

Philosophical Investigations 1

Reconsidering a Misleading Picture

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“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, *Confessions*, 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]

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 order, and look in a drawer for carved wooden numerals in the shapes of ones and twos and threes?

5 In an article titled “Meaning, Use, and Privacy” [*Mind*, 1982, Vol. XCI, pp. 541-564], 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 take out another slip of paper and write on it “five red apples” and send the person away with the second slip but without any apples.

Perhaps Prof. Craig would say that the person who wrote the message should imagine or picture to himself the shopkeeper handing five apples over to the bearer of the message. However, if, as Dr. 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.

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 sentence 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”, but to *give* them to the bearer of the note. Note that on Edward 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 boy 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 particular fact is the case in the world. 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; words and actions are intimately bound.

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.

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. Edward Craig sometimes claims not that the receiver should think exactly the same thing as the sender of the message, but rather something *analogous*. On his 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! 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 as the name is being called?

Think of calling the name of a dog or a cat. The dog will come 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, but I never knew a cat which would come when it was called. It is not because a cat is not intelligent enough to come when it is called, but rather that it is not disposed to obey humans in this manner.

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 word itself.

9 Words which evoke actions may or may not be words which *refer* to actions. “Come”, “go”, “stand up”, “eat”, and so on refer to actions but may or may not evoke one. “Fall downstairs!” refers to an action but almost certainly will not evoke the action referred to—though even here we could invent a context in which it would (a stuntman on a movie set, for example, might take his cue from such a command). 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 this would be sufficient to trigger an action, namely, that the shopkeeper 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 or a receipt for goods already 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, 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 word, but also on the context, the nebulous background of practices and expectations which make up the scene in which the word or name is 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 his son or daughter, 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.

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 same 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 inventories from suppliers, 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.

12 In a sense, 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.

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 “a dozen brown eggs”, but that he has never seen the word “plum”. Now let us suppose that the apprentice is handed a slip of paper with the phrase “ten yellow 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.

13 Wittgenstein often noted that it helps to understand the significance 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 “ten yellow plums” but on this one occasion, exceptionally, the note said “five red apples”, and the shopkeeper simply 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 five apples not realizing that they were green rather than red. Or perhaps there were only four red apples left in the drawer.

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 China—this would be quite 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.” And 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 also spent time in shops and watched what kinds of things go on there. 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 brains, 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 also unfamiliar; perhaps the apprentice comes from a culture in which 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 “five red apples” or “ten yellow 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. 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 simply 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 single word “plum”, but it fails to give him the meaning of the message “ten yellow plums.”

16 In a sense, Wittgenstein’s example is artificial, for shopkeepers do not generally look up colors in charts. However, we could plausibly modify the details. Suppose that the person goes to a printshop with a slip of paper of a specific color; the person in the print shop might then very well take the sample color and try to match it with color swatches in a chart (e.g., Pantone).

17 If you 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 your sample.

18 Suppose someone were sent 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 cut 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, hardness, and finish (chromed, galvanized, etc.) 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.

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 scientific research instruments and space shuttles may require even narrower tolerances. What range of tolerance is appropriate for five identical bolts? The answer to that question depends on the use to which you will put the bolts, not on the denotation of the word “identical.” That is, there is no logically fixed or *a priori* criterion of identicalness (such as one-to-one correspondence of the elements of the atomic propositions which describe the bolts in question, as the *Tractatus* account would have required).

How does the machinist *know* what range of tolerance is appropriate for five identical bolts? This is something he has been trained to do by other machinists who made other bolts for similar 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 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. How few of them are names of 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 utterly inert and evokes no action. 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 of the *Tractatus* account altogether.

22 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 “the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself.”

23 Wittgenstein seldom mentions other philosophers in his work, and very seldom quotes them at length, as in this remark. Norman Malcolm, in his memoir (page 71), stated that Wittgenstein quoted Augustine in this passage, not because the idea had not been better expressed by other philosophers, but rather because the idea must be important if so great a mind had considered it.

24 Generally, Wittgenstein did not concern himself with other philosopher’s work, except insofar as he found in another philosopher’s work some echo of his own thought—or some temptation to which he himself felt subject—as in this remark in which he quotes Augustine. Generally, Wittgenstein is responding to his own train of thought—sometimes his own previous, tractarian, train of thought, or sometimes his present train of thought. Often he is pursuing multiple simultaneous monologues in different voices which are indicated by questions, objections, or counter-examples, set off by single or double quotes.

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. Sentences are concatenations of names standing for objects. To this model or picture of how language is sup-

posed 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. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein takes his own earlier views to task by showing that this picture of how language works is inadequate and, in some cases, misleading.

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