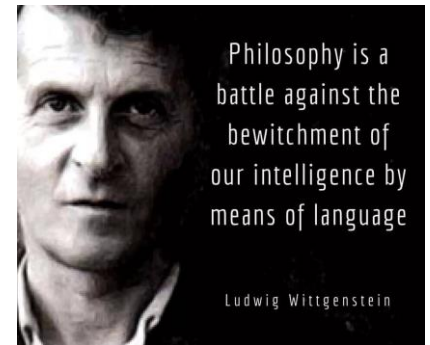


Language-games and Family Resemblance

Bishop Butler: “Everything is what it is and is not another thing.”

Shakespeare: “I’ll teach you differences”.



Could there be a complete language?

- TLP: “if all the true elementary propositions are given, the result is a complete description of the world” (TLP 4.26)
- PI: ‘It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard of ways.’ (PI 133)
- ‘Ordinary language is all right.’

Philosophical Investigations – the prominence of ‘language-games’

- ‘I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, a “language-game”.’ (PI 7)
- ‘Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that *speaking* a language is part of an activity, or a form of life.’ (PI 23)
- ‘Consistently with his general position, he does not give any general account of what a language-game is, not a criterion for individuation for language-games.’ (K, p.130) Illuminates through examples.

Simple forms of life - Primitive language-games

- *Philosophical Investigations* begins with an outline of the Augustinian picture of language. The possibility of this picture is explored through the development of the simple language-games. E.g. Builders example (where one calls out the words, the other acts on them). - the ‘practice of the use of language’ (PI 7)
- ‘We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games “language-games” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.’ (PI 7)
- ‘Our clear and simple language-games are not preparatory studies for a future regularization of language—as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. The language-games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities.’ (PI 130)

What does this show? Differences!

- Objection: ‘Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language. And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is

because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language". I will try to explain this.' (PI 65)

- 'You need to call to mind the differences between language-games.' (PI 290) 'There are countless kinds [of sentence]: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.' (PI 23)
- 'Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:
Giving orders, and obeying them—
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
Reporting an event—
Speculating about an event—
Forming and testing a hypothesis—
Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
Making up a story; and reading it—
Play-acting—
Singing catches—
Guessing riddles—
Making a joke; telling it—
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.
—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)' (PI 23)

Tool-box analogy

- 'Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)' (PI 11)

Games

- 'Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.
And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network

of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.' (PI 66)

Family Resemblance

- ***You talk about all sorts of language- games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is:***
- How is it possible to speak of language-games that seem to be constituted by absolute difference???
- 'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.— And I shall say: 'games' form a family.' (PI 67)
- 'Why do we call something a "number"? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.' (PI 67)

Philosophy fails to understand differences or the context of a language-game

- 'When philosophers use a word—"knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name"—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.' (PI 116)
- 'If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: "What is a question?" or, what is a description - but there are many kinds of description, as there are many kinds of question.' (PI 24)
- 'Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy.' (PI 11) The root of philosophical nonsense lies in such misunderstandings.

Clarity: to understand the role of the concept in the language-game.

- For example, in the analysis of 'pain' and 'pain-behaviour' : 'The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose.' (PI 304)
- The sceptic who doubts the existence of a 'pain': 'If he now said, for example: "Oh, I know what 'pain' means; what I don't know is whether this, that I have now, is pain"—we should merely shake our heads and be forced to regard his words as a queer reaction which we have no idea what to do with. (It would be rather as if we heard someone say seriously: "I distinctly remember that some time before I was born I believed".) That expression of doubt has no place in the language-game;'. (PI 288)
- 'We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself upon us here.' (PI 304) Distinction between surface and depth grammar. 'In the use of words one might distinguish 'surface grammar' from 'depth grammar'. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use—one might say—that can be taken in by the ear.—And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word "to mean", with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about.' (PI 664)
- 'Philosophers who say: "after death a timeless state supervenes", or "at death a timeless state supervenes" & do not notice that they have used in a temple sense the words "after" &

“at” & “supervenes” & that temporality is embedded in their grammar.’ (*Culture and Value*, p.26e).

Language-games as a horizon of meaning

- Example of relationship between the commands of “Slab!” or “Bring me a slab!”
- How would the difference be taken? Is “Bring me a slab” one long word corresponding to “Slab” – can it sometimes mean one word and sometimes four? What gives it sense?
- ‘For what goes on in you when you give such an order? Are you conscious of its consisting of four words while you are at uttering it? Of course you have a mastery of this language - which contains these other sentences as well - but is this having a mastery something that happens while you are uttering the sentence?’ (PI 20)
- We have a tendency to ‘picture psychological phenomena (such as understanding or mastery) in terms of a determinate inner state’. (MG 54)
- What gives it sense? ‘But doesn’t the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same use?’ (PI 20) ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’. (PI 19)

Forms of life, understanding and lions.

- ‘If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.’ (PI p. 190e)
- ‘Essence is expressed in grammar ... Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)’ (PI 371, 373).
- ‘If God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of.’ (PI p.185e)
- ‘The arrow points only in the application that a living being makes of it. This pointing is not a hocus-pocus which can be performed only by the soul. (PI 454)
- ‘(A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar.)’ (Philosophical Investigations 1953, p.189e).
- ‘It is not only agreement in definitions but also (odd as it may sound) in judgments that is required’ (PI 242), and this is ‘agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.’ (PI 241)

Is Language ever incomplete/complete? - ancient city analogy

- W. is concerned to respond to a possible objection: ‘that languages [2] and [8] consist only of orders.’ That they are ‘incomplete’.
- But, is our language complete? He looks at later additions to our language, like ‘the symbolism of chemistry’ - was language incomplete before the advent of that symbolism? These latter additions are ‘suburbs of our language’. ‘how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?’ (PI 18)
- ‘Our language may be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.’ (PI 18)

Abbreviations and Bibliography

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