

**Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations***  
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**Lecture VIII: §§65-88 (conclusion)**

Fixity of meaning lies at the heart of the thinking of the early analytic philosophers. The power of the manner of philosophizing introduced by Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein lies in their working out visions of language that embody this fixity, and doing so in a technically sophisticated way (i.e., intertwined with the development of modern logic). It is unsurprising, then, that in his attack on fixity of meaning, Wittgenstein looks at the showcase instance of analysis in the early analytic tradition, Russell's theory of descriptions.

Take a sentence containing a name, e.g.,

Sigmund Freud was born in Bohemia.

How does the name "Sigmund Freud" function in this sentence? Well, Russell held that it functions as a description, perhaps "the originator of psychoanalysis". So he claims that the sentence means the same as

The originator of psychoanalysis was born in Bohemia.

Russell goes on about the further logical analysis of this sentence, but that doesn't concern us here. Frege's view is analogous (although the subsequent logical analysis is different). In Frege's terminology, the proper name has a *sense* that gives the way of picking out the object meant. The important point is that for both of them, the name is tied down by a specific way of picking out the object, a property that holds of that object and only of that object. That is true of all names, for Frege; for Russell, it is true of all names except the demonstratives "this" and "that". (Recall *Investigations* §38.)

Of course, "the originator of psychoanalysis" is not the *only* definite description by which we could analyze the name "Sigmund Freud". Someone might use the name and associate with it "the author of *Civilization and its Discontents*". Or some contemporary Viennese, unaware of Freud's published writings, might associate some homelier description, like "the man living next door". That is to say that

people can use proper names in different ways. Frege is aware that different people may use proper names with different senses; for him such “fluctuations in sense are tolerable, but are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science.” How the object is picked out can vary; but what’s essential is that, for every speaker, the name operates by there being some property associated with it that holds uniquely of the object that is referred to,.

In §79, Wittgenstein is going against the view that the name works by means of some associated description. He is not specifically concerned with Russell's particular version of the theory, (though the younger Wittgenstein did embrace it), as his strictures would apply to Frege’s and other versions of the basic idea. Even more generally, though, he would want to go against *any* account postulating some kind of fixity as undergirding how a proper name functions.

What is Wittgenstein’s argument? On the surface, he is pointing out that as a matter of fact, we do not have any one description *in mind* when we use the name to pick out the object. (After all, if I make a claim about Freud, there may be nothing specific that I’m thinking of at that moment, as being that property which picks out who I’m talking about. And, if asked, any number of things might leap to my mind as a description of him.) Now Wittgenstein has been taken to be completely denying this type of theory for that reason (as did P. F. Strawson in his paper “On Referring” from 1955). But that criticism misses the boat, since Frege and Russell are not committed to any “first-in-mind” view about what determines the associated description. (Russell stresses this in his reply to Strawson, which, by the way, was made *fifty years* after Russell proposed his theory.)

A more sophisticated view of Wittgenstein here takes him to be moving to a *cluster* theory. “For Wittgenstein the sense of a proper name is given not by a single specific criterion of identification, but by a cluster of such criteria” (M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, p. 111). According to such a view, the name is pinned down by some *bunch* of descriptions that we might offer. It is fulfilling some “weighted most” of that cluster that determines the referent. To my mind, this doesn’t capture what Wittgenstein is doing, which is more radical. Wittgenstein would deny there is something called “the sense of a proper name”.

Now Frege and Russell are not explicit about what determines how a speaker’s use

of a proper name should be analyzed, that is, what description should be associated with that speaker's usage. Implicit, though, is the idea that what sense or what description best captures a speaker's use of a proper name is determined by what the speaker would accept as justifying the identification of a particular object as the object that is meant. Of course, a speaker may not be totally clear on this; Frege and Russell can readily agree that in our everyday practice people can be quite "muddled" (as they would say), and that everyday practice contains ambiguities. But, they believe that the way language works — how a name is able to function at all — is via precise senses or descriptions. The idea of the sense or associated description sets down the standards for exact usage, and establishes the framework for describing the ways in which our everyday uses can fail. Truly rational language use requires the fixing of a criterion of identification, since the fixing of a sense or description is a precondition for there being a structure within which one could justify a claim made using the name. (This blending of two themes: the analysis of language as we use it, and the provision of a standpoint from which we can criticize our use, is exactly what Wittgenstein is commenting upon in his remarks in this neighborhood about logic. See, e.g., §§81, 91, 98, and 101.)

What kind of criticism is Wittgenstein advancing? He is doing two things. *First*, he wants to elicit the plain facts that seem to point in the direction of the idea that Sinne or definite descriptions are necessary in underlying our practices of explaining and justifying claims. After all, if, after my assertion, my audience asks me who Sigmund Freud is, I will give a description. Indeed, if my assertion using the name is challenged in a serious way, then I *must* give descriptions. So if certain matters of fact are put into question — if I am to support my statement, if I am to be deemed to know what I'm speaking about — then I will need to supply a description (except in the exceptional case in which a demonstrative will work). Most such challenges involve questioning whether my use of the name *does* pick anyone/anything out at all. That is one of the reasons that Wittgenstein uses the example of Moses. Here the supplying of a description seems mandatory. Indeed, if the world is badly behaved in certain respects, then in order for one to be staking oneself to a claim in making an assertion, there must be a description that displays what the name is doing. -That is the "plain fact".

It can then seem almost inevitable to conclude that, if one is staking oneself to a definite claim in making an assertion, then one has to be in a position to say, no

matter how the world is (without taking for granted *any* facts), what the name is doing. This takes us to Wittgenstein's *second* point. It is here that he sees the slide: from our ordinary practices of explanation and justification, to our not being able to take for granted that the world will be well-behaved in *any* respects. A truly rational use of the name must allow for *any* possibility of the world's recalcitrance. In the name there must already be lodged all that *could* count for or against something's being its referent, *no matter how the world is*. Because we have to be able to tell, given any way the world is, whether the claim can be maintained or not. That requires there to be a specific criterion of identification by means of which the proper name works.

The movement is from the idea that, in particular circumstances, if certain facts are in question, then I must supply a description, to the general idea that if I can generally be held to account for my claims, given the possibility that the world may not turn out the way I think it will at all, then I have to have something fixed to guarantee that I am held accountable in my use of the name, and how I do so. This latter is the idea of language as *presuppositionless*. Wittgenstein is attacking the picture of the presuppositionlessness of language. He is urging that there *is* a gap between the plain facts and the philosophical move.

In some circumstances, in order to support a claim involving a name we must make certain substitutions, that is, supply some amplifications of what we meant by the name. Wittgenstein wants now, after eliciting the plain facts that “grease the slide” to presuppositionlessness, to take a closer look at our practices and see how they actually *fail* to fit the philosophical model postulating definite senses or descriptions with a special role. That is the point of Wittgenstein's asking whether it is not the case that “I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa” (§79b). What we in fact do in our use of names is not as uniform as the construction that the philosophical theory puts on it.

We are meant to imagine examples in which we can justifiably take back a definite description that we once did lean on, and also (I would assert) cases in which we could not do so (without being justifiably accused of prevarication). There are *different* sorts of cases, some fitting, and others failing to fit, the Theory of Descriptions model. Wittgenstein's point is an instance of the point that what we do

is *not* determined by rules that cover all cases. The fairly long paragraphs of §79 are meant to exhibit cases where in the philosophical construal fits poorly, and to elicit from us more cases in which we have more flexibility in switching descriptions than the philosophical model allows. This is to get us to see the gap between our practices and the model.

If the “cluster theory” were tantamount to this point of Wittgenstein's, then he is not in disagreement. But the advocates of the cluster theory seem to want more. According to Wittgenstein, all we can say is that when we use a name, we should have *something* to say about it. If circumstances arise making the use of the name appear questionable, then we had better say more about it. But of course, if *that* is the “cluster theory,” then it is no theory at all.

The eliciting of such descriptions is getting no *deeper* — it is not unearthing, by analysis, anything already there in the act of meaning the name. This is meant to be shown by the fluidity of our practices. What I must say about the name depends on actual circumstances, not on all circumstances that could possibly arise. On different occasions, I might explain myself differently. That would not entail that I am using the name without a fixed meaning, in any ordinary sense of “fixed meaning.” In §87 Wittgenstein says, “The signpost is in order if under normal circumstances it fulfills its purpose.” This gives a general characterization of the point he is trying to make.

Wittgenstein's reflections urge on us that, in providing a description to remove an unclarity about the proper name, we are not providing an analysis of the name. Explanations of meaning do not penetrate to a deeper level of meaning that lay there all along. The ability to provide descriptions in particular circumstances can be a criterion of understanding a name; but as Wittgenstein repeatedly insists, nothing stands in need of explanation unless *we* require one to prevent a misunderstanding. There is no determinate totality of all explanations that we may ever have occasion to offer. Wittgenstein's reflections on our actual practices, and on the role of explanations, are meant to show the jump from plain facts about our practices to the philosophical model of names being disguised descriptions. The jump rests on a view of explanations as called for independently of the context of the use of the words.

So, to sum up about §79. Wittgenstein raises a question about what we do when the

propriety of the a name, i.e., whether it picks out something and if so what it picks out, is put into question. In so doing, he is making (at least) two moves.

First, he is eliciting reflection on what might attract us to bad views, reflection on how a view of language can arise according to which there must be a precise content of the name, which determines under which circumstances the name refers to which particular item, so under which circumstances the propriety of the name disappears. In other words, the idea that we must be responsible for our words in the face of challenges — a truistic commonplace — becomes the demand for definiteness of sense. The notion that it has to be given in advance which challenges are the relevant ones, in any possible circumstances, is what arises. Wittgenstein is eliciting reflection on how this slide, or leap, is made.

Second, Wittgenstein is trying to defuse just this push by exhorting us to look closely at the details, without preconceptions. In his comments about “a whole series of props in readiness”, Wittgenstein's idea is that in different contexts, there are different things upon which we might rely. There are different standards for the acceptability of what we say, and even for flexibility “after the fact”, where we can retract one way of elaborating on a name and substitute another. Wittgenstein is trying to show that our practices do not have the overly schematic and oversimplified character that fuels the push into presuppositionlessness. So the analysis of a name as a description is not accurate to our practices.

That Wittgenstein is concerned with the philosophical picture of “presuppositionlessness” is confirmed in §80, which presents the “disappearing chair” example. Wittgenstein asks whether “chair” applies to it, and what determines whether it does or it does not. (“Do you have rules ready...?”) Wittgenstein wants us to agree that it is not quite right to call it a chair, nor is it quite right to call it *not* a chair. Wittgenstein is going against the idea that if our sentences are to make claims, then they must give us a verdict in all possible cases, i.e., that we *cannot* rely on the world's being well-behaved.

Now, an Interlocutor might say, “You have simply packed the assumption of the world's being well-behaved into your words; so you owe us a sketch of *exactly what* the presuppositions are.” (Indeed, that is implicitly part of what is going on in Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Tractatus* that there must be simple objects, for

otherwise language would have presuppositions.) What we find in §80 is that Wittgenstein flatly denies the urges in that direction. He says quite bluntly that our language does not reach out to all the cases. His example involves a humdrum word: 'chair'. To question whether you and I might not understand that word would be perverse. But then Wittgenstein depicts, in §80, a scenario in which our understanding of the word *fails* to deliver a verdict. Yet our grasp of the word is none the worse for that. Wittgenstein is suggesting that the same motives lie behind the "rules-for-all-cases" picture as lie behind Frege's or Russell's theory of names. Wittgenstein follows his usual gambit of taking a concrete case, and he points out that nothing in our practice forces us to think that language is insufficient. If enough fails, then so may our words. The conviction otherwise (in §79) is shown to be unmotivated (in §80).

About the scenario with chairs, another Interlocutor might say: "Yes, but that is just our flaw. We aren't always precise in our use of language." It is rather odd, though, to insist that our current use of 'chair' is not *really* rational unless it is determinate whether this (imagined) disappearing object is or is not a chair. Here we have, instead of a subtle teasing out of the motives to offer a philosophical theory, a flatfooted challenge to the theorist: "Look what your position implies about *this* case. Is that plausible?"

The message of §80, again, is that if enough goes wrong in the world, our words may fail. But that is not to say that we cannot describe the "enough going wrong" at all. We are not *totally* helpless in the face of a recalcitrant world. It is not to say, after all, that there is a fixed boundary of language. The message is rather that how we go on with our words is not contained in our *current* use of words. And Wittgenstein also means us to question the notion of "all possible cases." Is *this* case really a possible case?

John Austin similarly challenges this picture. Consider his example, in "Other Minds," about goldfinches. In calling something a goldfinch, Austin says, it is wrong to say that I am making a prediction about what will or will not happen in the future. It is a serious mistake, he says, to view language as always predictive. So if the goldfinch explodes, or quotes Virginia Woolf, there may be no answer to the question "Was that a real goldfinch?" In the other place in Austin's writings where he discusses this, "The Meaning of a Word," he describes the case of a cat that

suddenly delivers a philippic after years of harmonious, normal companionship. Austin says that neither 'It is a real cat' nor 'It is not a real cat' "fits the facts; for each is designed for other situations than this one". The moral here, too, is that ordinary language breaks down in extraordinary cases.

G.E. Moore, on p. 129 of his *Commonplace Book*, voices an interesting denial of this claim of Austin's:

Austin says, "Suppose my cat suddenly began to preach the gospel. There would be no answer to the question 'Is that a cat or isn't it?'" Wouldn't there also be no answer to the question "Is 'This is a cat, but it preaches the gospel' self-contradictory or not?" It looks as though there must be an answer, namely that it is not self-contradictory. It looks as if we must say, "The usage is not such that 'This preaches the gospel' entails 'This is not a cat'." Since if it were, there would be an answer to "Is this a cat or not?" — namely, "It isn't."

Moore here is just insisting that the structure of language still has to operate. There still must be relations of entailment, of contradiction. If 'This preaches the gospel' does not entail 'This is not a cat', then it would not be *wrong* to say 'This is a cat that preaches the gospel', and Austin would be wrong. But if it does entail 'This is not a cat', then it *would* be wrong to say 'This is a cat that preaches the gospel', and Austin is wrong again. Of course, Austin will turn out wrong if you are correct in assuming that the structure of language works in a certain kind of way.

There is another criticism of Austin possible too. You might say, "Look, Austin: you have *described* the case with words like 'cat'. You said that your cat preached the gospel! How can you use that word to conjure up a *case* unless 'cat' has its ordinary meaning?" But one would then need to examine that for what aspects of ordinary meaning one is playing on if one simply says that of course there is an answer to the question "Is that a cat or not?" I would claim that this rejoinder too assumes, like Moore does, that language has a certain structure. (In short, I find these cases convincing ones of "language failing", but I realize I have no knockdown arguments .)

Austin goes on to say that an *ideal* language would not break down no matter what happened. He suggests that the language of physics is such a language. But Austin is probably wrong about physics. And the idea of an "ideal language" having such

features is what Wittgenstein is warning us against in the ensuing sections.

Wittgenstein suggests that we have no examples of such a language, and that it is a philosophical chimera to suppose that there are any. All of our language-games lack rules determining verdicts in every conceivable case; and we have no idea what such language-games would be like. To put the point positively: Language presumes the well-behavedness of the world. (There may be a link here to the mysterious §242.)

The philosophical idea that language must have rules to handle all possible cases is the outcropping of a picture of rationality that is a central object of scrutiny, in various guises, in the *Investigations*. The general idea of fixity of meaning, and the concomitant notion of analysis as unearthing all that is at stake in the use of a word, are outcroppings too. Yet another outcropping, that has been implicit so far but becomes explicit in the §80s, lies in the notions of justification and explanation. Justification, on this picture, is that which provides guarantees against any conceivable counter-possibility, or doubt. Similarly, explanation is viewed as ultimate and unconditioned; the “full explanation” would answer any conceivable unclarity or confusion, without resting on any features of the world, the case, the explainer, or the person to whom the explanation is addressed. All of these discussions are connected. They share the idea of not resting on any presuppositions.

In §87, Wittgenstein raises the question of how to understand “Moses” (in §79), and then further doubts arise concerning how to take the explanations given. The Interlocutor asks how the explanation helps her to understand if the explanation is not defined too. She is saying that if the explanation is to fulfill its purpose, it must have a certain kind of structure, which ends in things about which explanation is not needed. Wittgenstein answers, “As though an explanation as it were hung in the air unless supported by another one.” He adds that no explanation “stands in need of another-unless *we* require it to prevent a misunderstanding.” The paragraph from which this is taken is a central one of the *Investigations*. Explanations are only required where *we* require them. They are not necessary to head off all possible misunderstandings. Nothing stands in need of explanations unless the surroundings make one necessary.

So we see again Wittgenstein's emphasis on the need for surroundings, the context, as already given. You need that structure there for something to play the role of an explanation; to remove those surroundings is to make it unclear what an

“explanation” would be. You wind up in the position of the Interlocutor at §86, who asks how an explanation can work *at all*. So these reflections on explanation are reminiscent of the “jump” noted in §79, with respect to what is necessary for the use of a name to be rational. In the present case, the jump rests on a view of explanation as existing independently of context, as it were “behind the words.”

Now, there is another route into fixity of meaning, which Wittgenstein briefly depicts in §81. Heretofore we have been approaching it from considering the structure of rationality (in a loose sense); but there is a way of approaching it from considerations about the workings of the mind — of how, in particular, understanding works. If words have no *fixed* meanings, then how can we be said to *understand* words? If we understand a word, there is something we are doing—a particular piece being supplied. Something particular about my mind differs if I understand the word, some particular content of knowledge that I possess. This content is the fixed meaning of the word.

That is a way into the picture. In §81b Wittgenstein remarks that his considerations

can only appear in the right light when one has attained greater clarity about the concepts of understanding, meaning, and thinking. For it will then also become clear what can lead us (and did lead me) to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules.

Some picture of how understanding, meaning, thinking operate feeds the conception of language as made up of fixed rules. The promissory note Wittgenstein gives here is cashed out starting in §138, where he starts considering understanding (i.e., understanding a word, or a sentence, or a rule). In this material, it seems, Wittgenstein is trying to undercut the idea of understanding as a definite mental state or process. But it is difficult to make out what that means.

We might say that Wittgenstein aims to undercut the picture of understanding as the hidden state from which the manifestations of understanding flow. We can split this swath into four sub-swathes.

1. §§138-42: Wittgenstein is looking at this notion of “flowing from” a hidden state.

What is the relation between the state of understanding and its manifestations?

2. §§143-55: Wittgenstein focuses on the “grammar” of understanding: the features of “what-we-would-say-when” in attributions of understanding. The upshot is not all that clear.

3. §§156-78: Wittgenstein optimistically says in §156 that all the point “will become clearer if we interpolate the consideration of another word, ‘reading’.” By this he means a thin notion of reading — just deriving sounds from text, with no questions of understanding at issue. Wittgenstein investigates reading in this thin sense for thirteen sections.

4. §§179-84: The coda. There appear to be summations, and some brief consideration (all too brief) of the use of causal notions.

At §185, there is a fairly abrupt break, when Wittgenstein begins his considerations on rule-following (which go up to §242).

We shall start on this next time; I hope to get through all of §§138-184 on Friday.