

LANGUAGE GAMES AND PRIVATE LANGUAGE

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The Augustinian picture

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* opens with a quotation from St Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine is giving an account of learning to speak:

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

Of course, Augustine is not recounting from memory, but rather expressing a commonly held view of the way we learn to speak. "This is what must have happened", he is saying. The central idea here is that the child learns to recognize an object and to associate a word with it.

Now Wittgenstein's intention is to lead us away from this view of learning to speak. The reason he quotes Augustine, who was one of the few philosophers he really admired, was evidently that in his opinion Augustine had given an uncommonly lucid account of this view. Wittgenstein wants us to see that the proposed account does not work. For one thing, a large part of speaking is not a matter of *referring to objects* in the first place; for another, this story could not even explain how we learn that. We shall get back to this.

Focusing on language learning provides an occasion for looking closely at what is really involved in mastering a use of words, at the place of words in our lives.

Wittgenstein thought it important to realize the limitations of Augustine's account, because whether or not we are aware of this, the fact that we tacitly assume its correctness tends to govern our thinking about words and meaning, and thus it has bearings on the way we think about many of the problems of philosophy.

The core of the Augustinian picture, as Wittgenstein describes it, is this:

the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. --- In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

The quotation from Augustine and Wittgenstein's comment on it are followed by what seems like a bizarre little story about a shopkeeper who is given a slip of paper marked "five red apples":

the shopkeeper ... opens the drawer marked 'apples', then he looks up the word 'red' in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers ... and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.

Thereupon Wittgenstein comments: "It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words." This remark may strike us as outrageous. "Of course we do nothing of the sort!" we'd like to say. What Wittgenstein is trying to create here, however, is what might be called a distancing effect: we are so accustomed to operating with words that we are not really aware of the complexity of what is involved in doing this. But try to imagine someone who is just coming to master these words, or who suffers from serious memory problems, and you may become aware of the skills that underlie the successful application of even the most everyday words of our language. The important thing to note here is that each of these words requires a *different* kind of skill: the use of the word "apple" is linked to a certain class of object, here illustrated

by its being placed in a specific drawer with a name on it; the use of colour words is linked to a sample (of course we do not all refer to one and the same colour chart, but in learning colour words we learn to match the colours of new objects with those of objects we have been shown before); the use of number words is linked to the counting of objects. Here we see that each of the words on the slip of paper is linked to the end result, the bunch of apples he hands over to his customer, by a *different* type of relation, mediated through a different way of proceeding.

This little thought experiment instantiates an important feature of Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy: he is not so much giving arguments as working on our habits of thought. That is, he trying to make us aware of our tacit assumptions in order to liberate us from them.

The builders' game

All of this takes place in §1 of *Philosophical Investigations*. In §2 the perspective is widened to include a larger activity: A is building something, and calling out "Block!", "Pillar!", "Slab!" to his helper, B, who brings him the building stones. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine this as a complete primitive language, and he says that this is a language for which "the description given by Augustine is right". By this he evidently means that each word in this "language" is linked to a particular type of physical object, as in Augustine's story. Actually, even this rudimentary language goes beyond Augustine's account, since A and B do not simply associate words with objects, but make use of the words in their activity: A uses the words to get what he needs, and B responds accordingly. This activity is what their "associating" words and objects consists in. The connection between, say, the word "block" and this particular shape of building-stone is constituted by the activity of the builders. B will not learn what it is he is supposed to do simply by having the building-stones pointed out to him and hearing their names, since that would require that he gets more out of the teaching than is contained in the act of pointing.

Wittgenstein calls the act of explaining a word by pointing to an instance of its application "ostensive teaching" (*PI* § 6). He is concerned to show the limitations of what can be achieved by this method. The pointing by itself does not convey the

activity that constitutes the use of the word (cp *PI* §§ 28-36). There are different aspects to this: on the one hand, there is the question of what we do in order to pick out the object in question, as illustrated by the case of the shopkeeper. What features are relevant for the application of this particular word? On the other hand, there is the question of how one is supposed to respond when the word is used.

The point of the language game metaphor is to bring these activities surrounding the uttering of a word into focus. We might compare a word to the ball in a game or the pieces in chess: we have not learned to understand the game by simply observing the ball or the chess king or being told what they are called (*PI* § 31). We must get clear about the *role* of the object in the game. Balls, for instance, are used in a variety of games: in one game you try to get the ball across the goal line or into a basket, in another you hit it across a net, in a third you try to hit it as far as you can while the other side tries to catch it, in yet another you try to hit your opponent with it, etc. If you simply concentrate on the fact that in each of these activities a similar-shaped object is in use, you will miss out on all these essential differences.

Most parents presumably play various word games with their infants in which they point to objects and utter their names. Even if this is not a way of conveying the use of words, it does not mean that these games are useless. Maybe in this way the child becomes attentive to the ritualistic aspect of language, to the fact that similar vocal sounds are produced in similar situations. In *Philosophical Investigations* § 7 Wittgenstein speaks about “those games by means of which children learn their native language”.

It does not matter that most parents probably have no clear idea of what actual bearing their efforts at teaching have on what their children end up learning: children do learn to speak!

Other than objects

After this, Wittgenstein proceeds with a further widening of the perspective on language. He imagines the builders’ game coming to comprise numerals, as well as the demonstrative pronouns “this” and “there” (*PI* § 8). The type of activity surrounding the use of *these* words is wholly different from that surrounding the

names of building-stones. In *PI* § 15 the idea of proper names is added. Furthermore, while the original builders' game consists only of orders, he now imagines a game of reporting: the helper is to tell the builder how many stones there are in a pile (*PI* § 21). An order and a report might sound exactly the same: they are only distinguished by their role in the game: an order means that the helper should, as we say, *make* it true; a report should *be* true. This brings us to the different roles of utterances. In *PI* § 23 Wittgenstein points out that there are – not three (assertions, questions, commands) but – countless kinds of sentence, and he gives a list (seemingly random) of 24 different uses of sentences – among them: describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements, singing catches, telling a joke, translating, thanking and praying.

After this, there follows a long sequence of remarks in which the points made in these initial passages are further refined and related to various debates in philosophy, concerning the concept of meaning, existence, particulars. Wittgenstein is here more or less explicit in his criticism of his own thinking in the *Tractatus*, as well as that of Gottlob Frege. Thus, Frege's requirement that a concept must have sharp limits if it is to be a real concept is replaced with the notion that what is important is that we can use a concept in practice. The word "game" itself is here used as a central example (*PI* §§ 65-71). There is no single characteristic or set of characteristics that all games have in common, at most different games are connected through a family resemblance, yet we mostly have no difficulty using the word "game" for various practical purposes. Thus, the existence of common features is not required for a word to have a place in our life. The idea that the objects to which a word applies must have some features in common is due to a mistaken picture of what is involved in a word having meaning. According to Wittgenstein this also throws light on language itself: a large variety of human activities are united by the fact that words (even many of the same words) are used in them, yet there are no specific common features making all cases of using words instances of speaking language.

If we think of speaking as playing language games, the implication seems to be that in speaking we follow a distinct set of rules which could be formulated in words. But Wittgenstein points out that this may be too simple an idea of language. The sense in

which a game has rules may vary from one type of game to another. In *PI* § 83 Wittgenstein writes:

Doesn't the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw.

And is there not also the case where we play and – make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them – as we go along.

The *sense* in which our speaking is regulated, then, varies from one situation to another. In some contexts (say, in a court of law) the way to proceed is clearly laid down and we can give an account of it, in other contexts we may all proceed in more or less the same way without being able to spell out the principles involved (say, among a team of carpenters), yet again there are contexts in which we improvise, and where we reckon with others being able to go along with what we are doing (say, in spirited conversation).

This observation should serve as a warning against a certain way of going on with the concept of a language game. It might be tempting to think that Wittgenstein is outlining a programme for philosophy, that of cataloguing the language games that there are (at least the main ones) and listing their rules. This, roughly, was the direction taken by Wittgenstein's contemporary J. L. Austin¹. It is not just that such a task would be philosophically banal, since it would serve no purpose unless it was done in the service of addressing particular philosophical difficulties. In fact, it could not be done since the task would be indeterminate and open-ended. For one thing, language games keep on changing, and for another thing, the question of what should

¹ See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

be seen as constituting a different language game may itself be a matter requiring philosophical reflection.

In fact, the idea that our speaking is ultimately guided by formulated rules leads to an infinite regress. For the rules, being formulated in a language, would have to be applied, and this would then presuppose a different set of formulated rules for their application, and so on. What basic to our speaking is not the knowledge of certain rules, but rather the fact that we have learnt to act in certain ways. This, in fact, is a recurrent theme in Wittgenstein's later work. (There is an extended discussion of rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.)

The so-called private language argument

Wittgenstein's rejection of the Augustinian picture of language learning has an important implication, one that has been an object of intense discussion: the critique of the idea of a private language. This critique occurs, roughly, in *PI* §§ 243-315. A core remark in this critique is *PI* § 258:

Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. – I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. – But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. – How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation – and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. – But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. – Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'.

This remark is a prime example of Wittgenstein's style of reasoning. It has the form of a compact dialogue between a protagonist (Wittgenstein himself as it were), and an interlocutor, but without indication of which remark goes with which participant. Sometimes there are more than two voices, and it is only by sensing what Wittgenstein is driving at that one is able to keep the participants apart. In some remarks, the distribution of roles is controversial, but in the present case there is a large consensus on how the remark is to be read: the interlocutor – let us call her the diarist (*D*) – introduces the idea of a diary about a sensation, and she does not see any problem with this idea. The protagonist (*W*), on the other hand, is arguing that we do not really have any clear understanding of what *D* is describing here. What *D* is proposing has analogies with what an Augustinian account of learning the names of sensations would have to look like. That would have to mean that to learn the meanings of words like “pain”, “hunger”, “itch”, etc, is to associate them with particular sensations. However, unlike the case of physical objects, a sensation (consistently with this account) is present only to the person who has it, so a teacher cannot point to my sensations and tell me “That's a pain”, nor can she inspect my sensations to check whether or not I have caught on to the correct use of sensation words. So if the Augustinian account is to apply, I must do the pointing and checking myself. But this is where *W* sees a problem. What is it to define a word to oneself? Of course, if one already has the use of a language for the purpose, there is no problem: I may undertake to use the sign “S” to refer, say, to “a tingling sensation in my lower lip”. But the point about *D* is that she has no suitable vocabulary at her disposal. All she can do, it appears, is to undertake, inwardly, to use the sign “S” for this and only this sensation.

But what would it mean for *D* to “undertake” that? When I undertake to act in a certain way, what I proceed to do either is or is not in accordance with my undertaking. If “anything goes”, I have not really made an undertaking. In the present case, however, there seems to be no basis for deciding what is or not in accordance with the undertaking. Suppose the next day *D* has an inclination to write an “S”: would she be right in doing so? Is it really the same sensation? The problem is not that her memory may deceive her, but that no standard has been established for deciding whether she remembers correctly or not. Calling two items instances of “the

same kind” presupposes some standard of comparison, but in this case no such standard has been provided. The illusion that there is a standard comes from our imagining that in concentrating my mind on a sensation I am at the same time laying down a standard of application. If there is to be room for talk about a standard, there must be *room for judging* whether I am acting correctly or not, independently of my inclination to act in this way or that.

Wittgenstein’s private language discussion has a number of dimensions, and it has been read in a variety of ways. Here I wish to focus on one aspect of it. In the second remark following the one just quoted (*PI* § 260), Wittgenstein writes:

--- Then did the man who made the entry in the calendar make a note of *nothing whatever?* – Don’t consider it a matter of course that a person is making a note of something when he makes a mark – say in a calendar. For a note has a function, and this “S” so far has none.

(One can talk to oneself. – Does everyone who speaks when no one else is present speak to himself?²)

Compare the case of the builder and his helper. If the helper brings a slab when the builder calls for a beam, the builder may correct him. If there were no correcting going on, there would be no room for speaking about moves as correct or incorrect. On the other hand, suppose the builder uses a slab when he really needs a beam. If he tries to fit it into the construction, he may notice that it does not work: the construction may become unstable or he is unable to go on. An onlooker can criticize his choice on purely technical grounds, since he can see the point of what the builder is doing. But when it comes to using the names of the building stones, there is no such external standpoint from which to judge the use of the names independently of their role in the interaction between the builder and his helper. Thus, if the builder went on building by himself we could still make sense of what he was doing. However, if he were to call out the names of building stones by himself, it would be hard to make

² I have deviated from Anscombe’s translation in the last sentence.

sense of what he was doing as a case of saying something. His calls would only have *the appearance* of moves in a language game. And something similar goes for the sensation diarist.

But do we never speak to ourselves? Of course we do, as Wittgenstein acknowledges. We will sometimes utter words out loud, say, in doing a calculation, or when trying to think of a person's name. However, this is done against the background of a shared language in which a distinction is made between getting it right and getting it wrong. Here we may wonder what the speaker means. (We may even correct someone who is doing math out loud for himself.) Merely uttering words by ourselves, however, does not necessarily mean that we are speaking to ourselves in this sense; thus, someone may be in the habit of repeating the last words he has heard under his breath without thinking of what he is doing. Here there is no question of what he means, and no distinguishing between right and wrong. What Wittgenstein is suggesting is that a sensation diary, without the background of a shared language, would be just as pointless as this type of speaking by oneself.

But if we cannot decide whether *one* person is right or wrong, some commentators have asked, what difference does it make if there are two people, or even a whole community? Cannot they all be wrong together? This question misses the point, however. After all, what would the community be wrong about? It is *its* language. It is not that a community is required to guarantee that something is correct, but rather: only between the members of a community trying to speak to one another is there any serious place for a distinction between right and wrong. Only there is there a space for disagreement and criticism concerning the use of words. This does not mean that there is always a way of resolving these disagreements, but that does not render it pointless to *seek* agreement.

By why cannot the sharing come later? some have asked. Suppose a solitary individual starts up a diary, and then later she comes into contact with language speakers and learns to explain her notes in their language. Would not that be sufficient to show that her notes had meaning to begin with; that there was a way of distinguishing right from wrong even before? But then the question is: what is she supposed to explain to them? She could not convey the point of the "diary" since the

diary did not have a point. There would be nothing to appeal to in order to provide a space for the question whether her explanations were correct or not. So the idea that the language might already be there before it comes to be shared is unintelligible.

What are the lessons to be learnt?

Many readers of Wittgenstein who have taken his comments on private language to heart have assumed that its import lies in the light it throws on first person psychological utterances – expressions of pain, feelings, intentions, beliefs, etc. However, it can also be argued – and there is some merit to the suggestion – that it really has a wider bearing on our thinking about what it means to be a speaker of language. On this view, the critique of the private diarist, together with the language game metaphor, are meant to focus our attention on the actual situations in which people use words because they have something to say to one another, rather than, as has been the tradition in philosophy, limit our attention to the objects *about* which we are speaking. This means that speakers and listeners are placed in the centre of our inquiry. On this reading, the problems of philosophy are to be resolved, not by conceptual analysis in the abstract, but by listening in on the conversations carried out by particular people in particular situations, in order to take note of the role of the words of our language in those contexts.³

³ I wish to thank David Cockburn for a number of helpful comments.