

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*
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Lecture II: §§1-2

On my view, Wittgenstein is launching a radical critique of philosophy: traditional philosophy is wrongheaded, based on misconstruals, is to be done away with. This point is not made by argument against any recognizable philosophical view. Rather it comes from a certain kind of intense scrutiny of the impulses with which philosophy starts. Figuring out what that is is our agenda in these lectures: its delicacy should not be underestimated. And then, what replaces traditional philosophy?

§1 of the *Philosophical Investigations* opens with a paragraph from Augustine's *Confessions*, in which Augustine recounts his initiation into language. Of course, for Wittgenstein there is every reason to begin with the general subject of the nature of language (given the situation in philosophy, and the role of language in Wittgenstein's view of both bad philosophy and good), and it is not remarkable that he start with a reflection on the nature of *initiation* into language. But why this Augustine quote? Augustine was hardly a major figure in philosophy of language, nor is the passage meant to be an analysis of language.

The standard answer (what Malcolm attests Wittgenstein told him): the paragraph expresses a particular philosophy of language, that is held widely, exhibited many other places; but that such a mind as Augustine could hold it shows its importance. Indeed, the text of the *Philosophical Investigations* almost says this. "These words give a particular picture of the essence of human language." That picture, Wittgenstein says, has three tenets:

- (1) Every word names something, which is the meaning of the word.
- (2) Sentences are combinations of such words.
- (3) There are no important differences in kinds of words.

This is often called "the Augustinian picture". The standard view is: Wittgenstein goes on in the ensuing sections to rebut it.

This should give one pause. For the view is clearly false, and easily refuted. "The" and "sake" do not name anything. No one can deny that there are all sorts of differences in kinds of words: nouns, adverbs, verbs, articles. So who would hold such

a view? Malcolm's ascription is just false; no one held it, even if (1) is modified somewhat.

As for the views in early analytic philosophy that Wittgenstein took most seriously: Frege thought there couldn't be a greater difference than that between object-words and concept-words (saturated and unsaturated expressions); and Frege introduced the distinction between sense and reference precisely because he saw that what a word names does not exhaust its meaning. The early Wittgenstein said his "fundamental thought" was that the logical particles ("and", "or", "not", etc.) are not names, and also insisted, against Frege and Russell, that number words and numerals were not names (numbers are not objects).

Now one could say that Frege and the early Wittgenstein are sophisticated, while the Augustinian picture is not, and that sophistications don't matter. In some sense what is wrong with Frege, the early Wittgenstein, and others, can be gotten by figuring out what is wrong with the Augustinian picture. This is not totally off the mark for Wittgenstein. But in what way don't the sophistications matter? That is where the work has to go on.

Let's back up and return to the question "Why the Augustine quote?" We had answered: a particular philosophy of language is expressed. But now, look at the quote again but without thinking of it as being the start of the *Philosophical Investigations*. One can react: surely there's nothing in what Augustine says except pedestrian and obvious truths! All he's saying is: early in life, children learn what things are called; they learn to express their wants and needs verbally. Augustine expresses just what is trivially evident in what we do, when we teach babies to talk, to say "nose", "kitty", etc. And then, to read that the Augustine is giving "a definite picture of the essence of language" is surely meant to shock. That is (as Stanley Cavell first suggested) Wittgenstein is intentionally seeking here not acquiescence but a reaction: *This* is giving the essence of language? *This* is a philosophical conception of meaning?

But, *now that you mention it*, you can see a philosophical conception in the Augustine quote. So, it appears, Wittgenstein is calling attention to a *double aspect* of Augustine's words: they can seem commonplace and unobjectionable on the one hand; and philosophically loaded on the other. The difference comes when you see

Augustine *as* offering an account, as having a certain kind of generality and explanatory intent, as trying to answer certain philosophical questions. Then, Wittgenstein wants to claim, the triviality is lost. Such notions as “naming some object”, “seeking”, “pointing” (notions which, after all, are perfectly ordinary) can, when they figure in certain contexts, come to have a weight that our ordinary understanding of them does not support. A structure is imposed on them when they are taken as playing explanatory roles, and that structure will then shape how we view the task, what is to be accounted for.

This is what happens when we see that the “Augustinian picture” is inadequate and seek to refine it. It is the “seeking to refine” which makes the words bespeak a picture, which make them no longer commonplace. Unmasking this double role, this shift, is to show the wrongheadedness of seeking to refine the account. Augustine's remarks, taken philosophically, bespeak a conception that is primitive, not because it needs development, but in the sense of §194:

When we do philosophy we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the expressions of civilized people, put a false interpretation on them, and then draw the queerest conclusions from it.

The work lies ahead; so far all we have is a suggestion. Wittgenstein has to show more convincingly that something fishy is going on here, and to say something about how it happens.

A crucial aspect of his strategy is expressed in the third paragraph of §1, although Wittgenstein does not emphasize it at this point. Augustine takes himself (and Wittgenstein takes Augustine to be taking himself) to be describing the learning of language. Just before the cited paragraph in the *Confessions*, Augustine says,

Now I was not an infant, without speech, but a boy speaking. I have since learned *by observation* how I learned to speak. [emphasis mine]

And Wittgenstein uses “description” repeatedly (§§1, 2, 3, 10). The point is made explicitly in §109

We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.

A theme of these early sections is that we must keep to the level of description, and that this is not an easy thing to do. We are constantly led to pack more in, to characterize what is going on in ways that rest upon unexamined assumptions, and to ask questions that are philosophically loaded. In short, Wittgenstein is trying to focus attention on the question of what the data of philosophizing are. He insists that we rein ourselves in, because we cannot see what our words come to until we have a perspicuous and unbiased view of what the facts are.

But it should be borne in mind that it is never clear beforehand what description is, and when we are going beyond it. The only way to see that we are is to show when it happens in a particular case. As we shall see, Wittgenstein suggests in §23 that description is not a single or homogeneous category. But the point here goes further: whether or not a sentence counts as description will depend on the question being addressed, on the work to which it is to be put. (This is what is at stake in my claim that the passage from Augustine has a double aspect.)

The call for description is illustrated in the example at the end of §1. At the surface, this example illustrates the idea that a description of different kinds of words looks to be at variance with the uniform picture that Augustine can be taken to express. The bizarrely pedestrian greengrocer in this example acts very differently on each of the words “five”, “red”, and “apple”. Pointing out these differences gives rise to the first appearance of the interlocutor, who here voices just what might lead us on: How does the greengrocer know what to do? Wittgenstein’s response is simple: “I assume that he acts as I have described.” Wittgenstein is here pointing out the need for sticking to description. It would be a mistake to proceed to a higher level, for we do not even know what would count as an explanation here. (The “how does he know what to do” is very much Wittgenstein’s concern later; Wittgenstein will try to rid us of the idea the meanings of the words, or something similar, answer the “how” question, and to rid us even of the impulse to assume that the differences need be explained in some way beyond noting that the greengrocer understands the language.) Wittgenstein continues, “Explanations come to an end somewhere.”

This last remark seems to be a joke; for Wittgenstein seems to be saying that explanations come to an end before they even begin. Clearly, he does not mean that you can use one thing to explain another, a third to explain the second, and so on, but there must be a final thing in this chain or else there would be no explanation at all.

(That would be a trivial thing to say.) Rather, here the moral is more like this: the role of explanations has an end, a place where explaining is no longer at issue. At some juncture we are not concerned with explaining, but just with what it is that is to be explained. Talk of a meaning of “five” assumes too much at this stage.

So far Wittgenstein is just trying to incite some suspicions. He does not continue the example, for it is already too complex (!). For example, we have already, without reflection, taken the greengrocer to be acting on each word, one-by-one. Such an assumption already begins the push towards saying that the greengrocer acts as he does because the words are part of an articulated system (and this can lead to all sorts of sophisticated philosophical views). Thus the example already lends itself to quick characterizations which embody hidden assumptions. The intricacies of the example of §1 prompt the simpler example of §2.

The language presented in §2: the builder calls out “Block!”, “Slab!”, “Pillar!”, “Beam!”, and the assistant fetches the appropriate item. It is a language “more primitive than ours” — one that we can see all at once; all is open to view.

Wittgenstein seems to claim that it is a language for which the description given by Augustine is correct. Apparently: what Augustine does is describe something appropriate for some restricted cases, and illicitly assumes it's valid everywhere (§3); in general, “it disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application” (§5).

This ought make us take pause, for these are puzzling characterizations. How can we accept that the builders illustrate Augustine's remarks, and illustrate the notion of naming? The words of this language do not seem to be names in the sense we have them; it's not what we mean to say when we call something a name. They seem more like *codes*. (And note that Wittgenstein calls them “calls.”) Yet, on the other hand: here is a case where in a way you can see what reference comes to. How can we deny that a slab in this language is *called* “slab” when a slab is *called for* by “Slab!”? If ever there were a link between language and reality, here it is!

To get clearer about the puzzlement, let us note that Wittgenstein remarks in §6, “We could imagine that the language of §2 was the whole language of A and B.” This tells us that there are two ways of imagining that language: (1) as “complete” but

not the whole language of A and B; and (2) as the whole language. As Stanley Cavell first pointed out, it is highly instructive to consider the differences.

In the first way of imagining it: it looks like a special system for calling for certain objects. Indeed, it is a language not unlike that used in hospital operating rooms ("Scalpel!", "Suture!", ...), or (formerly) in short-order kitchens, with their special argot (e.g., "Radio!", which, I was told, means "Tuna-fish sandwich on white toast").

So construed, there is no problem here, Augustine seems perfectly correct. We can easily imagine an apprentice learning the language by watching, grasping the intentions in the utterances, seeing what A wants. It seems perfectly correct to say, that A wants a slab and so calls out "Slab!", or wants a tuna on toast and so calls out "Radio!" And there seems little objection to saying that the words name the things.

Now imagine it as the whole language of A and B. This is all they do by way of linguistic behavior. The terrain has changed. How do we now imagine this? It's natural now to think of the builders as cavemen, slow and ponderous, with blank expressions. And then the question, or challenge, or objection, arises: can we take them to be speaking, to be using words with understanding? Isn't it just like the dances of bees? Isn't it just too mechanical, too much an automatism?

I take Wittgenstein to be trying to elicit this reaction. He uses "calls" for the words of this language. In §§19-20 he brings up concerns about the relations of the builders' language to ours, as we'll see. Outside the *Investigations* he refers to the builders twice, in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* VI §40 and in *Zettel* §99.

What does examining the worry yield? The objection is that, so described, this is not a language. Wittgenstein might respond, simply, "Why not?" Since the objection must rest on more than the mere oddity of these builder-creatures, we do owe some story. Why do we want to claim that there is no understanding here? What's wrong with taking the assistant who starts getting it right (bringing a slab upon hearing "Slab!") as understanding?

Of course there are considerations that support the objection. We might start by noting how mechanical these builders would see, how animal-like. But is this to say

more than that they are not fully intelligible to us, that we cannot imagine ourselves leading their lives? And then Wittgenstein might continue, why are we digging in our heels on this ground? Against his insistent (hectoring) demand for reasons why we locate anything important in one or another particular feature of our story, I think we might well want to explode with this: These “builders” don't think! They can't think; the scenario Wittgenstein has described leaves no room for thinking. This is the line Wittgenstein suggests in *Zettel*, §99.

You are just tacitly assuming that these people *think*; that they are like people as we know them in *that* respect; that they do not carry on that language-game merely mechanically. For if you imagined them doing that, you yourself would not call it the use of a rudimentary language.

Or, more elaborately, either they do think — and so are holding back, so we haven't really given their language; or they don't think, they are automata, so what we've described is not language. If this is what fuels the objection, then we see a whole complex of unexamined, powerful philosophical conceptions at work. It is certainly not mere description.

Of course, *we* think as we talk (sometimes), but that is quite different from claiming to have a notion of ratiocination apart from what we say and do. It looks like in the objection we are imagining an independent process of thinking that is behind and animates language. We are imagininig language as stuck on to people who already have thoughts; the thoughts are what make the noises (the calls) into language. This would be a great deal to swallow. At this point, Wittgenstein only wants to suggest that some such conception may be at work. He continues in *Zettel* §99:

Of course it is true that the life of those people must be like ours in many respects, and I said nothing about this similarity. But the important things is that their language, and their thinking too, may be rudimentary, that there is such a thing as 'primitive thinking' which is to be described via primitive *behaviour* . The surroundings are not the 'thinking accompaniment' of speech.

Wittgenstein presents the possibility that we take the builders to have rudimentary thought — the thought appropriate to their lives. In so doing he is pointing to the puffed-up nature of the objector's notion. If we can take this idea seriously (take seriously the inextricability of thought and language) then the conception of “thought-behind-language” as the independent factor that makes the noises into

language looks unsupportable. The dichotomy “either they think or they are automata” then comes down to no more than “either they are just like us or they are automata”, and so looks highly questionable.

Or, at least, Wittgenstein is asking: from where to the standards for what counts as thinking suppose to come? He's pointing to an overblown, overly general nature of the notion as it is exploited in the objection.

Now one can reject the deflationary move on thought of *Zettel* §99, but one cannot just buy the objection, it seems to me. Rather, we have to examine in closer detail what aspects of our operations we are taking as crucial to a language, and why we take them to be what is at stake in the “animation” of language. (We'll see something along these lines in §19).

There is no settled moral here, no conclusion. This is intentional on Wittgenstein's part. We are meant to retain an unease, a sense of oddity, with the language of §2 when taken as the whole language. *We should* want to say: perhaps these are names, but not really in the same sense in which we have names in our language.

Recall, however, that on the first reading, as not the whole language of the builders, there was no unease. Augustine is correct there. On the whole language reading, we are reluctant to apply the notion of name (as well as the other notions Augustine has: state of mind, seeking, rejecting, avoiding, etc.). Now nothing has changed between the two construals with respect to the particular calls "Slab!", etc. and their use. What changes is that, in the second case, the rest of language is abrogated.