Philosophical Investigations 1

Beginning At The Beginning

"When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires." (Augustine, C*onfessions*, I. 8.)

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in a language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. —In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated *[zugeordnet]* with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

Augustine does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word. If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like "table", "chair", "bread", and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked "five red apples". He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples"; then he looks up the word "red" in a table and finds a color sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers—I assume that he knows them by heart—up to the word "five" and for each number he takes an apple of the same color as the sample out of the drawer. —It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words.—"But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" —Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. —But what is the meaning of the word "five"? —No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used." [Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #1, translation G.E.M. Anscombe]

1 While Augustine is proposing how language is *learnt*, Wittgenstein is giving an example of how language is *used*. In later remarks, Wittgenstein notes that simplified forms of language, which he calls language-games, are often used as means of instruction. Wittgenstein also often uses language-games when trying to focus our attention on some philosophical problem or misunderstanding or assumption, or to demonstrate a specific function of language by casting it into high relief in a language-game.

2 Imagine a variation of the shopkeeper example: a person comes into a shop with a slip marked "five red apples." The shopkeeper checks his color chart, says the numbers up to five, looks in his apple drawer, and then adds the following sentence to the slip: "yes, there are five red apples in the drawer."

3 Imagine another variation: the shopkeeper simply looks into the drawer and says to himself, "Yup, five red apples."

4 "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" How does the shopkeeper know that he is to recite the cardinal numbers from

one to five, and not, for example, look up the numbers in a drawer and recite the colors in a certain order: violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, red? How does the shopkeeper know that he is to look in a drawer filled with apples, and not, for example, to look in a book filled with pictures of various fruits? Why wouldn't he look up the apples in a picture book, say the colors in spectrum-order, and look in a drawer for carved wooden numerals in the shapes of ones, twos, and threes?

5 On Augustine's model of how language works, understanding consists in thinking of the object a word or sign stands for, and communication consists in using signs to get someone else to think of the object.

In an article titled "Meaning, Use, and Privacy" [*Mind*, 1982, Vol. XCI, pp. 541-564], Prof. Edward Craig claimed that communication would be successful if the hearer (or in this example, the shopkeeper) were to think the same thing the speaker (or the person who had written the slip of paper) had thought. In that case, the shopkeeper should think "five red apples" and send the person away without any apples {i.e., paragraph 3 above}.

Perhaps Craig would say that the person who wrote the message should imagine or picture to himself the shopkeeper handing five apples to the bearer of the message. However, if, as Craig says, the essence of communication is for the receiver to think the same thing as the sender, then the shopkeeper should *imagine* himself giving five red apples to the bearer of the message, without actually giving him any apples. But even supposing that the slip of paper reads "*give* the bear of this slip five red apples," the shopkeeper, if he is to think what the sender thought, should take out another slip of paper, write on it "give the bearer of this slip five red apples," and send him away with the second slip and no apples {paragraph 2 above}.

The point of Wittgenstein's remark here is that it does not matter what the shopkeeper thinks so long as he acts in a certain way, in this case, so long as he gives the bearer of the note five red apples. The shopkeeper *may* think something, but evidently it must *not* be the *same* thing as the person who sent the message.

6 Even so simple a phrase as "five red apples" cannot be correctly analyzed as three names denoting three objects, or ideas in the mind of a speaker/writer/missive-sender, or a quantified subject-predicate expression. For, in all these cases (names denoting objects, ideas in the mind, quantified subject-predicate expression), the shopkeeper could send the person away empty-handed, for nothing on the slip of paper indicates to the shopkeeper that he should *do* anything upon reading the message.

7 "Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. — But what is the meaning of the word "five"? — No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used."

The words, "five red apples", are part of a scene, the cue which gets the shopkeeper to play his part. The shopkeeper's part is not merely to look at the slip of paper and read the sentence, nor to look into a drawer and say to himself "yup, five red apples", nor is it to think what the writer of the message thought, but to *give* something to the bearer of the note. Note that on Craig's account, even after expanding the sentence on the slip to "give the bearer of this note five red apples", the shopkeeper should write the same sentence on another slip of paper and give it to the bearer of the first slip—since that was the thought in the mind of the person who wrote the slip in the first place.

In the *Tractatus*, language and action are disconnected. One can, of course, describe an action in a proposition, such as "the shopkeeper is giving the bearer of the message five red apples." However, the sense of the proposition is entirely independent of whether anyone ever actually asserts the proposition. Human action, in the *Tractatus* account of language, stands at the same level as any other fact in the world and lends no purpose or significance to language, since meaning is entirely a matter of logical form independent of whether any fact in the world is the case. In the *Investigations*, on the other hand, language is seen to take much of its meaning and purpose from the contexts in which it is actually used, which is to say, common *usage*, not merely how someone *happens to use* a word.

8 How does a request *request?* Of course, we are in no doubt *what* it is that is requested, in this case, five red apples. The question is, how is it that the words "five red apples" or even the expanded sentence "give the bearer of this note five red apples", evoke an *action* and not simply an idea in the mind of the shopkeeper, as in Craig's account?

How does a name call someone? When a child calls "mama!", mama comes; she goes to the child, perhaps picks it up and says soothing words to it. Craig sometimes claims not that the receiver should think exactly the same thing as the sender of the message, but rather something *analogous*. On that account, if mama were to think something analogous to what the child had thought when the child called "mama!", then mama should call *her* mama—that is, the child's grandmother! The trouble with this proviso is that something can be analogous to something else in indefinitely many different respects. How is the receiver of the message to know which respect is relevantly analogous in any given case?

It is no help to say that the image in the mind of the reader of the note is analogous to the image in the mind of the person who wrote the note. Why? Because an image in the mind does not translate into an action in the world; an image would be analogous only to some other image."Analogy" is altogether too vague a concept on which to base a theory of how language works

So how does a name *call* someone? How is it that calling the name gets the person to *come*, and not merely to think something (or something analogous) upon hearing the name called?

Think of calling the name of a dog or a cat. The dog comes to its master, wagging its tail, grateful for any attention its master may bestow upon it; whereas, if you call the name of a cat, the cat may, if it is so disposed, look at you and mull over whether it really wants to go to all the bother of approaching you if you don't have a treat ready to hand. It is not because a cat is not intelligent enough to come when it is called, but rather that it is not so minded as to render obeisance to humans in this manner. [See *Zettel* 187: "Why can't a cat be taught to retrieve? Doesn't it understand what one wants?"]

A name does not merely denote an object; in the case of a person's name, it can get the person to *do* something: to come, to move towards the speaker. A child's name, spoken in a sharp tone of voice, can get the child to *stop* doing something it knows it should not be doing. A name can trigger action, but this is something we must learn, it is not contained within the thought of the extension of the word.

9 Words which evoke actions may or may not be words which *refer* to actions. "Come", "go", "stand up", "sit down", "turn left", may evoke actions but do not refer to them in the same way as, for example, "he is walking the dog now." And now think of "Fall downstairs!" A context could be imagined in which this too might evoke an action: a stuntman on a movie set, for example, might take his cue from such an instruction. Conversely, in the sentence "five red apples", not one word refers to an action—there is no verb in the sentence, so, strictly speaking, it is not grammatically complete—nonetheless, we can imagine that these three words could be sufficient to trigger an action, namely, that a shopkeeper would give the bearer of the note the items requested. Assuming, of course, that the shopkeeper understands the note as a request and not, for example, as an inventory of goods in his storage room or a receipt for goods delivered.

10 In the context of someone who comes into a shop bearing a slip of paper marked "five red apples", there is a nebulous background of practices and expectations within which the phrase "five red apples" takes on significance beyond merely denoting objects. The purpose of the slip of paper is to get the shopkeeper to *give* the person five red apples, as the child who calls "mama!" expects its mama to *come*. No analysis of the proposition in isolation, or the mind of the sender of the message in isolation, or a comparison of the thoughts in two minds (those of sender and receiver), will capture this aspect of its significance or yield the expected result. A word or a name can trigger action; which action is to be triggered depends not only on the words, but also on the context, the nebulous background of practices and expectations which make up the scene in which the words are a cue for someone to play a part.

"—But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? —No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used."

In the shopkeeper example, we may suppose that the person who wrote the note is well-known to the shopkeeper and often sends someone, perhaps a son or niece, to the shop with requests for goods, and that the shopkeeper keeps a running bill which is to be paid in full at the end of each month or when a certain agreed-upon sum is due. That is, there is a prior agreement, an implied contract, between the sender and the receiver, which the slip of paper invokes. This is part of the nebulous background within which, and only within which, the phrase "five red apples" *requests that* five red apples be given to the bearer of the message.

Suppose the bearer of the message "five red apples" is the shop assistant returning from having taken inventory in the storage room. What is the shopkeeper to do? Perhaps he telephones his supplier and orders more apples. But, if he thinks what the shop assistant had thought, or something analogous, then the shopkeeper should go to the storage room, look in the same bin, and count the apples again. Now suppose that the person bearing the message is the driver of a delivery van and that the slip of paper is a receipt for goods delivered. What is the shopkeeper to do? He probably signs and dates the delivery receipt. But if the shopkeeper thinks what the delivery man thought, or something analogous, then he should take the apples and the unsigned delivery ticket to some other shop. Evidently, the idea that the receiver should think what the sender thought, or something analogous, doesn't get the job done.

11 How does the shopkeeper know that the message on the slip of paper is a request and not an inventory or a receipt? We could image the shopkeeper handling many such notes during the course of a week, every one bearing a similar combination of words with minor variations: "six green apples", "a dozen brown eggs", "a case of canned beans" and so on—some of which could be requests from customers, others delivery tickets from suppliers, some his own inventories, still others receipts from other shopkeepers, still others reminders to himself to place orders, and so on. Clearly, this will not be specified by the objects denoted. 'This is specified by the intention behind the message.' Yes, of course; only, *where* is the intention in "five red apples"? If you locate it in the mind of the person who wrote the message, then the shopkeeper can at best only *guess* at it. If you locate it in the mind of whoever sent the message, then, like the beetle in the box, it drops out of the language-game; it becomes inaccessible to us.

12 In one respect, a slip of paper marked "ten yellow plums" would have the same significance, even though it denoted different objects, for it would play the same role in the shopkeeper scene and trigger much the same action of giving the bearer of the note the specified quantity of fruit. That is, in a sense, the role which the phrase or sentence plays is content neutral, within a range of possibilities. The range of possibilities need not be fixed in advance or *a priori.*

Let us suppose that the shopkeeper takes on an apprentice whose native language is not that of the shopkeeper. We shall suppose that the apprentice is familiar with the procedure of buying and selling and furthermore that he understands that sometimes people come into the shop bearing slips of paper with phrases such as "five red apples", or "half a pound of plums", but that he is unfamiliar with the word "plum". Now let us suppose that the apprentice is handed a slip of paper with the phrase "half a pound of plums". In this case, it would be sufficient to explain the meaning of the word by saying the word "plum" and pointing to a plum. In this specific instance, Augustine's scheme of how language works works.

13 Wittgenstein notes that it helps to understand the meaning of a certain statement to see what mistakes or misunderstandings would look like, and to see what types of mistakes or misunderstandings are ruled out. In the shopkeeper example, an intelligible mistake might look like this: the shopkeeper gives the bearer of the note either the wrong color or the wrong number of apples. Or he gives the

bearer of the note plums instead of apples. This kind of error might have a perfectly intelligible explanation. For example, perhaps the same messenger has been sent to the same shopkeeper 100 times before with 100 other notes which always read "*seven* red apples" but on this one occasion, exceptionally, the note said "*five* red apples", and the shopkeeper did not pay attention, assuming that today's order was the same as all previous ones. Or perhaps the shopkeeper's assistant had mistakenly put green apples into the red apple drawer, and the shopkeeper reached into the red apple drawer blindly and pulled out a number of apples not realizing that they were green rather than red. Or perhaps there were only four apples left in the drawer. Such mistakes would be intelligible.

But now suppose that the shopkeeper, upon receiving the note, promptly burned down the shop, pawned all his possessions, and caught the next steamer to Indonesia—this would be an unintelligible reaction to "five red apples" (although a good novelist might be able to construct enough prehistory to make even this scenario somehow plausible).

14 "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'? —Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described." He acts as described because he has been trained to do so, presumably by others who acted in a similar way in similar circumstances. Presumably, as a boy, he spent time in shops and watched what kinds of things go on there; perhaps he inherited the shop from his parents who taught him, by example, how a shop is run. No analysis of the words themselves, or of the objects they stand for, or of ideas in the minds of people who write notes, or of processes going on in people's brains (e.g., Chomsky), will encompass this or yield the expected result.

15 Let us suppose that the shopkeeper has taken on an apprentice whose native language is not English and for whom the practice of buying and selling is unfamiliar; let us suppose that the apprentice comes from a culture where such things are bartered between farmers, rather than paid for in shops. Now suppose that the apprentice is handed a slip of paper with the phrase "half a pound of plums". In this case, in contrast to that of the above-mentioned apprentice, it might not be sufficient to say the word "plum" while pointing to a plum, for the apprentice might then wonder what the note-bearer intended to barter for the plums, and so the apprentice would not know "how to go on," he would not know how to complete the transaction. In this case, there is too much of the background of the language-game missing for the apprentice to understand what he is to do merely by having the object denoted by a name pointed out to him. In this case, ostensive definition fails; it might, indeed, give the apprentice the meaning of the word "plum", but it fails to give him the meaning of the message.

16 In one respect, Wittgenstein's example is contrived, for shopkeepers do not generally look up colors in charts. However, we could plausibly modify the details. Suppose a person goes to a printer's shop with a slip of paper of a desired color which is to be duplicated, for example, for a company logo on some advertizing flyers; the employee in the print shop is very likely to try to match the sample with swatches in a chart (e.g., Pantone).

17 If one took a scrap of cloth to a tailor and said "make me a suit of this material", the tailor would undoubtedly pull out a bundle of cloth swatches and attempt to match the sample.

18 Suppose someone went to a machine shop with a bolt and a slip of paper marked "five identical bolts." For the benefit of readers who have not (as this author has) worked in a machine shop, it is no simple matter to turn five bolts on a lathe identical to a given sample (I am assuming that the bolts in question could not be delivered ready-made or cut with a standard die). In order to make five bolts identical to a sample, a machinist would indeed look things up in charts. There is quite a lot to a bolt: overall length, thread length, bare shaft length (if any), and head dimensions. The threads alone consist not only of thread length, but also thread depth, thread pitch, thread diameter, thread shape (not all

threads are sharp-edged: industrial bolts can have a different, flatter, profile). In addition to the bolt's dimensions, its material (mild steel, stainless steel, brass, aluminum, titanium), hardness, and finish (chromed, galvanized) would have to be considered. How does the machinist know which charts to check to determine which factors? This is something he has been trained to do by other machinists who made other bolts. In other words, the word "identical" wants rather a lot of situation-specific background.

19 In machining, as well as in other industries and contexts, there is the concept of tolerance: roughly, how much identicalness is enough. Plus-or-minus 1/32 inch is enough for woodworking, but not for machine tools; plus or minus 0.0003 (one third of 1000th) is ridiculously expensive to meet for most tools, although large hadron colliders and orbital telescopes might require such narrow tolerances. What range of tolerance is appropriate for five identical bolts? The answer to that question depends on the use to which the bolts are to be put, not on the denotation of the word "identical." That is, there is no logically fixed or *a priori* criterion of identicalness. Whereas, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein would have said that identicalness consisted in two things having the same "multiplicity" (Tr 40411), whatever that is.

How does the machinist know what range of tolerance is appropriate for five identical bolts? This is something he has been trained to know (or to find out) by other machinists who made other bolts for various purposes.

Wittgenstein's idea that explanation stops somewhere is akin to the concept of tolerance: knowing where to stop. Knowing how much is enough.

20 An account of language which fixates on the objects denoted by names—apples and bolts—will leave us wondering, how *did* the shopkeeper know what to *do* with the message? For the apples in his drawer do not whisper to him "sell me to the next customer." An account of language for which explanation stops at the object denoted by a name, or the *thought* of the object denoted by a name in the mind of the sender somehow correlated with an 'analogous' idea in the mind of a receiver, will not only miss the point of the shopkeeper and machine shop examples, namely to *give* someone something or to *make* something in exchange for payment; it will positively lead us astray regarding words, such as "five" and "identical", for which there is no object or only an imaginary pseudo-object off in Noumenal Nowhereland.

The 32 most commonly used words in written English are (in order of frequency): a, and, he, I, in, is, it, of, that, the, to, was, all, as, at, be, but, are, for, had, have, him, his, not, on, one, said, so, they, we, with, you. Note how few denote objects.

21 "If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like "table", "chair", "bread", and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself." Although this refers to Augustine, it could equally well refer to the *Tractatus*. According to the picture theory of meaning, "five red apples" can only be understood as a description of a state of affairs, not as a request to give someone five red apples. Even the complete sentence "give the bearer of this note five red apples" could, on the *Tractatus* account of language, be interpreted in only two ways: either 1) as a description of a thought in the mind of the person who wrote the message, corresponding to the proposition expressed in the phrase "five red apples", but not as a request or command to *do* something. That is, it is only a picture of a thought, a picture which is inert and evokes no action. This is the problem with Craig's account, too, whereby the recipient is to *think* something analogous to what the writer of the message thought. Or 2) as a description of the state of affairs which would fulfill the request—but without *requesting* that the state of affairs be brought about. The *request*-part of it is left out altogether.

22 *On privacy:* Professor Craig used to claim that he had a private word, and, to prove it, he would utter the noise *munge* (rhymes with "sponge"), defying anyone to tell him what it meant. I know

what it meant; it meant, 'you can't guess what I'm thinking,' for that was how he *used* it. What he was thinking, I do not know, for, like the beetle in the box [PI, 293], it might have been something constantly changing. What he was thinking was not the meaning, it was the *extension,* and Wittgenstein does not deny that there can be private extensions (for example, for sensation-words): "Of course all those things go on in you..." What Wittgenstein disputes is that acquaintance with extensions reveals common usage. Familiarity with canines and felines does not tell you what "It's raining cats and dogs" means.

23 *Kripke on rule following:* Just as the meaning of a word does not consist in anything going on in the mind of the speaker (though the extension might be something going on 'inside' the speaker), so too whether one is following this rule (plus) or some other rule (quus) is not something going on in the mind of the rule follower. Look at the person's *behavior* to see what rule he is following. If Kripke deposits 68 pounds into his bank account on Monday and 57 pounds on Tuesday, and if on Wednesday he asks to withdraw all his funds and the banker says he has a balance of 5 pounds, does Kripke accept the 5 pounds without protest? That reveals whether he is following the rule we call "plus" or some other rule he calls "quus."

Show me a practical application of accepting 5 as the correct answer to 68 quus 57, and I will show you what following *that* rule looks like.

24 In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein remarked that he had had occasion to try to explain the ideas in the *Tractatus* to someone and that "it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking. For since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book." One of the grave mistakes in the *Tractatus* is that it does not recognize other uses of language than describing states of affairs, and therefore treats other uses of language as something that will take care of itself.

25 In sum, in his opening remark Wittgenstein introduces an idea or *picture* of language in which each word has a meaning, which is the object for which a word stands, under the assumption that understanding a word requires one to *think* of the object for which the word stands. Sentences are concatenations of names standing for objects. To this model or picture of how language is supposed to work, the *Tractatus* added a logical structure whereby simple propositions could be complexified using "and", "or", "not", and possibly other logical functions, for which there are no corresponding objects in nature. Communication then consists in getting someone else to think the same (or an analogous) thought by means of signs standing for the objects referred to.

Wittgenstein began to deconstruct this model of of how language works already in the notebooks posthumously published as *Philosophical Remarks* and *Philosophical Grammar.* For example:

"The idea that you 'imagine' the meaning of a word when you hear or read it is a naive conception of the meaning of a word. And in fact, such imagining gives rise to the same question as a word meaning something. For if, for example, you imagine sky-blue, and are to use this image as a basis for recognizing or looking for the color, we are still forced to say that the image of the color isn't the same as the color that is really seen; and in that case, how can one compare these two?" [*Philosophical Remarks,* Chapter 2 Section 12, page 58.] It is no help to say that your image is somehow analogous to the color which is really seen, for anything can be somehow analogous to anything else. This undercuts Craig's idea that you know what someone else means when he uses a word by analogy with what you mean when you think of the meaning (or referent) of the same word.

In the *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein takes this view to task by showing that this picture of how language works is inadequate and, in some cases, misleading. He later applies this insight to rule following, as well as to words and sentences.

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