

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*
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Lecture VI: §43, §§65-88 (opening)

In §§39-64 Wittgenstein is primarily occupied in a polemic against atomism (both Russell's logical atomism and the views of the *Tractatus*). His two main targets are the notion of "simple", as used in the key concept in atomism of "simple object", and the idea of logical analysis, that is, the idea that you reveal some real "deep structure" in thought when you break analyze the sentence expressing the thought (logical analysis on the model of chemical analysis, as he characterizes it elsewhere). Here Wittgenstein is going against developed and sophisticated philosophical views. These sections are reasonably straightforward; I do not find in them the intricate structure that I see, for example, in §19. He's being very open about the philosophical positions he's criticizing; he's not trying to tease anything out. He does not seem to be trying to get at the motivations of those positions; indeed, sometimes the sections even have a tone of ridicule (e.g., about the broom and the broomstick in §60). I am not going to discuss these sections, as it would require some immersion in the *Tractatus*.

(Aside: there is a nonphilosophical translation glitch in §39. Anscombe translates the name of the sword as "Excalibur", although the Arthurian legend never has Excalibur destroyed. The original is "Nothung", the sword in Wagner's *Ring*, which is indeed broken into bits, in *Walküre*, Act II, and reconstituted in *Siegfried*, Act I.)

Now in §43a we get the remark: "For a large class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."

This has widely been taken as Wittgenstein's "definition of meaning as use", or as the expression of a Wittgensteinian "use-based theory of meaning". (Actually, "defined" seems wrong to me; the German should be rendered "it can be explained thus".)

The juncture at which this remark occurs (i.e., in the middle of this swath of texts about atomism) should make it doubtful that this is some important and central thesis of Wittgenstein's. His tone is very casual, as if to say that his slogan says

really nothing at all. Isn't it unarguable that when we know the meaning of a word, we know how it is used (and conversely)? So we might even take Wittgenstein's remark as a commonplace (a reading perhaps emphasized by his saying "use in the language" rather than simply "use"). (The clause "though not for all [cases]" is, however, a little puzzling.) Who would disagree? Not the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, who said "a sign determines a logical form only once it is taken with its logico-syntactic use", and "what signs slur over, their application says clearly" (3.327 and 3.262)

The remark can be a commonplace because "use" is a loose enough idea that §43 says next to nothing. To get some real content, "use" would have to be given some particular thrust that Wittgenstein never suggests. That is, he gives no framework for characterizing use. As a piece of theorizing, this so-called definition *idles*. It is always at issue as to what counts as a use, and how much of the use is supposed to matter. Talk of "meaning as use" does not yield anything about when two words have the same meaning. For to ascribe sameness of meaning is to say that the words have *features* of their application in common. What features might be essential to the ascription is not given beforehand: it depends on our aims, in the particular context, of talking about meaning at all. (Hilary Putnam once remarked: "meaning is a coarse grid over use". But then the question arises: what provides the grid?)

Thus, far from expressing a theory of meaning, I would take §43a as a warning *not* to theorize about meaning: both to be aware that different aspects of use might be at issue at different times, and to be cautious about what other categories might be brought in, in talking of meaning.

The last message comes, in part, from reading all of §43, not just the first paragraph. For the two short paragraphs present a seeming puzzle: meaning can be explained as use; the meaning of a name is explained by pointing to its bearer. How could this be: how can you get from the bearer to the use? Here Wittgenstein is trying to get us to appreciate the lessons of §§1-37, i.e., how naming is dependent on surroundings; how the "word-thing relation" is not isolatable, but is a matter of the interrelationships provided by all of language.

We turn now to §§65-88: these are very important. Wittgenstein is dealing with (1) universals: that which is supposed to underlie our use of general terms; and (2) rules of language generally. There is a sharp rhetorical break at §65. The Interlocutor jumps in, prompted to raise an objection, along the following lines:

Wittgenstein hasn't gone deep enough; he hasn't said what makes a language a language. We have reviewed simplified language-games. In general, we have described enough. Whatever it is that makes something a language (whether connections with mental images or laws of syntax, or intentions, or causal relations, or whatever), we will have the needed basis for the foundations of language that Wittgenstein says aren't there.

Wittgenstein answers: "True. I haven't given you an essence. For there is none." To show that this isn't simply a cop-out, Wittgenstein introduces the idea of "family resemblances." Here we have another model of how general terms operate. The notion was first introduced in the *Blue Book*, where Wittgenstein says, on p. 17:

What are signs?...What makes the investigation difficult is our *craving for generality*." This craving is the result of a number of tendencies connected with particular philosophical confusions — like the tendency to look for something common to all the things of which a general term is true.

On p. 19 of the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein suggests that family resemblance helps us in understanding wishing, thinking, understanding, meaning, and the like. In another middle period writing (1936, "Eine philosophische Betrachtung"), Wittgenstein is diagnosing a philosophical argument. He says that the reasoning rests on three errors:

1. A word must correspond to an object to have meaning (a myth);
2. A false concept of logical analysis as similar to chemical analysis;
3. A false conception of logical exactness — ignorance of notions of *family*.

What is family resemblance? Family resemblances are nests of properties, similarities, relations that the things picked out by a general term bear to each other. So Wittgenstein is claiming that, for a family concept, there is no one thing in common among all the objects falling under it.

The nomenclature of "family resemblance" underplays the variegation that Wittgenstein is pointing to. For in families, the resemblances of the members

depend on a fairly limited number of features. Hence the terminology doesn't completely forestall a misunderstanding, that what is at issue in family-resemblance terms is a number of reasonably homogeneous subclasses or subrelations.

But the 'game' example illustrates the point much better. The motley of features can't be readily surveyed, and new cases can always bring in *new* features. §66 is meant to emphasize this, which is why Wittgenstein plays out the example to some extent. (And we are meant to play it out even more.) Each time that we think of a feature as setting up a large and homogeneous subclass, we see that it fails. Counterexamples are rife. (There are attempts in the literature to rebut Wittgenstein by giving a definition of "game", but to my eye they fail ludicrously.)

What is the point? Wittgenstein wishes to undercut the philosophical model of essences, or universals, or Platonic forms (or Fregean concepts, or...) as being what underlies the application of general terms. (To get at the traditional way of thinking about this, see Russell's chapter on universals in *The Problems of Philosophy*. He exhibits quite clearly the philosophical motivations for thinking that we need universals.)

The attack, at first blush, amounts to this: Why think that there is *the* determining thing? There may be one or many things. For at least *some* general terms, it is a mistake to think that there is a common property that is possessed by all the objects to which the general terms apply. There is nothing definable in simpler terms that underlies general terms. So we see that, although some of our concepts possess easily statable necessary and sufficient conditions, but others do not, and yet we still operate quite well with them.

What force does such an observation have? If we are convinced, then we have to abandon the idea that our non-primitive concepts operate by being definable in terms of (analyzable into) simpler concepts. So much the worse for Socrates (demanding definitions of "justice", "piety", etc., because there must be some common property of all just acts, all pious acts, etc.), Leibniz, Carnap (of the *Aufbau*), and many others.

But someone not committed to such projects of definition could respond this way:

“So what? All this shows is that some general terms have no easily storable equivalents. One might even say *that* is why we need that general term: no other manageable expression does the work it does.”

Hence, the first blush attack does not go all that far. To go further, we need to get clearer on the intended role of universals. If we give up the claim that a universal underlying the term gives us a “common property” in the sense that entails the possibility of an analysis, then what does the universal do? Universals are needed as *guiding*, giving *content* to new ascriptions. They ground the distinction between correct and incorrect ascriptions. So the common property is conceived as a justification or ground: that's the underlying motivation.

The question that universals are meant to answer is: What *regulates* the application of the general term? So how is Wittgenstein's pointing out family resemblances supposed to cut against this philosophical motivation? Here's how. If you look at how we operate with these family terms, then you will see that when questions arise about an ascription of a term (or the denial of the term) we give and get richly textured explanations in specific cases, explanations that can be of *very different kinds* (again, see the discussion of “games” in §66). However, when we talk philosophically of an essence or an attribute, that makes it look as if there is a *uniform* story to tell here. But our actual practices are not uniform at all. Now, without the definability of terms in *simpler* terms, the appeal to universals becomes an appeal to an ineffable something that guides us in each case. That sets up a tension between the supposed uniformity of the guide and the heterogeneity of our actual activities. So begins to look empty to speak of our knowledge of how to apply a general term as knowledge of a common (ineffable) property.

This is the second-blush attack. But the Interlocutor has a comeback: “It's true, my model was too simple. It needs to be more complicated. Grasping what is behind a general term is not a single, simple feat, but a multitudinous, complex one.” In this way the Interlocutor can still cling to the idea of a fixed, full story of what underlies the applications of the general term.

Now, how do Wittgenstein's considerations move against *that* idea? That leads us to the “third-blush” reading. Here family resemblance is only one strand in the argument. (As should be apparent from the fact that, starting in §70, he talks

about color terms. Nobody would claim these are family concepts. Also, as I'll discuss in detail in the next lecture, in §79, he leaves off talking of general terms to talk of singular terms, names, and discusses Russell's theory that names are given their meaning by associated descriptions.)

Another thing Wittgenstein harps on is the boundaries of our concepts. In this Wittgenstein can, be read only as saying that we can get on perfectly well with vague concepts; that the early analytic philosophers, in particular, were wrong to think that "underneath" the vaguenesses of ordinary language there had to be sharply demarcated concepts, and to be supporting this by pointing out that we do operate well with apparently vaguely-demarcated concepts. True enough, he is saying that vagueness is in order as it is. But that's a superficial point.

A deeper connection is with the idea of fixity, or regulatedness: a *fixed content* of our ascriptions. Nothing that might come up *later* can affect what my current ascription contains. Otherwise, my ascription could not be justified, since what happens later might change what we need to say to justify it. And that's what motivates the idea of sharply demarcated concepts. (Cf. Frege's remarks on p. vii of *Foundations of Arithmetic* about the need for fixed concepts, and the threat of perpetual flux. What does a new ascription tell you? For Frege, it must be something fixed or nothing at all. If I say, "This is an F," then that has to be in the same sense in which I have *always* used "F") A similar point about regulatedness can be made about singular terms. It is this issue of the *fixity of meaning* of our terms, both general and singular, that is the object of attack in the "third blush".