

**Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations***  
**Professor Warren Goldfarb (Harvard University)**  
**Lecture I: Introduction**

Topic of these lectures: the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951), as expressed in his major work *Philosophical Investigations*, posthumously published in 1953. The *Investigations* is one of the most powerful works in the history of thought, but also one of the most difficult.

Wittgenstein was born in Vienna in 1889, son of an Austrian magnate. In 1911 he arrived in Cambridge (England), to study with Bertrand Russell. He became possessed by the problems of the philosophy of logic. While serving in the Austro-Hungarian army during WWI, he wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (published 1921). This is the early philosophy of Wittgenstein.

The *Tractatus* is the culmination of the period in analytic philosophy that began with the breakthroughs in logic developed by Gottlob Frege and by Russell. From insights in the philosophy of logic (nature of logical laws, how inference is possible, the nature of the a priori) Wittgenstein builds an account of the nature of *representation*: how reality can be captured, represented, talked about at all — an account of the logical structure and basis of any possible language (any possible thought). From this he derived limitations on what can be expressed.

The aim of the book is to set a limit to thought or rather to the expression of thought. It is only in language that the limit can be set. (Preface)

Wittgenstein took himself to have demonstrated that all of traditional philosophy (not just metaphysics, but also ethics and aesthetics) lies beyond the limits of language, and is nonsense. The book ends with this:

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

The *Tractatus* is written in curious fashion: its sentences are highly aphoristic, and usually very cryptic. The sentences are arrayed as separated remarks rather than continuous prose, with an intricate numbering system. Although the book has not yet been understood at its most profound level, its major themes have had great impact. E.g., it was the inspiration for the movement known as logical positivism,

that dominated analytic philosophy 1930s-1950s. Even apart from this, it undercut the notion of the synthetic a priori in philosophy, by making the a priori into a language-based category. This illustrates a major theme of the *Tractatus*, what we might call “linguification”: attention to the structure of language provides the solution of, or the explanation for, or the dissolution of philosophical problems. Not just that language is the locus of analysis (with propositions taking the role that “ideas” might have had in earlier philosophy), but that the special features that come from its being language provide philosophical solutions.

After finishing the book, thinking that he had solved the key problems of philosophy, Wittgenstein left the subject and became a primary school teacher in rural Austria. Gradually he started feeling doubts. In 1930, he returned to Cambridge, soon began lecturing there, and remained for most of the rest of his life. From the early 1930s we have a large number of manuscripts and typescripts, as well as lecture notes taken by students. At first here is a rethinking and modification of some of the basic doctrines of the *Tractatus* (documented in manuscripts published many years later as *Philosophical Remarks*, *Philosophical Grammar*). Subsequently his thinking diverges almost completely from the early work. In 1934-6 he prepared notes for circulation, out of concern that his new views were being inaccurately reported; these are the *Blue and Brown Books*.

Throughout this period Wittgenstein wrote philosophy by writing notebooks, then reviewing them, eliminating some paragraphs, redrafting and rearranging others, having the result typed up, and then repeating the process again and again. By 1944 he had assembled in final form what is the first part of *Philosophical Investigations*, about 80% of it, and was apparently ready to have published. But it was not published until after his death. He also left many further pages of notes, journals, and so on, which have since been published: notably *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, *Zettel*, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, *Remarks on Colour*, *On Certainty*.)

Wittgenstein was, it seems, an amazingly intense (even hypnotic) figure:

When [Wittgenstein] started to formulate his view on some specific philosophical problem, we often felt the internal struggle that occurred in him at that very moment, a struggle by which he tried to penetrate from darkness to light under an intense and painful strain, which was even visible on his most expressive face. When finally, sometimes after a prolonged arduous effort, his answer came

forth, his statement stood before us like a newly created work of art.

—Rudolf Carnap (from Schilpp volume autobiography)

Those who are new to Wittgenstein should definitely read Norman Malcolm's *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. (A full-scale biography is Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*.)

*Philosophical Investigations* treats a variety of topics, central areas of the philosophical terrain in, broadly speaking, metaphysics, phil of language, phil of mind, epistemology: I'll go over its central topics shortly. Basically, Wittgenstein's concern is with the deepest problems that arise in trying to give a conception of our status and operation as rational beings. His topics are the stuff of traditional philosophy. His emphasis on meaning and the nature of logic shows his roots in early analytic philosophy. But Wittgenstein sets himself in opposition to early analytic philosophy, to his own former self, and indeed to all of the tradition, by maintaining that traditional philosophical accounts are based in their very core on *misconstruals* — of us, of our situation, of what the problems should amount to.

*Philosophical Investigations* is a *critical* work. Crucial to Wittgenstein's thinking: the misconstruals are made in the very setting-up of philosophical projects. It's not that standard philosophical views are false and to be refuted; nor is it that they are nonsense in any straightforward way. Wittgenstein is attempting to give us *new terms of criticism*. As Rush Rhees characterized it,

Wittgenstein is not demolishing earlier systems and erecting a new one. Wittgenstein would have demolished, if he could, the idea of a philosophical discussion as a contest to settle who is right and who is wrong.

That is, he is not proposing alternatives to one or another philosophical theory, but trying to pull the rug from under that theory and all its alternative theories. In this lies Wittgenstein's attempt to give philosophy a new self-understanding of its roots: what the impulse to philosophy is, how it operates and misoperates.

The peculiar nature of the project is reflected in the peculiar nature of the text. It is unlike any other work in philosophy. In it there is no sustained treatment of anything. It is a sequence of numbered sections, each 1 - 3 paragraphs long, with a great deal of discontinuity, recircling, and crisscrossing. Wittgenstein called it "an album" (p. ix). It is colloquial in style. Rarely is there anything that looks like an

argument. Rather there are stories, humdrum examples, parables. In a superficial sense, there is nothing that is hard to understand (quite a contrast with the cryptic remarks of the *Tractatus*), nothing hard to understand, that is, *except* how these stories, examples, and parables are supposed to have any philosophical bearing on anything.

In *that* way, it is an obscure text. Obscure, but not technical: Wittgenstein does not grapple with the structures his predecessors have erected. There is little standard philosophical jargon (no “concepts”, “sense”, “sense-data”, “logical form”, much less “regulative principle”, “pure intuition” — even “a priori” barely makes an appearance). From this we can surmise that Wittgenstein is not going directly and explicitly against the developed views of his predecessors. There is an intentional or cultivated naiveté in his method: he doesn’t deal with the developed theories of those he wishes to criticize, rather he pays attention to their starting points. The point is to get us to think about the very nature of the philosophical enterprise; to force us to seek the wellsprings: the felt needs or requirements that move us to do philosophy. His aim :

The axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but around the  
fixed point of our real need. (§108)

Another important aspect of the book: many sections contain remarks enclosed in quotation marks. These are not Wittgenstein's own views; they are remarks of the character usually called the “interlocutor”. Essential to see what role they are playing. Not simply a mouthpiece for views Wittgenstein wishes to oppose. Often these remarks express the temptations into philosophy, the almost ordinary things we notice that push to demands for philosophical accounts, but (Wittgenstein is suggesting) by so pushing wind up being distorting.

Hence attention is always required to the context of the interlocutor's remarks: what gives rise to them: the stance from which they are said, what the interlocutor hopes to exploit them for. Again, the focus is on: where do we start philosophy.

The central teachings of the *Philosophical Investigations* (on my view) are the new ways it forces us to think about the projects of philosophy; in its concern with stance and authenticity, with the reasons that our attempts at self-discovery go awry, distort, and with what our “real needs” might actually be in the enterprise of finding

ourselves.

My lectures will present some close reading of only a part of this one book. I will not talk about Part II (which was not authorized by Wittgenstein), and even of Part I there will be no attention to anything after §421. (Although you, of course, are encouraged to read the whole thing, as well as others of Wittgenstein's works.)

I like to break *Investigations* §§1-421 into “swaths” of text, although it should be noted that these are not strict, in that topics interweave considerably. My lectures will primarily concern the first, third, fifth, sixth, and seventh of these.

§§1-43 Reference and meaning (20 pp.)

“How does language hook onto the world?” Wittgenstein here attempts to capture how that sort of question arises; and to start breaking the pictures about language, as a representation of reality or as expressive of our intentions, that make that look like a real question, and that lead to the sorts of “theories of meaning” of the analytic tradition.

§§44 - 64 Logical analysis, “simples” (10 pp.)

What fuels the notion of logical analysis? Much of the concern here is directed more specifically than most other parts of the *Investigations* at the particular views of the *Tractatus*.

§§65 - 91 Universals and fixity of meaning (12 pp.)

Wittgenstein wishes to undercut the age-old idea that there must be universals (Platonic forms, concepts, attributes) underlying our use of general terms or predicates, and the concomitant idea that there must be a level of fixity of meaning that anchors our language. Suggestive connections are made between these notions and those of justification and explanation, with natural (but, Wittgenstein claims, philosophically-loaded) views of the latter influencing the former.

§§92 - 137 The nature of the investigation (10 pp.)

Often metaphorical, Wittgenstein here tries to depict the sort of general views that greases the slide into the philosophical theories he wishes to undercut, and suggests the proper philosophical method to go against them.

“The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery.” (§119)

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose. (§127)

### §§138 - 184 Understanding (21 pp.)

What is it to understand (a word, a sentence, the principle of a series)? What is it for our understanding to fit, or fail to fit, the use of a word, or a sentence; what is it to “know how to go on in the same way” with the word, the sentence, or the series? What is the role of mental events in understanding? Is understanding a state of a mental apparatus?

### §§185-240 Following a rule (14 pp.)

Wittgenstein is perhaps the first philosopher to raise the idea that there are philosophical depths in the very notion of following a rule. This connects back to the discussions of universals (how do we recognize new instances of a concept) and understanding (going on in the same way with the word, the sentence, the series); and also to questions of logical inference. Rules are subject to interpretation; what fixes what the “right” interpretation is? What is the role of the conventional in rule-following? Of a community?

### §§243 - 309 Privacy of mental states (15 pp.)

Are mental states, particularly sensations, private, unknowable to any but the mind that has them? Wittgenstein here formulates what is often called the “private language argument”, which seems to have the conclusion that there cannot be a language the words of which “are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.” What lessons are to be learned about the notion of privacy at all?

### §§310 - 421 The mental (24 pp.)

More on sensations and pain; also on thinking; personal identity; and the nature of consciousness.