first section is based on my doctoral dissertation (cf. [11]) and an earlier version of this section has also been published in [12].

2. The following interpretation of Wittgenstein’s concept of “pattern of life” is an elaboration of previous presentations in my doctoral thesis [11] and in [23].

3. I modified the translation, which uses “pretence”, since Wittgenstein uses a different word (Heuchelei) in [17], 862 than in [14], 672, where he writes Verstellung.

4. For an overview of this debate and other positions, cf. [11,30,32,33].

5. Moyal-Sharrock only hints at what this “fundamental form of life” could be: “Whereas all humans share in a fundamental form of life, there exist, within this shared biology, behavior and environment—within this shared ways of living and (as we shall see) patterns of life—possibilities for diversity and variation; for, i.e., various forms of human life” ([30], 27).

6. Cf. the contexts of the examples for “patterns of life” mentioned above.

7. To the best of my knowledge, this notion of “conceptual injustice” has not been introduced elsewhere in this sense—I could only find one use of this term in the narrower sense of the wrongful exclusion of a person, group, or phenomenon from a concept in an abstract by Lisa Bastian. The abstract is from a talk in June 2019 at the “Conceptual Engineering Seminar” at St. Andrews University which, to my knowledge, has not been published [37]. Layla Raïd uses the notion of “linguistic injustice” in order to describe the characteristic female experience of being silenced when they express their experiences in sexist contexts [38].

8. The importance of fictive narratives for Wittgenstein’s method has been pointed out by Joachim Schulte [40], Allan Janik [41], and myself [23].

9. The original says: “Nichts ist doch wichtiger, als die Bildung von fiktiven Begriffen, die uns die unseren erst verstehen lernen” ([16], Ms 137, p. 78b).
Wenn man gewöhnt wäre, alle ganzen Gegenstände geradlinig darzustellen, wäre es schwer, sich von dem Vorurteil zu befreien, wenn man die Vorurteile wegräumen” ([16], Ms 133, p. 60r).

One could object here, as an anonymous reviewer has done (whom I thank for pointing this out!) that Wittgenstein’s reflections on imagination and fictional language-games, he is concerned here with the elimination of (conceptual) prejudices and a new, critical view of familiar patterns of representation. Therefore, as I have tried to show, these remarks are about questioning an established way of thinking, i.e., they are about critical thinking and exposing (conceptual, philosophical) prejudices. Interpreted politically, this is, in my opinion, contrary to the spirit of regressive politics, as it tries to maintain or reintroduce established and traditional structures by suppressing critical questioning of them.

The original says: “Ein Lebensmuster dient als die Basis einer Wortverwendung. Das Muster ändert sich. Das Sprachspiel kommt ins Wanken” ([16], Ms 167, p. 16r).

The original says: “Wir wollen uns Begriffe aus dem Bedürfnis nach ihnen erklären. Aber eigentlich wäre das nur das Bedürfnis nach einer bestimmten Lebensweise, welche die Verwendung des Begriffs in sich schließt” ([16], Ms 137, p. 61b).

Fricke’s own approach to overcoming hermeneutic injustice, however, follows different lines than those presented here. Since Fricker’s starting point is the stereotypical identity prejudices that underlie and lead to epistemic injustice, she advocates corrective virtues on the part of the hearer in a situation where the speaker experiences a gap in collective hermeneutical resources, i.e., “The form the virtue of hermeneutical injustice must take, then, is an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources. The point is to realize that the speaker is struggling with an objective difficulty and not a subjective failing.” [36] (p. 169). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

The original says: “Wenn man immer alles durch Konturen wiedergibt, kann man einen allmäßlichen Übergang nicht darstellen. Why shouldn’t something like that occur as an abnormality?” [1] (p. 66) and “why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him?” [39] (p. 92). Similarly, in the writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, he questions our concept of the human soul and the importance we give to the concept: “Imagine we were to encounter a human who had no soul. Why shouldn’t something like that occur as an abnormality?” [1] (p. 66) and “why should what happens within you interest me?” [13] (215); cf. [39] (38). For a more detailed discussion of these latter remarks in his Philosophy of Psychology, cf. [23].
35. Ter Hark, M. Uncertainty, Vagueness and Psychological Indeterminacy. Synthese 2000, 124, 193–220. [CrossRef]

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