

**Wittgenstein's Enduring  
Arguments**

**Edited by  
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- 57 See K. Guter, and Peter Pagin, "Rules of Meaning and Practical Reasoning," *Synthese* 118 (1999): 208–27; Robert J. Stainton, *Philosophical Perspectives on Language* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1996), pp. 139–42.
- 58 Baker and Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, p. 259.
- 59 In the current context, the distinction was first drawn by John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), ch. 2.5. But his formulations suffer from shortcomings highlighted by Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 108–11. These shortcomings are not essential to the distinction as such.
- 60 David Ryan informed me that as far as games are concerned, what philosophers call regulative rules would not even be called rules, but would instead be referred to as strategies or tactics. In this context, he referred to the canonical Hoyle's *Book of Games*, e.g., Lawrence Dawson and Edmond Hoyle, *Hoyle's Games Modernized* (London: Routledge, 1934).
- 61 PR, p. 51; LWL, pp. 46–59; PG, pp. 60, 133, 143; P1 §496.
- 62 See PG, pp. 184–85.
- 63 Von Wright, *Norm and Action*.
- 64 Joseph Raz, "Reasons for Action, Decisions and Norms," in *Practical Reasoning*, ed. Joseph Raz, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 65 PR, p. 78; PG, pp. 88–91, 202; BB, pp. 12, 85–90, 109.
- 66 Schroeder, *Das Privatprachen-Argument*, §12.
- 67 B. Smith, "Language, Conventionality of," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998).
- 68 See Hans-Johann Glock, *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality*, pp. 250–59.
- 69 PG, pp. 184–85; see Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, pp. 45–50.
- 70 Gordon Baker, *Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), ch. 7.
- 71 P1 §355; AWL, pp. 89–90; PG, pp. 68, 190.
- 72 AWL, pp. 169–70.
- 73 Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990), p. 310.

## 8 Wittgenstein's critique of referential theories of meaning and the paradox of ostension, *Philosophical Investigations* §§26–481

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### 8.1 Prologue

Readers of Wittgenstein who take their orientation from reference works, elementary introductions or the canonical literature on his later work often take it for granted that there is relatively little positive philosophical argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and that the few main lines of argument—principally the rule-following considerations and the private language argument—play a purely negative, or critical, role. These, in turn, are typically construed as Wittgenstein's principal weapons in a frontal attack on a single target, usually identified as the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, the Augustinian Picture, or the presuppositions that supposedly underlie traditional philosophy. However, reading Wittgenstein in this way, an approach that can find strong support in not only the work of most of Wittgenstein's constructively critical readers, such as Strawson or Kripke, but also the work of some of his most well-known sympathetic expositors, such as Malcolm or Hacker, does not do justice to the range and variety of the arguments at work, and the positions under discussion, in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The targets Wittgenstein takes on are much more varied, and much less monolithic, than they are usually supposed to be.

On the reading advocated here, both the "straight" and the "sceptical" solutions to the paradoxes of rule-following are equally misguided if they are presented as an exposition of the author's overall argumentative intentions, for they both misunderstand the character and methods of the *Philosophical Investigations*. They mistakenly identify the viewpoint defended in a particular strand of argument—in one case, the reasons Wittgenstein's narrator gives us for thinking that the problem of rule-following can be solved, in the other, a sceptical problem that the narrator claims the interlocutor faces—as equivalent to the views that are advocated by the author, or the book as a whole. Wittgenstein, I contend, provided neither a straight solution nor a sceptical solution to the philosophical problems discussed in the *Philosophical Investigations*; rather, he aimed to dissolve those problems, by means of a dialogue between opposing voices. However, to dissolve an argument is not to dismiss it; an successful dissolution requires an intimate knowledge of the

argumentative terrain if one is to convince one's readers of the limitations of the particular arguments one criticizes. Consequently, Wittgenstein's dialogue explores a much wider variety of arguments, and argumentative strategies, than the very limited range of positions and approaches usually discussed in the expository literature. Like Plato's dialogues, they are simultaneously literary and philosophical, and the reader's initial impression that the speakers and positions under discussion can be identified without much trouble should not be taken at face value. We shall see that it is a third voice in that dialogue, one which responds to that debate without endorsing either side, that comes closer to expressing the author's viewpoint than either of his leading protagonists do.

The principal concern of the *Philosophical Investigations* is not the specific arguments about rule-following or private language that have been the focus of most interpreters' attention, but rather the larger argumentative strategies that inform them, and the very wide variety of quite particular trains of argument that are provided throughout the book. Once we appreciate this, we will also see that Wittgenstein's work is directly relevant to a much broader range of current concerns.

## 8.2 The "method" of §2

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, topics are repeatedly introduced in the following way:

Stage 1. A brief statement of a philosophical position that Wittgenstein opposes, which usually emerges out of an exchange with another voice. Thus, in §1, we are presented with a conception of meaning that arises out of Wittgenstein's reading of a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*: "Every word has a meaning. The meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands (PI §1)."<sup>2</sup>

Stage 2. The description of a quite specific set of circumstances in which that position is appropriate:

That philosophical conception of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours. Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right.

(PI §2)

In §2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the passage just quoted leads in to the famous story of Wittgenstein's builders, a tribe who only have four words, each of which is used by a builder to instruct his assistant to bring one of four kinds of building blocks.

Stage 3. The deflationary observation that the circumstances in question are quite limited, and that once we move beyond them, the position becomes inappropriate:

Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe."

(PI §3)

To drive the point home, Wittgenstein later adds other uses of signs that don't fit Augustine's description: §8 describes an expansion of the language in §2 to include numerals, demonstratives and color samples, and §15 adds names for particular objects.

This three-stage argument scheme suggests a more general recipe for unsettling philosophical preconceptions. First, describe a case the preconception fits as well as possible, "a language-game for which this account is really valid," then change just enough about the case in question, either by adding or removing some aspect, or by changing the context or our point of view, so that we run up against the limitations of the preconception.<sup>3</sup> This method of §2, as Wittgenstein calls it in §48, is used repeatedly in the remarks that follow.

It is also characteristic of Wittgenstein's use of this argument-scheme that all three stages follow each other so quickly. In §§1–3 and §§46–48, each stage of the argument is presented quite explicitly; in many other cases the argument is only sketched, and Stage 3 may be left as an exercise for the reader. Because he aims, not to solve philosophical problems, but to undo, or dissolve them, Wittgenstein frequently presents the materials for a Stage 3 reply immediately before setting out Stage 2. The aim of the reply in Stage 3 is not to articulate a philosophical answer to the proto-philosophical question with which we began, but to get us to give up the question. The story of the grocer and his different ways of using words in §1d plays this role in the argument of §§1–3. Similarly, §47's multiplication of examples of alternative conceptions of complexity comes between Socrates' Stage 1 discussion of simples, the "primary elements" out of which the world is made in §46, and the use of the method of §2 in §48 to attack the very idea of a primary element.

One might reply, in defense of the first moves toward philosophical theorizing Wittgenstein is criticizing, and the theories they give rise to, that the approach to philosophy he opposes aims at a "view from nowhere," a position that is correct for all possible circumstances and contexts, not just a position that fits a few carefully selected cases. In defense of Wittgenstein's method of §2, one can say that if we grant, for the sake of argument, that such philosophical accounts do work at all, they must be applicable to specific cases, and ultimately these must include not only the best cases, but the problem cases, too. Furthermore, Wittgenstein will suggest, the "view from nowhere" is a distinctively philosophical fiction, a fiction that always starts out from a quite specific somewhere, and begins its theorizing with particular examples of familiar objects and activities. The philosophy Wittgenstein

takes as his target begins, in other words, with our taking familiar matters out of context, and taking them as the model for a universal account, true everywhere and at any time, of how things must be.

Confronted with §2-type examples, the Socratic philosopher dismisses the concrete cases as irrelevant, insisting that what matters is to get clear about the rules that determine which cases the term really applies to, and what they have in common. In 1944, when Wittgenstein was putting the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* into its final form, he told a friend that he was reading Plato's *Theaetetus*, and that "Plato in this dialogue is occupied with the same problems that I am writing about."<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein owned a five-volume German translation of Plato by Preisendanz, and refers to passages in Plato quite frequently in his writings. The philosophical discussion in the *Theaetetus* begins with Socrates' asking Theaetetus "what is knowledge?" His first answer is as follows:

TH.: I think the things Theodorus teaches are knowledge—I mean geometry and the subjects you enumerated just now. Then again there are the crafts such as cobbling, whether you take them together or separately. They must be knowledge, surely.

SOC.: That is certainly a frank and indeed a generous answer, my dear lad. I ask you for one thing and you have given me many; I wanted something simple, and I have got a variety. [...] You were not asked to say what one may have knowledge of, or how many branches of knowledge there are. It was not with any idea of counting these up that the question was asked; we wanted to know what knowledge itself is.—Or am I talking nonsense?<sup>5</sup>

We can see much of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as an extended defense of Theaetetus' initial answer—the best we can do in answering questions about the essence of a word such as "knowledge" is to give examples, with the aim of showing that Socrates is talking nonsense, and so "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."<sup>6</sup> In the Blue Book, Wittgenstein explicitly opposes his approach to Socrates':

When Socrates asks the question, "what is knowledge?" he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge [... ] the discussion begins with the pupil giving an example of an exact definition, and then analogous to this a definition of the word "knowledge" is asked for.<sup>7</sup> As the problem is put, it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word "knowledge." It appears we don't know what it means, and that therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. We should reply: "There is no one exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used."

(BB, pp. 20, 27)

On the other hand, there are also deep affinities between Wittgenstein's and Plato's dialogues: each of the definitions of knowledge Socrates proposes in the *Theaetetus* proves unsuccessful.

The three-stage argument of §§1–3 marks the beginning of an extended critique of the notion, prominent in §1, that every word has a meaning, the object for which it stands. This critique, which occupies much of §§1–64, can be divided into two distinct units. The first unit, §§1–38, is an attack on the idea that the meaning of a word consists in its standing for a familiar object of one kind or another. One of the principal approaches under discussion in §§1–38 is the view that ostensive definition—explaining a word's meaning by pointing at an object—is the basis of meaning. The second unit, §§39–64, looks at an approach that promises to avoid some of the difficulties that have arisen in §§1–38, the view that words stand for simple objects. §§39–45 examine the possibility that familiar things could be simple; §§47–64 examine the notion that ultimately words get their meaning by standing for simple objects, objects that we reach by analyzing familiar objects, which are complex, into their ultimate, primitive components, or "ur-elements," on an overly literal translation.

A three-stage argument starts from questions about something apparently un-philosophical—language learning, or giving a name to a thing; but this draws the narrator's alter ego into Stage 1, a preliminary formulation of a philosophical thesis. Stages 2 and 3 bring us back to earth, by first proposing as prosaic and simple an example as possible, and then pointing out its limitations. However, the method of three-stage argument can only get us so far; replying to Socrates with a list of different kinds of knowledge, or the denotationalist with a list of different uses of words, may perhaps make us suspicious of the idea that we must be able to give a unitary specification of knowledge, naming, or the use of words, but it runs the danger of giving the impression that the only thing that is wrong with such theories is that they need refining. For this reason, Wittgenstein's narrator replies to many different Socratic lines of thought in §§1–38 and §§65–88. However, the problems and paradoxes that Wittgenstein's narrator produces provoke his alter ego to dig deeper, and look for something hidden, a structure that supposedly underlies, or a hidden process that somehow animates, our everyday lives and language. Wittgenstein speaks of this movement, from the Socratic questions that typically initiate philosophical inquiry, to the counter-examples and paradoxes that such questions inevitably produce, and from there to the Platonic vision of a reality behind the phenomena as a "tendency to sublime the logic of our language."<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the Socratic questions about naming and reference in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* lead up to the formulation of a paradox about ostensive definition: "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in every case."<sup>9</sup> This results in a discussion of "sublime names": names that must stand for their objects, and so cannot be variously interpreted.<sup>10</sup>

8.3 Seeing the *Philosophical Investigations* as a dialogue

A key paradox that occurs over and over again, in one form or another, throughout the first 200 sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* is that nothing is intrinsically meaningful, for all determination of meaning, by such means as definitions, rules, thoughts, or images, is dependent on interpretation. Given any candidate meaning-determiner, it is always, in principle, open to a further, deviant, interpretation. No act of defining or intending, grasping a rule or deciding to go on in a certain way, can give the supposed meaning-determiner the power to determine our future actions, because there is always the question of how it is to be interpreted. Only if we ignore the context can we think that some isolated act or event can have a determinate meaning regardless of its context. A change in the context of application can yield a change in meaning, and therefore meaning cannot be identified with anything independent of context. Leading examples include the wayward child who learns to add small numbers correctly but systematically miscalculates, all the while insisting that he is going on the same way;<sup>11</sup> the drawing of an old man walking up a steep path, resting on a stick, that a Martian might describe as a man sliding downhill, and deviant ways following arrows or signposts;<sup>12</sup> or interpreting a drawing of a cube.<sup>13</sup>

The resolution of these paradoxes, like the resolution of a three-stage argument, turns on considering the wider context in which our words are used. In response to a proto-philosophical theory, a three-stage argument draws our attention to the circumstances it fits, and those it does not fit. Similarly, in replying to a philosophical paradox, Wittgenstein's narrator points out that the paradox does not arise in our everyday lives, and draws our attention to the way in which it turns on a failure to pay attention to the circumstances in which those words are ordinarily used. Ordinarily, the paradox does not arise, because it is already clear how the words or actions in question are to be understood. Thus Wittgenstein's reply to the paradox of ostension turns on the point that "ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word if it is already clear what kind of role the word is to play in language."<sup>14</sup> A parallel paradox about explanation—that any explanation of the meaning of a word hangs in the air unless supported by another one—receives a similar response: "One explanation may rest on another explanation which has been given, but no explanation needs another—unless we need it to avoid a misunderstanding."<sup>15</sup> Analogous paradoxes about understanding, interpreting, and following a rule are the principal concern of §§134–242; by the time Wittgenstein sums up the paradox of rule-following and provides his response in §201, he expects the paradox to be so familiar that his treatment takes the form of a summary that begins by referring back to the previous discussion.

The previous paragraph attributes a clear-cut set of answers to the paradoxes of ostension, explanation, and rule-following to Wittgenstein. There can be no denying that these answers are present in the text; they can be

compared to a prominent and repeated pattern in the weave of the *Philosophical Investigations*'s argumentative fabric. Most interpreters attribute this argumentative strand to Wittgenstein without any pause. But the connection between this train of thought and the author's intentions is far from clear and so I will usually qualify this by attributing them to Wittgenstein's narrator.

If we take Wittgenstein's narrator to be a behaviorist, or an ordinary language philosopher who maintains that the rules of our language guarantee that we are mostly right, then the skeptical paradoxes—namely, that ostension, explanation, and rule-following can always be undermined by sceptical possibilities—receive what Kripke calls a "straight" solution: we really can provide a positive answer to the paradoxes, because the expressions in question can be defined in terms of public behavior, or the rules of grammar that govern our use of language. If, on the other hand, we follow Kripke in taking Wittgenstein to be a sceptic who endorses the paradoxes he has formulated, then the appeal to what the community ordinarily does in its use of these terms is only a negative answer to the sceptical problem (Kripke calls this a "sceptical" solution): recognizing that we cannot solve the problem, we instead appeal to what we ordinarily do as a way of indicating the best reply available, albeit one that does not really solve the paradoxes.

Rather than seeing these arguments as exchanges between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor, I propose that we approach them as an exchange between a number of different voices, none of which can be unproblematically identified with the author's. For these reasons, in discussing passages of dialogue in the *Philosophical Investigations*, I prefer to speak of dialogues between Wittgenstein's narrator and an interlocutory voice, rather than Wittgenstein and the interlocutor. In some places, and particularly in those parts of the text that are most critical of the *Tractatus*—principally §§39–142—the narrator's voice sets out the case against philosophical positions set out in Wittgenstein's first book, in opposition to voices that express Tractarian convictions. In §§140–693, the narrator's voice is frequently used to set out behaviorist, verificationist, and anti-essentialist objections to traditional philosophical views, in opposition to an anti-behaviorist voice that expresses mentalist, verification-transcendent, and essentialist intuitions and convictions.

In addition to these opposing voices, voices that play different parts at different points in the text, we also meet with a third voice. This third voice, which is not always clearly distinct from the narrator's voice, provides an ironic commentary on their exchanges, a commentary consisting partly of objections to assumptions the debaters take for granted, and partly of platitudes about language and everyday life they have both overlooked. Most readers treat both of these voices as expressions of Wittgenstein's views, with the result that they are unable to reconcile the trenchant and provocative theses advocated by the narrator and the commentator's rejection of all philosophical theses.

The following passage provides a convenient summary of the commentator's approach, not only to disputes over realism and idealism, but also to the exchanges between narrator and interlocutor, the voice of correctness and the voice of temptation:

For *this* is what disputes between idealists, solipsists, and realists look like. One side attacks the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being.

(PI §402b)

Most of the *Philosophical Investigations* does consist of a debate for and against "the normal form of expression." The narrator is usually taken to be arguing for Wittgenstein's own philosophical position, ordinary language philosophy, while the interlocutor attacks our ordinary way of speaking, arguing that it does not do justice to his intuitions and his arguments.

While it is certainly possible to construe large swatches of the *Philosophical Investigations* as exchanges between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor, or a doctrinaire behaviorist and a querulous anti-behaviorist, we should not identify the outlook of the author with every passage that we attribute to his leading narrator. The closest the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* comes to expressing his own views is not in the person of his narrator, the aggressively anti-Socratic protagonist we meet in the book's three-step arguments, but rather in the moments when he steps back from this serio-comedy and offers us a striking simile, or draws our attention to platitudes that philosophers don't take seriously.

For this reason, all this talk of Wittgenstein's argument, and of the positions he opposes, while unavoidable, is potentially deeply misleading. For it implies that he thinks of the views he is opposing as intelligible, albeit mistaken. It also makes it tempting to suppose that Wittgenstein's distinctive contribution to philosophy turns on a clear distinction between unproblematic, everyday uses of language, and their mirror image, the metaphysical uses of language that are characteristic of traditional philosophy. However, if Wittgenstein is correct, the accounts offered by all the participants in his dialogues, although they certainly appear at first sight to make good sense, are actually "disguised nonsense," and so cannot, in the end, be true or false.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Wittgenstein's aim is to get us to recognize that the proto-philosophical accounts of meaning and mind that his interlocutor proposes, and his narrator opposes, only appear to make sense, and that neither the descriptions of simple situations his narrator offers in Stage 2, nor the sublime truths about the essence of the world and language his interlocutor aims for, will do justice to those ideas and intuitions with which philosophical discussion begins. On this reading, Wittgenstein is neither saying that a solution to the skeptical paradoxes, or a private language is possible, nor proving that such things are impossible. Rather, Wittgenstein holds that such words do no useful work at all.

What we "are tempted to say" in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. Thus, for example, what a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts, is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical treatment.

The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.

(PI §§254–55\*)

If we follow the author's advice, rather than those of the protagonists in his dialogues, we will give up both behaviorism and anti-behaviorism. The result of his discussion of philosophical problems is not supposed to be an endorsement of one of the views he discusses; rather, "a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation."<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, in order to "pass from a piece of disguised nonsense"—such as the initial expression of a philosophical account of meaning we find in §1—"to something that is patent nonsense," we must first try to make sense of it, and in so doing, come to see that we cannot.<sup>18</sup> There are few better ways of beginning to do this than to try to think of cases the proposed account does fit as well as possible, and then seeing how it fails to fit when the context or circumstances change. Wittgenstein sums up this predicament and his response to it in the following words:

The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do. As if there really were an object, from which I derive its description, but I were unable to show it to anyone.—And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the *application* of the picture goes. (PI §374)

#### 8.4 The paradox of ostensive definition: §§26–38

The method of §2, the three-stage argument, and the notion of a language-game first emerge in the early 1930s, and reach their high point in the Brown Book, where each of the 73 numbered remarks in Part I introduces another language-game. The central idea that motivates this method is that of drawing our attention to the context in which our use of language takes place. In some cases that context consists of the rules for the use of certain terms, and in these cases there is little difference from the method of paradox; but often, and especially in work after the early 1930s, the context is a much broader one. Certainly, there is no clear distinction between the notion of a calculus, a formal system of rules, and a language-game in Wittgenstein's work from the early 1930s, and at first the two expressions were used interchangeably. However by the time he wrote the early version of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the two terms are quite clearly contrasted with each other: "in philosophy we often compare the use of words with games and calculi which have fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language *must* play such a game."<sup>19</sup>

In §6, where Wittgenstein's narrator asks us to imagine a tribe whose whole language consists in the game of §2, he suggests that the teaching of the words for the blocks will presumably consist in such activities as the teacher's repeatedly pointing to the various kinds of blocks and saying the appropriate words. However, he observes ostensive definition is not yet possible for a child learning the vocabulary of §2: "I do not want to call this 'ostensive definition,' because the child cannot as yet *ask* what the name is."<sup>20</sup> That words have the meaning they do is never simply the product of a single connection between word and thing, for even when one makes such a connection, its effect depends on the larger context:

But if the ostensive teaching has this effect,—am I to say that it effects an understanding of the word? Don't you understand the call "Slab!" if you act upon it in such-and-such a way?—Doubtless, the ostensive teaching helped to bring this about; but only together with a particular training. With different training the same ostensive teaching of these words would have effected a quite different understanding. "I set the brake up by connecting up rod and lever."—Yes, given the whole of the rest of the mechanism. Only in conjunction with that is it a brake-lever, and separated from its support it is not even a lever; it may be anything, or nothing.

(PI §6c-d)

§8 introduces a new language-game by making additions to the game described in §2: words for numerals, colors, "this" and "there." The subsequent discussion emphasizes the great differences between these words, and the even greater differences between the variety of words commonly used in everyday language. Wittgenstein's narrator stresses how the differences between these words are not simply a matter of the different ways in which they are used, but also the larger context of use and training within which they are located. One of the morals of the intricate discussion in §§19–20 of the question whether "the call 'Slab!' in example (2) [is] a sentence or a word" is that the answer depends on the resources of the language in question, and the interests and concerns of the speaker. Only after an extended introductory discussion of the diversity and multiplicity of language, is Wittgenstein ready to turn to the topic of ostensive definition.<sup>21</sup>

§15 first introduces an extension of the game of §2, which includes names for particular objects, by putting distinctive marks on certain objects; the builder can then use those marks as a way of getting his assistant to bring the object:

It is in this and more or less similar ways that a name denotes and is given to a thing.—It will often prove useful in doing philosophy to say to ourselves: naming something is like attaching a label to a thing.

(PI §15\*)

However, this train of thought is allowed to lapse until §26, when it is explicitly taken up again, in the context of a discussion of the view that learning language consists in naming objects, where "object" covers such diverse entities as people, shapes, colors, pains, moods, numbers, and so forth. Wittgenstein writes: "To repeat—naming is something like attaching a label to a thing. One can say that this is preparatory to the use of a word. But *what* is it a preparation *for*?" (PI §26). An interlocutory voice immediately answers this question at the beginning of §27, in a tone that implies the answer is entirely unproblematic: "We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk."

This provides the jumping-off point for a correction by Wittgenstein's narrator:

—As if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called "talking about a thing". Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions.

(PI §27a)

The first point the narrator makes here is skeptical: that, by itself, the act of naming settles nothing, for much depends on what happens afterwards (and before). The second point is that we have many ways of talking about things, and many ways of talking that are not a matter of talking about things at all. But Wittgenstein's principal point at this stage in his discussion of naming is neither the multiplicity of ways we talk about objects, nor the many ways in which we do things with words, but how these various uses of words depend on a taken-for-granted context.

§§26–28 build up to Wittgenstein's paradox of ostensive definition: "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case." Given any definition of a word that involves pointing to something, one can always come up with more than one interpretation of the definition, because there will be more than one way of interpreting the act of pointing. The dialogue begins with a platitude and puzzle that could have been spoken by the Queen in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*:

Now one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on. The definition of the number two, "That is called 'two'"—pointing to two nuts—is perfectly exact.

(PI §28)

The sensible voice that replies to the puzzle fails, as Alice usually does, to see the point: "But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn't know what one wants to call 'two', he will suppose that 'two' is the name given to *this* group of nuts." (PI §28a).

This sets the Queen up for her claim that the puzzle is quite general: the problem doesn't only arise for the unusual case of ostensively defining a number, but even for the most seemingly straightforward cases of ostensive definition, such as naming objects or people:

—He may suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake; when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might understand it as a numeral. And he might equally well take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition, as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case. (P1 §28a)

At this point, the Queen makes the next move on Alice's behalf: "Perhaps you say: two can only be ostensively defined in *this* way: 'This number is called "two"' (P1 §29). This is one of the ways that Wittgenstein's dialogues frequently segue into a monologue of sorts: the voice criticizing a philosophical position or intuition begins to say what the philosopher will say next. Here, this is only an opportunity for the Queen to spell out the consequences of what has just been said:

For the word "number" here shows what *place* in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word "number" must be explained before the ostensive definition can be understood.—The word "number" in the definition does indeed show this place; does show the post at which we station the word. And we can prevent misunderstandings by saying: "This *colour* is called so-and-so", "This *length* is called so-and-so", and so on. That is to say: misunderstandings are sometimes averted in this way. (P1 §29a)

At first it may look as if the Queen has conceded too much to Alice: hasn't she just said that we can settle how an ostensive definition is to be understood, by specifying the appropriate category or type the name belongs to? In practice, she concedes, misunderstandings are sometimes averted in this way. In principle, however, the problem of multiple interpretations has not gone away, for the same questions can always be raised about the classifying terms that are used in specifying the word's post:

But is there only *one* way of taking the word "colour" or "length"?  
Well, they just need explaining.

—Explaining, then, by means of other words! And what about the last explanation in this chain? (Do not say: "There isn't a 'last' explanation". That is just as if you chose to say: "There isn't a last house in this road; one can always build an additional one".)

(P1 §29a\*)<sup>22</sup>

This should remind us of the end of §1: "explanations come to an end somewhere." We can give explanations, but somewhere, usually sooner rather than later, our explanations will give out. The beginning of §30 provides a preliminary summary of the moral to be drawn:

So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of a word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me, the ostensive explanation "This is called 'sepia'" will help me to understand the word.—And you can say this, so long as you don't forget that all sorts of problems attach to the word "to know" or "to be clear." One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name. But what does one have to know? (P1 §30\*)

In a way, the question at the end of §30 is a restatement of the questions that opened this part of the discussion in §26. A minimal answer here would be the one canvassed above: we have to know what kind of thing you are talking about—a number, a color—its "*place* in language, in grammar" as Wittgenstein puts it in §29.

At this point in the discussion, Wittgenstein's narrator is particularly didactic and insistent, devoting §31 to answering the question posed at the end of §30, by way of a discussion of a simple example taken from chess. Chess is one of Wittgenstein's favorite objects of comparison, a familiar game that can "throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities."<sup>23</sup> Like many of Wittgenstein's in-gamary language-games, chess is a game that has a clearly stated set of rules, but one can learn the game without explicitly stating them.

§31 considers a variety of cases in which someone might be shown a chess-piece and told "This is the king," and uses this as a way of asking what you have to know before I can explain the use of a chess-piece to you by pointing to it and saying "This is the king." In the first paragraph, Wittgenstein describes a straightforward, if unlikely, scenario in which you have explicitly learned the rules, but have not yet been told what a king looks like. The second paragraph considers the case in which you pick up the game without ever hearing or stating the rules. Here, you would have learned what a king looks like as you picked up the game, but perhaps because I own one of those novelty chess sets, I might need to tell you which piece in *this* set is the king. In either case, the explanation can only work if it connects my previous knowledge with the current circumstances.

This explanation again only tells him the use of the piece because, as we might say, the place for it was already prepared. Or even: we shall only say that it tells him the use, if the place is already prepared. And in this case it is so, not because the person to whom we give the explanation

already knows rules, but because in another sense he has already mastered the game.

(PI §31b)

In both of these cases, the words "This is the king" only do their work because I already know the rules of the game, and only need to find out which chess-piece is the king. Finally, Wittgenstein turns to the case where someone is learning how to play chess, and the teacher uses "This is the king" to introduce the piece by pointing to it, indicating how it moves, and so forth. Here, at last, one might think, the words do more work than in the previous cases. However, Wittgenstein observes that this case, just like the others, presupposes a great deal of prior knowledge, knowledge of how games are played and taught, if not knowledge of chess itself:

In this case we shall say: the words "This is the king" (or "This is called the 'king'") explain the use of the words "the king" only if the learner already "knows what a piece in a game is." That is, if he has already played other games, or watched "with understanding" other people playing—and *similar things*. Further, only under these conditions will he be able to ask relevantly in the course of learning the game: "What do you call this?"—that is, this piece in a game.

We may say: only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name.

(PI §31c\*)

To sum up: ostensive explanation cannot be the foundation for learning a first language, because ostensive explanation presupposes a knowledge of how names work, and more generally, a grasp of their place in language, a grasp which will include familiarity with how they are used in a variety of cases. On the other hand, ostensive explanation is likely to be a large part of language learning for someone learning a second language, for here the pre-conditions for ostensive explanation are already in place. In §32, this leads Wittgenstein back to Augustine, and the suggestion that the Augustinian conception of language learning is modeled on the way we learn a second language, not a first.

With the statement of the paradox of ostension, and its connection, in §32, with the issues raised at the very beginning of the book, the main business of the first half of the first "chapter" of the *Philosophical Investigations* has been completed: we have been led from the initial expression of philosophical intuitions and proto-theories about language to a clear statement of one of the paradoxes that arise if such trains of thought are pursued. §§33–35 explore a variety of possible responses to this paradox, all of which turn on the idea that something in the speaker's or hearer's mind allows him or her to pick out just what's intended—such as guessing correctly, attending to the correct aspect, having a certain characteristic experience. In each case,

Wittgenstein's narrator points out that the supposedly disambiguating experience won't do the job, for such experiences are neither necessary—for we can think of cases in which the experience in question occurs, but we don't pick out what's intended—nor sufficient—for we can think of cases where the experience in question doesn't occur, but we do pick out what's intended. Once again, this is a further application of the familiar three-step argument we met in the first 'chapter' of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

The point of the train of argument in §§33–35 partly lies in the details, in the careful consideration of the very wide range of cases in which we may attend to a color, or a shape. But it also serves to lay the groundwork for the next stage of Wittgenstein's discussion of naming. §§36–37 sum up the principal negative and positive conclusions that emerge from what has been said so far. Negative: when we are unable to find any one bodily action that guarantees one is pointing to a shape, rather than a color, we find ourselves thinking that something in the mind, something spiritual, must do the trick. Positive: the relation between name and thing named is in clear view, and consists of a variety of quite familiar activities that we engage in when using names. Wittgenstein is quite happy to refer to both physical activities, such as writing the name on the thing, or saying the name when pointing at it, as well as mental activities, such as calling the picture of the object to mind. He is not denying that we do call pictures of objects to mind, or that the particular ways of looking and attending discussed in §§33–35 do occur, and can help us identify what we're talking about; what he is denying is that the mind has the peculiar, quasi-magical ability to disambiguate, to guarantee that words and things are rigidly attached to each other, in the way that the paradox of ostension can lead us to wish for.

§§36–37 thus wrap up the discussion of the interlocutor's initial attempts to overcome the paradox of ostension, and lead in to §38, which lays the ground for the discussion of the strategies philosophers turn to when they fail to identify everyday solutions to their problems in understanding how names work and so are driven to postulate spiritual solutions. Wittgenstein speaks here of a "tendency to sublime the logic of language" (PI §38b) and says "philosophical problems arise when language *idles*" (PI §38d\*).<sup>24</sup> Philosophers have often found this diagnosis puzzling, or unsatisfying: why, they ask, does Wittgenstein regard philosophical uses of language as illegitimate? Why can't we simply say that the philosopher's use of language is another language-game, no less legitimate than the ones Wittgenstein offers as examples? The nub of Wittgenstein's reply is that the philosophical uses of language he opposes are not really uses of language at all, and that appealing to philosophers' intuitions about the use of language is like appealing to our fantasies, or our dreams, if we want to understand our relation to the world around us. While there are places where Wittgenstein's voice of correctness does lay down the rules of grammar, and says that philosophical mistakes consist in breaking them, this is not the considered position of the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Talk of language's idling, or going

on holiday, should not be understood as a matter of breaking the rules of sense, or offending against certain pragmatic principles, but rather as summing up the way philosophical language can conjure up an illusion of sense, a fantasy that creates the appearance of solidity.

Wittgenstein supports this diagnosis by a detailed account of how we go wrong, how we may be led from the desire to specify what naming consists in to the Russellian illusion that we best capture the essence of naming when I apply the word "this" to an object directly in the centre of my visual field. Failing to identify a single uniform connection in plain view that links word and thing, we are misled into thinking that there must be something "spiritual," a mental or intellectual process that does the job. But this "spiritual" process is, as Wittgenstein puts it, a "queer conception," for it is an unexplained explainer that has been introduced to fill a gap of our own making.

One way of understanding Wittgenstein's talk of subliming here is as a way of talking about the elevated and mysterious character of the appeal to spirit. One can also draw a connection here with the Romantic notion of the aesthetic sublime, a realm above or beyond the ordinary that only the gifted visionary can reach; certainly the suggestion that the philosopher is reaching for a spurious profundity is appropriate.<sup>25</sup> However, the word Wittgenstein uses here is *sublimieren*. While it does, like the cognate English word, mean to elevate, or to purify, German, unlike English, has a different word for the romantic sublime, namely *erhaben*, which would have been a much more natural choice if Wittgenstein had meant to emphasize this connection. There is a stronger connection here with the notion of subliming as a physical process, one that Wittgenstein, as a trained engineer, would have found quite familiar: the direct transition from a solid to a gas, without a liquid phase—a good example would be the clouds produced when dry ice (frozen carbon dioxide) vaporizes. One way of reading this talk of subliming our language is to take it to be about a mistaken attempt to purify, or refine, the motley material of our everyday activities into something pure and simple, much as a distillation extracts pure alcohol from a fermented liquid, or pure crystals can be formed directly from a cloud of vapor.<sup>26</sup> This reading enables us to draw a connection with the talk of the interlocutor's requirement of "crystalline purity."<sup>27</sup> A related, but rather different possibility is that the transition in question is not from (impure) solid to (pure) solid, by way of a gaseous process of distillation, but rather from something everyday and solid to something cloudy and diffuse.<sup>28</sup> On this reading, Wittgenstein is characterizing what the philosopher does as a matter of turning something solid—our ordinary use of words, the "working of language"—into a gas—the mysterious spiritual processes supposedly at work, "a haze which makes clear vision impossible."<sup>29</sup> This is connected with his disparaging parenthetical reference in §109 to "the conception of thought as a gaseous medium." Wittgenstein's talk of condensing "a whole cloud of philosophy into a drop of grammar" would then be a way of summing up the reverse process that takes us away from these cloud-castles and back to something more

definite.<sup>30</sup> The "distillation" reading is an apt summary of what the interlocutor is trying to do; the "gaseous" interpretation captures the narrator's assessment of what the interlocutor actually does.

### 8.5 Subliming names: §§39–48

In §39 and the sections that follow, the Stage I formulation of the position under attack is "*A name ought really to signify a simple*."<sup>31</sup> §39 opens the discussion by sketching an argument for the conclusion that a name must correspond to an object in order to have a meaning, an object that must exist for the name to have a meaning. The motivation for saying that "[a] name *ought really to signify a simple*" is that otherwise it would be contingent whether a given proposition makes sense or not, for it might be the case that the things it appears to refer to don't actually exist. §39 sets out this Tractarian line of reasoning: if the object a name refers to doesn't exist, then the name would have no meaning. But the proposition does have meaning, and so the object in question must exist. However, §40 replies that this confuses the meaning of the name with the bearer: when Mr. N.N. dies, his name is still meaningful. In other words, this account manifestly fails to fit the way we use names of everyday people and equipment, which still have a meaning when their object ceases to exist. §§41–42 point out that we can construct language-games that follow the Tractarian model, but that this is only one possibility. This problem leads to the idea that we must first identify those names that do stand for simples. The critique of this idea by Wittgenstein's narrator involves at least two applications of the three-stage argument. In the first he examines the idea that ordinary names signify simples;<sup>32</sup> in the second he turns to the view that we must first analyze ordinary names into real names, names that signify primary elements, simple objects that must exist.<sup>33</sup> This movement back and forth between turning to familiar words and objects as the terminus of theorizing and looking for something hidden and unfamiliar is a recurrent feature of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Pears aptly sums up this aspect of the interlocutor's predicament as follows:

[T]here are two equally slippery paths leading to the limbo in which so many philosophical theories terminate: one is to postulate something remote and reconduce to play an impossible role, and the other is to give an equally impossible role to some perfectly familiar kind of thing. [...] They both make the same impossible demand: when a word is attached to a thing, it must immediately slot into a pre-existing grid or lock on to rails extending indefinitely into the future.<sup>34</sup>

§41 begins a reply to the idea that ordinary names signify simples: we are asked to imagine an extension of the language-game of §2 that includes names, and to consider the case where the builder calls out the name of a

broken object. What will the assistant do? First, we get a Stage 2 response, a description of a situation that fits the position under discussion:

Well, perhaps he will stand there at a loss, or show A the pieces. Here one *might* say: "N" has become meaningless, and this expression would indicate that the sign "N" no longer had a use in our language-game (unless we gave it a new one). "N" might also become meaningless because, for whatever reason, the tool was given another name and the sign "N" no longer used in the language-game.

(PI §41a)

Stage 3 follows immediately—the narrator describes a different case, which the stage 2 interpretation does not fit:

—But we could also imagine a convention whereby B has to shake his head in reply if A gives him the sign belonging to a tool that is broken.—In this way the command "N" might be said to be given a place in the language-game even when the tool no longer exists, and the sign "N" to have meaning even when its bearer ceases to exist.

(PI §41)

However, the defender of the view that names must stand for simples will reply that this is just shadow boxing: if we imagine a case where a word has meaning when the bearer ceases to exist, then that just goes to show that the word wasn't really a name after all. A real name signifies something that is not composite, something absolutely simple.

In §518, Wittgenstein quotes a closely related passage from the *Theaetetus* in which Socrates argues that imagination must be a matter of imagining something. As it provides an example of how one might begin to argue for the view that words must be about something really real, something that must exist, it can provide us with an introduction to the concerns that motivate Wittgenstein's discussion of simples in §§39–64: Socrates to Theaetetus: And if you imagine mustn't you imagine *something*?—Th.: Necessarily.—Soc.: And if you imagine something, mustn't it be something real?—Th.: It seems so.<sup>35</sup> (PI §518\*). Socrates gets Theaetetus to agree with him that if I imagine something, then there is some thing I imagine. But what is that thing? It can't just be my idea of what I imagine, for I can also imagine things that are real. But then what are we to say about the case where I imagine something that doesn't exist? The *Tractatus*, like Socrates at this point in the *Theaetetus*, aims at a systematic explanation of what must be the case in order for true and false statements to be possible. The Tractarian solution is that we can't really talk or think about nonexistent objects: when we say something doesn't exist, or imagine something unreal, closer analysis must show we are talking or thinking about certain simpler objects, which do exist, and denying that they are arranged in a specific way. In order to avoid

a regress, one is forced to conclude that there must be some primary elements, which cannot be further analyzed, that refer to things that must exist. The meanings of these directly referring terms just are the objects they refer to. For Russell, these terms were demonstratives, which picked out the contents of immediate experience; for the early Wittgenstein, they were the names that referred to simple objects. These simples cannot come into existence or cease to be, for they are the unchanging ground that makes change possible.

In §518, the quotation from Plato is followed by a couple of cryptic and leading questions that amount to a compressed outline of the familiar three-stage argument:

And mustn't someone who is painting be painting something—and someone who is painting something be painting something real?—Well, what is the object of the painting: the person in the picture (e.g.), or the person that the picture represents?

(PI §518b\*)

The first sentence, a recasting of Socrates' questions in Wittgenstein's words, also does the work of Wittgenstein's Stage 1 formulation of the problem: we are asked to consider the case of a painting, say a painting of a person, as a good example of what Socrates has in mind. Wittgenstein will often propose that we examine a claim about imagining, or another mental state, by asking us to consider a parallel case that involves a picture, or some other public object. He does not deny that we imagine, or have mental lives, but thinks that we are often tempted to accept incoherent theories about the mind because we attribute mysterious powers to the mind, and that the incoherence only becomes clear when we consider an illustration of the account in question on the public stage.

The last sentence of §518 gives us a choice between two different construals of the phrase "the object of the painting." The first gives us a way of understanding Socrates' argument on which he is making a simple and uncontroversial point: if we look at a picture of a man, we may say that the object of the picture is the person contained within the picture, the person depicted there; in this sense, the object of the picture certainly exists, even if the picture is the product of the artist's imagination. This is Stage 2: if we take the object of the picture to be the person in the picture, then any painting of a person must be a painting of someone, and in a similar way we can make sense of the claim that if I imagine, I imagine something, for the talk of imagining something is just another way of talking about my act of imagination. On the other hand, it is easy to see how a Stage 3 reading is possible: if we take the picture to be the person represented by the picture, the living (or dead) person that the picture represents, then there is no guarantee that the picture must be a picture of someone, for it is entirely possible to paint a picture that has no object in this sense. The point is spelled out quite explicitly a few remarks later, in §522–23:

If we compare a proposition to a picture, we must think whether we are comparing it to a portrait (a historical representation) or to a genre-picture. And both comparisons make sense. When I look at a genre-picture, it "tells" me something, even though I don't believe (imagine) for a moment that the people I see in it really exist, or that there have really been people in this situation. For suppose I ask "What does it really tell me?"

(P1 §522\*)

"What the picture tells me is itself." I should like to say, That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its forms and colours.

(P1 §523\*)

Thus in §§518–523, Wittgenstein leads us to a way of looking at pictures, imagination, and other forms of representation on which Socrates' problem about imagining something real is dissolved. Paraphrasing the Blue Book on knowledge, we could say "There is no one exact usage of the word 'picture' or 'imagine'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used."<sup>36</sup>

Wittgenstein's main line of response to Socrates' concerns about simples in §§46–64 is very similar. For the notion of simplicity is always relative to a context: what counts as simple depends on what we identify as the constituents or components of the complex in question. In §§46–48, Wittgenstein's initial response to the view that real names refer to primary elements, he proposes that we yield to the temptation and see where it leads. In Stage 1, a quotation of Socrates' statement of the view that names really stand for primary elements plays the role taken by Augustine's description of learning to speak in §1:

Now what about this matter of names really standing for something simple?—

Socrates says in the *Theaetetus*: "If I make no mistake, I have heard some people say this: there is no explanation of the *primary elements*—so to speak—out of which we and everything else are composed; for everything that exists in its own right can only be named, no other determination is possible, neither that it is nor that it is *not* [...] But what exists in its own right has to be [...] named without any other determination. Consequently, it is impossible to talk of any primary element by way of an explanation; it, after all, admits of nothing but mere naming; its name is all it has. But just as what consists of these primary elements is itself composite, indeed is an interwoven structure, so its [the structure's] names become explanatory speech through this kind of interweaving, for the essence of speech is an interweaving of names."<sup>37</sup>

Both Russell's "individuals" and my "objects" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) were such primary elements. (P1 §46\*)

Anscombe's translation of the opening sentence of §46—"What lies behind the idea that names really signify simples?"—is misleading, if it suggests that Wittgenstein thinks something does lie behind this idea, and he is about to tell us what it is. Wittgenstein, looking over Rhees' convoluted but fairly literal translation—"What is the position with regard to whether names really stand in for what is simple?"—wrote instead: "Now what about this matter of names really standing for something simple?"<sup>38</sup> This way of speaking, like the German, indicates that a topic is being picked up, rather than a position taken.

Immediately afterward, §47 tries to show us that the idea in question, that a name ought really to signify a simple, makes no sense at all. For "simple," if it means anything at all, surely means "not composite," not made up of smaller parts. The philosopher of the simple is looking for something absolutely, contextlessly, simple, but "composite" is itself a context-dependent term. §47 both gives a number of striking examples of different cases in which "composite" can be understood in different ways, and sums up Wittgenstein's response to the philosophical question about the nature of the simple:

If I tell someone without any further explanation: "What I see before me now is composite," he will have the right to ask: "What do you mean by 'composite'?" For there are all sorts of things that that may mean!—"The question 'Is what you see composite?' makes good sense if it is already established what kind of complexity—that is, which particular use of the word—is in question [...]."

We use the word "composite" (and therefore the word "simple") in an enormous number of different and differently related ways [...].

To the *philosophical* question: "Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?" the correct answer is: "That depends on what you understand by 'composite.'" (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.) (P1 §47c, §47e, §47f)

As in §1d, the nub of Wittgenstein's way of rejecting the view under discussion is set out before the method of §2 is invoked. In §48, the barrage of objections we found in §47 is distilled into a language-game that plays the role of Stage 2, a language-game that is clearly proposed by the voice of correctness, the voice that aims to make what sense it can of the idea of real simples:

Let us apply the method of §2 to the account in the *Theaetetus*. Let us consider a language-game for which this account is really valid. The

language serves to describe combinations of coloured squares on a surface. The squares form a complex like a chessboard. There are red, green, white and black squares. The words of the language are (correspondingly) "R", "G", "W", "B", and a sentence is a series of these words. They describe an arrangement of squares in the order:

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

And so for instance the sentence "RRBGGGRWW" describes an arrangement of this sort:

R	R	B
G	G	G
R	W	W

Here the sentence is a complex of names, to which corresponds a complex of elements. The primary elements are the colored squares.<sup>39</sup>

At this point, an interlocutory voice asks "But are these simple?" to which the voice of correctness replies, "I do not know what else you would have me call 'the simples,' what would be more natural in this language-game." But this immediately leads to Stage 3: however natural the proposed interpretation seems, a change of context can make another interpretation more natural.

But under other circumstances I should call a monochrome square "composite," consisting perhaps of two rectangles, or of the elements colour and shape. But the concept of compositeness might be extended in such a way that a smaller area is said to be "composed" of a greater area and another one subtracted from it.

(PI §48a\*)

Of course, the idea proposed here is counter-intuitive at first sight, but as Wittgenstein points out, there are precedents for it: we do think of a plane's speed flying into a headwind as the result of subtracting the headwind from the plane's cruising speed, for instance. As usual, the point of the Stage 3 argument here is not that another construal is more natural, but that another construal is possible, given different circumstances, circumstances that may be quite far-fetched.

Wittgenstein's narrator goes on to offer a diagnostic explanation for the Socratic (and Tractarian) desire to say that simples must exist, that they can

only be named, and that their existence is a condition of significant discourse. He suggests that this conviction arises out of a misunderstanding of the role of paradigmatic examples (such as color samples) or rules (such as a table correlating colors and their names) in our use of language. In §50, he offers the example of the standard meter in Paris—the specially constructed measuring rod that was once used as the standard for the construction of all other measures of length in the metric system. This rod, he claims, is the one thing of which one can neither say that it is, nor it isn't, one meter long. Not because its length is ineffable, but because these words (namely, "the standard meter is one meter long") make no sense. To say that the standard meter is one meter long is comparable to saying "But I know how tall I am!" and putting my hand on top of my head to prove it<sup>40</sup> or maintaining that "this is here," said pointing at something right in front of me, always makes sense.<sup>41</sup> The words "the standard meter is one meter long" have the sound of a logical truth, but the truth is nonsense, precisely because we are no longer making use of the standard meter as a paradigm in order to measure something else, but rather turning it back on itself. If we take into account the circumstances in which we use these words, we see that what we are trying to do in such uses of words is to step outside the usual circumstances in which we locate and measure things, with the aim of stating something more profound and fundamental. Of course, we can imagine unusual circumstances in which "the standard meter is one meter long" could make sense—perhaps in talking to someone who has no idea what a standard meter is, or in which "this is here" might do some work—perhaps pointing out a familiar pattern that had so far gone unnoticed—but the point of such philosophical truths, as the philosopher wants to use them, is that they are supposed to be stating something that must be true, not drawing our attention to something unexpected. Here we are inclined to misunderstand the role assigned to the object in the language-games as though it were a mysterious feature of the object itself, and the doctrine of simples is an ontological crystallization of this methodological role.

## 8.6 Epilogue

Most interpreters take the opening remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations* as an outline of Wittgenstein's answers to questions about the nature of language. Consequently, they take the material we have just discussed to have immediate and clear-cut consequences for positions in contemporary analytic philosophy, such as the theory of reference. However, on the dialectical reading advocated here, Wittgenstein's opening is best understood as raising questions and introducing us to a number of voices in the discussion that follows, rather than as offering solutions to familiar problems. Wittgenstein's primary concern is not with the sophisticated statement of philosophical problems and theoretical solutions that they lead to, but how those problems arise. He begins not with systematic philosophy, or the history of philosophy,

but with the patterns of thought, the ways of speaking, which can lead us into formulating such philosophical theories.

Because the opening sentences of the *Philosophical Investigations* are often construed as a critique of certain fundamental premises in the theory of reference, they provide an excellent point of departure for further consideration of this question about the implications of a dialectical, or polyphonic, reading for current work in the theory of reference. Wittgenstein's first sentence in the *Philosophical Investigations* tells us that the opening quotation from Saint Augustine contains a definite picture of the essence of language. Yet on first reading, Augustine's words can strike the reader as an entirely natural and unproblematic description of how he learned to speak:

My primary reaction to the citation from the *Confessions*, read by itself, is to think that what it expresses is obvious—it seems trivial, prosaic, well-nigh unobjectionable. It is just a harmless elaboration of the observations that early in life children learn what things are called, and learn to express their wants and needs verbally.<sup>42</sup>

Warren Goldfarb contends that Wittgenstein expected his readers to be shocked by his initial construal of Augustine, and those commentators who “would have us meekly acquiesce to this sentence” have been too ready to take what he has to say at face value.<sup>43</sup> Instead, Goldfarb proposes, the aim of these opening words is not to show us that Augustine's conception of language is wrong and Wittgenstein's right, but to throw us off balance, by challenging our preconceptions about what is involved in having a conception of language. Ultimately, the aim of this challenge is to get us to see that the same words can be understood in both a commonplace and a philosophical way, and thus the unclarity of the very idea of our having a conception of language. Talk of naming objects, pointing things out, and states of mind can be quite unproblematic, yet in certain contexts these notions “come to have a weight that our ordinary understanding of them does not support.”<sup>44</sup> For Augustine's words can also be read as intimating a number of different conceptions of how language works, conceptions that can provide a starting point for philosophical theorizing about language and meaning. Similarly, Cavell proposes that we approach the multiplicity of voices, the lack of clear demarcation between voices, the frequent shifts in topic, the fragmentary arguments, the multitude of questions, suggestions, instructions, stories, and far-fetched imaginary examples as an invitation to explore the deep difficulties that arise when we start to philosophize, rather than construing them as all advancing a single, authorial point of view. On the other hand, nothing can stop a philosopher from taking Wittgenstein's arguments and drawing his or her own positive conclusions: indeed, the book both invites and resists such a reading.

What, precisely, is the “particular picture of the essence of human language” that Wittgenstein speaks of in the first sentence of his own words in

the book, or “the conception expressed in that quotation,” as Malcolm puts it?<sup>45</sup> To many philosophers, §1b provides a clear outline of the mistaken view of the nature of language that Wittgenstein finds in Augustine, a view that is presupposed in §1a, and that forms one of the principal targets in what follows. One line of interpretation concentrates on the question of the nature of this particular picture, and its place in the overall project of the *Philosophical Investigations*. While I cannot do justice to the full range of such readings of §1b, the main disagreements concern the scope and character of the picture in question. On a big picture reading of Augustine's words, they serve to introduce the paradigm, or world-view, that Wittgenstein opposes throughout the book.<sup>46</sup> On a small picture reading, they set out a quite specific philosophical theory, the topic of the opening sections of the book.

While there is some support for each of these approaches in §1b, Wittgenstein's words are more equivocal than they may seem at first sight. He does say that the particular picture suggested to him by Augustine's words is that: (1) “individual words in language name objects”; and (2) “sentences are combinations of such names.” However, Wittgenstein qualifies all this by an “it seems to me,” one of the expressions he repeatedly uses as a warning that he is introducing, or entertaining an idea, rather than giving it his full support. These words are followed by a long double-dash, used by Wittgenstein to indicate either a change of topic, or a new voice (unlike a single dash, which often indicates a brief pause within a single train of thought).<sup>47</sup> Only then are we introduced to a further idea, which, we are told, has its roots in this picture: that (3) “every word has a meaning [*Bedeutung*],” and it “is the object for which the word stands.” Thus we are introduced to at least two views of the Augustine passage: the particular picture, which concerns the role of words in language, and a further development of this conception, which introduces the notion of a word's meaning.

Exponents of a small picture reading of these words are often attracted to the idea that the *Tractatus* is the real target. For instance, according to Jaakko and Merrill Hintikka, the passage from Augustine is Wittgenstein's starting point because it sets out the view that ostension—naming objects and pointing to them—is the “prime vehicle of language teaching and learning.”<sup>48</sup> This view supposedly follows from an “idea embraced by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* [...] the basic links between language and the world are simple two-place relations of naming.”<sup>49</sup> On the Hintikkas' construal, the links in question are ineffable: nothing more can be said about them within the Tractarian framework. A related reading maintains that the picture is a little bigger, for the Tractarian conception of naming can be specified—and criticized—in more detail. Thus, according to Hacker, it is part of the *Tractatus* view of naming that it requires a mental act “that injects meaning or significance into signs, whether in thought or in language.”<sup>50</sup> But such crude and simple views of language and mind fail to do justice to the subtlety of the *Tractatus*, a book that takes as its fundamental thought the idea that certain words do not stand for anything.<sup>51</sup> Neither of

these remarkably naïve views of naming nor the role of mind in meaning are of much independent philosophical interest, either. It is implausible, to say the least, that these are the principal topics raised by the *Philosophical Investigations*' opening.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, most of those who begin by spelling out the rather limited views they find in §1b go on to say that their real interest lies in the bigger picture that they give rise to, or otherwise support. For instance, Baker and Hacker hold that this passage introduces the Augustinian picture, which proves to be nothing less than an entire world-view or philosophical paradigm, the principal target throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*, and this interpretation has seemed obviously right to many. However, much of the attractiveness of this view depends on the way its expositors trade on the open-ended and vague character of the picture in question, moving between a relatively small and specific view in the initial exposition, and the much larger theoretical positions it supposedly underwrites. Glock's *Wittgenstein Dictionary* entry on the "Augustinian picture of language" is a good example of this:

[Wittgenstein] treated Augustine's view not as a full-blown theory of language, but as a proto-theoretic paradigm or "picture" which deserves critical attention because it tacitly underlies sophisticated philosophical theories. [...] The Augustinian picture comprises four positions: a referential conception of word meaning; a descriptivist conception of sentences; the idea that ostensive definition provides the foundations of language; and the idea that a language of thought underlies our public languages.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, less sympathetic readers of Baker and Hacker have noted that "most of the leading ideas of the [*Philosophical Investigations* are] interpreted as so many aspects of an extended critique of the Augustinian Picture."<sup>54</sup> However, the big picture reading has a slender textual basis: the very expression "Augustinian" picture is an artifact that occurs nowhere in Wittgenstein's writing, and the particular picture of §1b is only one of many quite specific philosophical mistakes and temptations that Wittgenstein discusses in the pages that follow. Indeed, Wittgenstein's explicit references in the *Philosophical Investigations* to the conception of language that he finds in Augustine are outnumbered by his references to other passages from the *Confessions*, each of which serves to introduce other philosophical pictures. Running these pictures, and others, into a single over-arching big picture runs contrary to Wittgenstein's emphasis on the diversity and multiplicity of the ways in which we go wrong. Furthermore, the significance of the passage from Augustine for the *Philosophical Investigations* is not simply that the opening quotation is a convenient point of departure for a critique of mistaken views about meaning and language learning. For the very words from Augustine that Wittgenstein quotes do not lend unambiguous support to the particular

interpretations he advances in §1 ff., either. In fact, Wittgenstein's reading of the Augustine passage is itself remarkably one-sided. While the quotation from Augustine does begin with his learning that certain sounds his elders made were signs for things, and ends with his learning to use these signs to express his own desires, much of it does not fit Wittgenstein's description at all. Augustine does not claim that this gives a model for understanding all word meaning, and actually connects understanding words with grasping their proper places, not only in the structure of sentences, but also the context in which they are used. He also draws our attention to the role of facial expression, the play of the eyes and tone of voice in expressing intention.

Given the amount of thought Wittgenstein clearly gave to the question of how best to start, and given his intimate acquaintance with Augustine, is it not much more likely that he expected the reader to be initially impressed by the reading offered in §1b, but then come to see its limitations? These are multiple: §1b is not only a very partial description of what Augustine says, and the picture that it does sketch is only a first example of how we can go wrong in philosophy, not the outline of an overarching big picture. After all, in §1c and §2a, Wittgenstein suggests that it can help us to understand the over-simple conception of language attributed to Augustine in §1b if we see it, not as a mis-description of our language, but rather as a description of a language simpler than our own. Surely Wittgenstein expected the careful reader to eventually see that §1b is an over-simple, one-sided and provocative reading of §1a. Yet many of Wittgenstein's readers have either, like Hintikka or Hacker, taken §1b to be an unproblematic exposition of what Augustine says or presupposes or, like Kenny, taken it as proof that Wittgenstein missed Augustine's point.

Wittgenstein's opening words, like Augustine's, are not as simple as they seem; they offer orientation in several different directions. Clearly, they do introduce us to a family of views about how language is learned, and what words mean, that will be Wittgenstein's principal target in the first 64 sections of the book. Along these lines, Anscombe observes that the main purpose of the opening of the *Investigations* is negative, namely

to persuade us not to look at the connection between a word and its meaning either as set up or as explained by (a) ostensive definition, or (b) by association, or (c) by mental pictures, or (d) by experiences characteristic of meaning one thing rather than another, or (e) by a general relation of reference or naming or designation or signifying which has (logically) different kinds of objects as its terms in different cases.<sup>55</sup>

However, while there is a good deal of argument along these lines in the sections that follow, much of it, like §1b, is directed at positions that are remarkably naïve. Baker and Hacker's explanation of this is that the real target is the big picture that lies behind the particular topics that are discussed. There is something right about this: Wittgenstein is trying to get at

the preconceptions and unexamined assumptions that lead philosophers to argue as they do. However, Wittgenstein does not see those preconceptions as something else, over and above these particular lines of argument, along the lines of the Augustinian picture, the true motives hidden behind what philosophers say and do, but rather as present in the moves that begin philosophical reflection. For this reason he begins with particular examples of deceptively simple philosophical arguments, of the kind that are more likely to come up in a classroom discussion than a philosophical article or book, yet his main aim is not so much to show that they are wrong, as to get us to think about what is involved in beginning to look for a philosophical account of language and meaning. As Robert Fogelin puts it, “for the most part the work is not a criticism of the results of philosophizing, but an interrogation of its source.”<sup>56</sup>

This question about the character of Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophy, in turn, is connected with the question of what Wittgenstein means by saying that past philosophy is nonsense. On Hacker’s reading, Wittgenstein appeals to the grammar of our language to show that what philosophers say makes no sense. While it is true that there is a strand in the book’s dialogue—Cavell’s “voice of correctness”—that does make use of grammar in just this way, I take it that the point of the book is not to get us to cheer on this side of the debate. Rather, to say that philosophy is nonsense is just to say that it falls apart when we try to make sense of it.

The results of philosophy are the discovery of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of this discovery.

(PI §119)

But this must emerge out of the reader’s involvement in the dialogue of the *Philosophical Investigations*, our being tempted into particular philosophical theories, and our coming to see that those particular attempts at theorizing are nonsensical, rather than as a more general principle, or overarching method, that any one voice in the dialogue is advocating.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on ch. 1, §§ 1 and 3, and ch. 4, §§ 1, 3, and 4 of David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The permission of Cambridge University Press to make use of this material is hereby gratefully acknowledged. References in footnotes to “ch. m” or “§ ‘m.n’” are to other parts of that book.
- 2 For references to the *Philosophical Investigations*, I provide section numbers, or page numbers, in parentheses. All translations are based on G. E. M. Anscombe’s. Where I depart from her translation, I add an asterisk to the cited section number.
- 3 PI §48.

- 4 M. O’C. Drury, “Conversations with Wittgenstein,” in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 149.
- 5 *Theaetetus* 146c–e; Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), pp. 162–63.
- 6 PI §116.
- 7 See *Theaetetus* 146 ff.
- 8 PI §39, cf. §89.
- 9 PI §§26–31; see section 8.3 of this chapter.
- 10 PI §§39–64; see section 8.4 of this chapter.
- 11 PI §143, §185.
- 12 PI §§85–86.
- 13 PI §§139–41.
- 14 PI §30.
- 15 PI §87.
- 16 PI §464, §524.
- 17 PI §500.
- 18 PI §464; cf. §524c. For further discussion of Wittgenstein on philosophy and nonsense, see 2.2–2.3 in Stern, *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*.
- 19 PI §81a.
- 20 PI §6b.
- 21 PI §§21–25.
- 22 I have introduced line breaks to emphasize the changes of voice.
- 23 PI §130.
- 24 PI §38b & 38d\*. Here I follow Rhees’ prewar translation, in *JTS* 226 of the Wittgenstein papers, rather than Anscombe’s somewhat more literal “goes on holiday.” The advantage of this translation is that it makes it a little clearer that Wittgenstein’s point is that the language in question is not doing any work at all.
- 25 Usually, it is taken for granted that “sublime” means “elevated” or “pure.” Cavell is the leading advocate of a Romantic reading. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, The Frederick Ives Carpenter Lectures 1987 (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch, 1989), pp. 56–58. Two interpreters that do give due consideration to the question of how to understand Wittgenstein’s use of *sublimieren* are Gordon Bearn, *Waking to Wonder: Wittgenstein’s Existential Investigations* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 309–12; Elke von Savigny, “No Chapter ‘on Philosophy’ in the *Philosophical Investigations*,” *Metaphilosophy* 22 (1991): 148–49. There are also parallels with the psychoanalytic use of the term: Freudian sublimation is a matter of giving displaced artistic expression to repressed drives that would otherwise be inexpressible; Wittgensteinian sublimation is a matter of providing a metaphysical response to philosophical problems that cannot be given a more direct solution. In both cases, the result, however beautiful it may be, does not solve the problem that gave rise to it.
- 26 This appears to be the reading that von Savigny favours.
- 27 PI §97, §§107–08.
- 28 Bearn advocates this construal: Bearn, *Waking to Wonder*.
- 29 PI §5a.
- 30 PI II, xi, p. 222/189.
- 31 PI §39.
- 32 PI §§40–45.
- 33 §§48–64.
- 34 In a footnote and the surrounding text, Pears draws a connection with the contents of §218, but the point is considerably more general. David Pears, *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy*, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 209–10.

- 35 *Theaetetus* 189a. For further discussion of this passage see David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 54–55.
- 36 See BR, p. 27.
- 37 *Theaetetus* 202a–b. Like Anscombe's translation, this is not a direct translation of the Greek, but of the German translation (by Preisendanz) that Wittgenstein used. 38 TS 226, p. 31.
- 39 Readers of the "third" 2001 edition of the *Philosophical Investigations* should be warned that the use of seven black squares and two white ones in the second diagram in §48 is an error. In fact, none of the revised graphics incorporated in the reissued second edition (1997) are taken up in the 2001 edition. Presumably, the text of the 2001 edition is based on a photocopy of a pre-1997 printing of the second edition; this would explain why black ones replaced the colored blocks, used in most printings of the text prior to 1997. I discuss the relationship between the varying reproduction of the blocks in these editions and the source text in a review of the Bergen edition of the Wittgenstein papers. David G. Stern, "Critical Review of Wittgenstein 2000," *European Journal of Philosophy* (forthcoming).
- 40 PI §279.
- 41 PI §117b.
- 42 Warren Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab. Remarks on the Opening Sections of the 'Philosophical Investigations,'" *Synthese* 56 (1983): 268.
- 43 *Ibid.*: 268.
- 44 *Ibid.*: 268.
- 45 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 59–60.
- 46 Gordon Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding*, vol. 1, *Essays on the Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 1–27.
- 47 PI §1b.
- 48 Merrill Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 179.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 51 TLP 4.0312.
- 52 Cf. Robert Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 108–09; Brendan Wilson, *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: A Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 1; Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab."
- 53 The last idea is not present in §1b, but something like it is attributed to Augustine in §32. Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 41.
- 54 Peter Carruthers, "Critical Study: Baker and Hacker's Wittgenstein," *Synthese* 58 (1984): 451.
- 55 G. E. M. Anscombe, "A Theory of Language," in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Irving Block (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), p. 154.
- 56 Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, p. 110.

### Part III

## The absolute