In a furious moment, Wittgenstein once complained that Carnap had no nose for philosophy. Whether he was right or not is perhaps open to question. But there is no doubt that Wittgenstein had such a nose, a sense of the uniqueness of philosophical questions and puzzles. Wittgenstein said about philosophical inquiry: “We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider’s web with our fingers”, (P.I., 106). “These are, of course, not empirical problems”, he tells us. “They are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: despite an urge to misunderstand them.” (P.I., 109). We find in his writings, from the Tractatus through On Certainty, a continuum stressing the autonomy of philosophy, and exhibiting three levels of sensitivity: 1) The recognition that “traditional” philosophical problems, such as the Other Minds problem or the Free Will problem, are not straightforwardly empirical, and thus are not resolvable by science, 2) the awareness that some deviation from ordinary discourse is present in all such problems, 3) and, most importantly for our purposes here, that in many problems which seem to be empirical or scientific there are philosophical intrusions which are not generally recognized to be such and which jam up the works in all sorts of complicated ways. In particular, they hinder or even prevent these problems from being solved by the simple adducing of facts. For this volume, dedicated as it is to Wittgenstein, I would like to examine a contemporary problem in the theory of vision that exhibits the features I have just mentioned. This is the problem of whether we see the world directly or indirectly. There are proponents on both sides of the issue who adduce what they take to be empirical findings in support of their views. But as we shall see, the key issues turn on non-empirical, conceptual considerations; and a typical philosophical deadlock ensues. The diagnostic spirit of Wittgenstein is essential to understanding why the debate takes the form it does, for as he says,
“The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.” (P.I., 255). Only someone with a philosophical nose could have said that. Therefore, let us now turn to the debate to see how a Wittgensteinian approach will illuminate it.

II.

At the beginning of Chapter Nine of his celebrated book, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, J.J. Gibson says the following:

Direct perception is what one gets from seeing Niagara Falls, say as distinguished from seeing a picture of it. The latter kind of perception is *mediated*. So when I assert that perception of the environment is direct, I mean that it is not mediated by *retinal* pictures, *neural* pictures, or *mental* pictures. *Direct perception* is the activity of getting information from the ambient array of light. I call this a process of *information pickup* that involves the exploratory activity of looking around, getting around, and looking at things. This is quite different from the supposed activity of getting information from the inputs of the optic nerves, whatever they may prove to be.¹

In what follows, I shall focus on Gibson’s claim that “direct perception is what one gets from seeing Niagara Falls, as distinguished from seeing a picture of it”. As we explore this remark from a Wittgensteinian perspective, we shall find that Gibson is wrong in holding that a case of seeing Niagara Falls is to be characterized as a case of direct perception or that seeing a picture of Niagara Falls is to be described as an instance of mediated perception. How these cases should be characterized is an interesting and difficult question, which I shall address later.

To begin with it is essential to realize that in using the phrase “direct perception”, Gibson believes he is opposing one theoretical outlook to another. He tells us:

There are experiments, of course, that seem to go against the theory of a direct perception of layout and to support the opposite theory of a *mediated* perception of layout. The latter theory is more familiar. It asserts that perception is mediated by assumptions, preconceptions,