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I WANT YOU TO BRING ME A SLAB:
REMARKS ON THE OPENING SECTIONS OF THE
*PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS**

The first few pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* are often seen as relatively unproblematic. To many this portion of the text has appeared reasonably clear in intent and operation, and, in the end, easily digestible. The source of such complacency is not hard to find. Many of Wittgenstein's remarks throughout his treatment of language and meaning seem to be directed against a naive mentalism, a view to the effect that meaning and allied notions are grounded in or constituted by occurrent mental phenomena, perhaps even mental images. Wittgenstein constantly urges us to look and see whether there are phenomena of the appropriate sorts "going on inside" when we assert a sentence, issue a command, point to a thing, attend to a property, and so on. Wittgenstein's presumed point is that when we find no such phenomena, the case is won.

So far this is easily digestible; but to take Wittgenstein's primary object to be naive mentalism is to take him to be attacking a straw man. It is difficult to find any significant philosopher whose doctrines could be so easily defeated. Indeed, such naive mentalism is most foreign to just those philosophers with whose views on language Wittgenstein is most concerned, viz., Frege and the author of the *Tractatus*. After all, the keynote of early analytic philosophy is "always to separate the logical from the psychological";¹ Frege and the early Wittgenstein are insistent on the irrelevance of the passing mental show to any questions of meaning. Their order of priority is clear: only *given* the structures they see as underlying objective communication can sense be made of psychological notions.

Of course, it could be claimed that, despite their protestations, the early analytic philosophers were in some straightforward way mentalists in disguise. Various commentators, led on, I believe, by their complacent construal of the *Investigations*' early sections, have read mentalism back into Frege and the early Wittgenstein. These readings are, to my mind, simply unsupported by the texts. Moreover, they render it impossible to understand what the aims of early analytic philosophy were and how it could have effected the dramatic change it did.²

My question, then, is how Wittgenstein's seemingly naive remarks, and the passages in which they are embedded, could be meant to cut more deeply, i.e., to go beyond an attack on some rather unsophisticated theories of meaning. This question has a specifically exegetical form, for it is the question of the nature of Wittgenstein's interlocutor in the opening sections. What stance does he represent, and why does Wittgenstein set up the particular oppositions that he does? The beginnings of an answer can come only from a close scrutiny of how these interactions unfold. In this, moreover, attention has to be paid to the ways Wittgenstein's rejoinders and proposals may be meant to engage and provoke the reader, not merely to elicit acquiescence.

To take these questions seriously is to recognize a curious and pervasive feature of Wittgenstein's method. Wittgenstein does not ordinarily set up as his opponent one who expresses anything recognizable as a philosophical theory of naming, meaning, mind, or what have you. The interlocutor does not voice developed philosophical positions; he is not a sophisticated Fregean or Tractarian, who puts forward some tenet *p* of his system to which Wittgenstein counters "not *p*". This feature is sometimes characterized as Wittgenstein's interest in "unmasking temptations". Talk of temptations has its good points. It indicates that Wittgenstein seeks not so much to propose an alternative to such and such a philosophical theory, but to pull the rug out from under the theory. Moreover, it hints that to be successful Wittgenstein's remarks must exact an acknowledgement that what he has pointed out is what might have led one on. Obtaining such an acknowledgement may require portraying the sources of a philosophical position rather than refuting the position: it may well be more a matter of depiction than of argument.

"Unmasking temptations", however, is a slogan. Like all Wittgensteinian metaphilosophical slogans, if it is not supported by a detailed account of what is going on in the sections where the work is being done, it can mean anything. Indeed, the slogan can mislead in suggesting that there are specific theses which play the role of unnoticed premises (in, e.g., Frege's arguments), which are beguiling, but which can be recognized as incorrect or misguided as soon as they are made explicit.

Rather, what Wittgenstein wishes to bring to light operates at a more basic level. For in these sections Wittgenstein is examining what it is to *begin* looking for a philosophical account of language and meaning. The

“decisive moves in the conjuring trick” (as he puts it in another context, §308) do not amount to specific theses held by this or that philosopher; they are made without notice at a point in the course of philosophizing far earlier than the development of a particular position. Thus I see the opening of the *Investigations* as crucially concerned with exhibiting such an early stage and with evoking its character.

All this is still not far beyond the level of slogans. There is no way of fleshing it out but to scrutinize Wittgenstein’s words. Hence it is to the text that I now turn.

1.

Wittgenstein begins, as is well known, with a passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*, and tells us that the passage expresses a particular conception of the essence of language. The conception he elaborates has three features: every word names something; the meaning of a word is what it names; there is no difference between kinds of words. Surely we ought object to this as a starting point (just as with naive mentalism); it is hard to see that anyone of importance has ever held this position. And again, the conception seems most inaccurate if attributed to the early analytic philosophers I have mentioned. To say of Frege that he does not recognize differences in kinds of words is to ignore the centrality to his thought of his distinction between saturated and unsaturated expressions. To say that Frege takes the meaning (in the ordinary sense) of a word to be what it names is to misread him blindly. For Frege gives “Bedeutung” a special usage, and emphasizes the role in what we unreflectively call the meaning of a word of both *Bedeutung* and *Sinn*. Moreover, to attribute this conception to the early Wittgenstein is to miss what he himself calls his *Grundgedanke*, that the logical constants do not stand for anything (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.0312).

Now it might be said that although this so-called Augustinian conception is not particularly true to these or other modern thinkers, these thinkers share enough of the conception that their differences with it are mere matters of detail. That is to say that their actual theories of language are not what is at issue. I think, in fact, that Wittgenstein is suggesting this. But it surely does not do to use the label “Augustinian conception” at will, and then take any considerations against its crude features as directly refuting or undermining the philosophers so

labelled.³ The *task* is to figure out on what level Wittgenstein might be operating that would make details unimportant, and what there is about a crude conception like this that carries over to sophisticated theorizing.

I believe, however, that in §1 Wittgenstein is also raising a deeper problem. It is not at all obvious that Augustine is expressing a conception of the essence of language. My primary reaction to the citation from the *Confessions*, read by itself, is to think that what it expresses is obvious – it seems trivial, prosaic, well-nigh unobjectionable. It is just a harmless elaboration of the observations that early in life children learn what things are called, and learn to express their wants and needs verbally. It hardly goes beyond the level of the commonplace; surely no capital can be made of it.

Thus, I would take Wittgenstein's first sentence after the quotation, to the effect that Augustine's remarks contain a definite picture of the essence of language, to be intended to shock. Many commentators would have us meekly acquiesce to this sentence,⁴ whereas I suggest that Wittgenstein means to call up amazement. *This* is giving the essence of language? *This* is a philosophical conception of meaning?

In short, Wittgenstein is, already in §1, pointing to the unclarity of what it is to have a conception of language; we know neither what constitutes a conception (a "picture of the essence") nor when it happens that our words express one. He is suggesting that despite its commonplace air the quotation *can* be taken as expressing a way of looking at language that is in its very core philosophical.

The transformation of Augustine's remarks from trivial to metaphysical occurs when we read the passage as attempting to treat certain sorts of problems as being entered in certain sorts of debates. The notions Augustine invokes, like "naming some object", "wishing to point a thing out", and "state of mind", can be entirely unexceptionable; after all, we use them all the time. However, Wittgenstein seeks to show that when these notions are used in certain contexts, they come to have a weight that our ordinary understanding of them does not support.

I take Wittgenstein to want to claim that, roughly put, innocent notions like these function in philosophy continually to set up the frameworks in which debate goes on. That they are everyday notions fuels our conviction of their availability for philosophical exploitation. But when they figure in general explanatory settings, a structure is imposed on them; so construed, they will shape how we view the task of any account and how we characterize what is to be accounted for.

To expose these ordinarily hidden moves, Wittgenstein will adopt what we might call an intentional naïveté. The chief expression of this stance is the constant hectoring of the interlocutor to substantiate his remarks and even his terminology, a hectoring that seems often to be challenging the obvious. Wittgenstein's aim here is to keep us to a low level, the level of description; for we cannot see what our words come to until we have a perspicuous and unbiased view of what the data are. To be sure, it is never clear beforehand what "description" is, and when we are in danger of going beyond it. In the list of "uses of language" in §23, Wittgenstein indicates that description is not a single or homogeneous category (and, of course, we cannot take description to amount to something like "picking out the facts", where the notion of fact is supposed to have some independent content). However, the point here goes further. Whether a sentence counts as description will depend on the work to which it is to be put. The forced naïveté is thus meant to unearth how things we say, things that in ordinary contexts are the most ordinary sorts of descriptions, can become something else.

Wittgenstein begins to flesh out these ideas at once. In §2, he gives a simple example where all is open to view: the language of the builders. He says it is a language for which the description given by Augustine is correct; it is a language, I take it, where there can be no question of what it "amounts to" to make the ascriptions Augustine does. In §5, Wittgenstein notes, "It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words".

This remark ought not to be taken flatly. To be sure, Wittgenstein adduces the example of §2 because he hopes it to be illuminating. Yet I cannot imagine that he intends us to accept the example without hesitation. For surely it raises serious questions, which are perhaps best brought out by considering two ways in which the example may be taken.⁵

(1) We can imagine the builders as people much like you or me, but having four special sounds that they use in a specific way, i.e., the way given in §2. There seems to me little problem in this. We can then easily think of an apprentice's learning this "language" by watching, grasping the intentions in the utterances, seeing what builder *A* wants, etc. And there can be no hesitation in saying of *A* that he wants a slab and therefore calls out "Slab!". So here we see that Augustine is correct, literally and word for word.

(2) On the other hand, we can imagine the builders as people whose entire linguistic behavior is given by the description in §2. Now the terrain has changed, as perhaps is evidenced by our imaginings. It seems most natural then (to all I have asked) to think of these builders as cavemen, as plodding, as having blank expressions, and so on.

Here a worry arises: perhaps the terrain has changed too much. Surely it can be objected that under reading (2) the example has no relevance to “the study of the phenomena of language”, because it is then hardly a language at all. If this is the whole of their “language”, can we take them to be speaking, to be using words with understanding, to be human?

In fact, I take Wittgenstein to be asking for this reaction. This is evidenced by his use of “calls” for the words of this language, by the interlocutory accusation in §65 that Wittgenstein evades the real problem by not giving a characterization of what counts as a language, and by §§19–20, as we shall presently see. Moreover, outside the *Investigations of Mathematics* V §50 and *Zettel* §99. All this shows a fascination with the builders, and suggests that it is an example meant to be spun out.

The challenge is that under reading (2) what is described is not a language. Now what are the grounds for this challenge, i.e., for denying that there can be understanding here – denying this, so to speak, at the very start, so as to deny the relevance of anything further that might be said about §2? What, after all, is wrong with taking the assistant who starts getting it right (bringing a slab upon hearing “Slab!”) as understanding?

There are, of course, stories that seem to support the challenge. These imagined builders do seem mechanical and animal-like. Yet this hardly seems more than to say that these builders are not fully intelligible to us, or that we cannot imagine ourselves leading their lives. Wittgenstein would then ask why one should dig in one’s heels on such ground. That is, Wittgenstein would insistently demand reasons for vesting anything important in one or another particular part of any story that could be told here. In the face of this insistence, the challenger might well want to explode with this: “These ‘builders’ don’t think! They can’t think; what Wittgenstein has described leaves no room for thinking”.

Indeed, such a reaction is suggested in *Zettel* §99, where the interlocutor says, “You are just tacitly assuming that these people *think*; that they are like people as we know them in *that* respect . . .”. Now, if what pulls together and underlies the force of the challenge does lie in the

idea of thought, then it should be clear that the challenge cannot operate at the level of description, for it implicitly invokes an unexamined conception of great intricacy and power. To mount such a challenge is, in the end, to imagine an independent process of thinking that is behind and animates language. It is to imagine language as stuck on to people who already have thoughts; thoughts are what make noises into language.

Now Wittgenstein does not engage in a full-tilt assault on philosophical conceptions of “thinking” until later in the *Investigations*. For now, it is enough to emphasize the wealth of assumptions made when “thinking” is exploited in the present context. In *Zettel* §99 Wittgenstein goes on to say of the builders:

But the important thing is that their language, and their thinking too, may be rudimentary, that there is such a thing as “primitive thinking” which is to be described via primitive *behaviour*.

In simply presenting the possibility of taking the builders to have “rudimentary thought”, the sort of thought appropriate to their lives, Wittgenstein means to undermine the sharp dichotomy “either they are just like people as we know them or else they are automata”. More important, though, he is posing two general questions: From what stance are standards for what counts as “thinking” supposed to come? Upon what features is the power we are ascribing to thought supposed to be based?

These questions have particular force, I think, against those who hold that whatever handle we can get on the notion of thought comes only via considerations about language. For Wittgenstein is suggesting that they may well have stacked the deck in implicitly (or even subliminally) using a conception of thought to frame the characterization of what is to be analyzed, and in thereby coloring the data that have to be accounted for.

There are, of course, ways to respond to Wittgenstein’s questions.⁶ The moral, however, is that one cannot buy the whole kit and caboodle at the start. We must examine, in the small, what aspects of our operations we are taking as crucial to “animate” language, and why. This is, in some measure, the subject of §19.

Hence, nothing conclusive emerges from the worries about the builders. Again, I take this to be intentional. (The absence of a definite answer is also hinted at in §360: “We say only of a human being, and of what is like one, that it thinks.” The hint comes from the obviously intentional vagueness of “like”.) We are then meant to retain a certain

uneasiness, a sense of oddity, about reading (2) of the builders' language. In denying the builders anything else but these calls, we have denied them so much that we are reluctant to call the calls *names*. To say that here "Slab!" names slabs is just to say that *A* calls out "Slab!" and *B* brings a slab; all is open to view. Because of this simplicity, we want to say that this is perhaps like a name but really is not one, or not one in the real sense – the sense in which we have names in our language. Stripped of the ideology that leads to the blunt assertion "this is not language", the reluctance itself is a datum.

This reluctance reflects back on what I've said about §1. As we've seen, under reading (1) there is no question about the word-for-word accuracy of Augustine's remarks. Under reading (2), however, we are uneasy, and hesitate to apply the notion of "naming some object" – as well as, presumably, those of "wishing to point a thing out", "state of mind", and the like. What creates the reluctance, the difference between the two readings, is the abrogation of the rest of language. This suggests that our everyday applications of these notions presuppose the surroundings provided by the rest of language. Given that the surroundings are in place, we can use these notions without reservation to mark out various distinctions. When the surroundings are removed, the notions no longer operate quite rightly.

Thus the relation of §2 to Augustine's remarks is far from straightforward; Wittgenstein's note that the builders provide a case for which the description given by Augustine is correct has a double edge. Augustine's remarks can be trivial, if we take the notions that figure in it to be operating locally. The trouble comes when we segment the description, i.e., when we take "naming", "wishing to point", and so on, as if they picked out isolatable phenomena, whose character can be given independently of any surrounding structure.

This idea of surroundings is connected to why the double aspect of Augustine's remarks arises in philosophical contexts. To take the notions Augustine invokes as figuring in a general account of language is to take them as picking out particular phenomena that are crucially, perhaps foundationally, at stake in the operation of language. These phenomena in and of themselves then become the focus of theorizing. Thus, for example, in §6, Wittgenstein talks of the connection between word and thing. His remarks there are intended not to deny that attributions of reference to words make sense, but rather to expose a slide that results in giving the word-thing connection a special place *underlying* the use of

language, as the essential item in the explanation of understanding. When this sort of thing happens, the notions are construed as operating on their own, independently of the rest of the structure. For it is they that ground the structure. Our considerations about §2 thus suggest that what is involved in undertaking such general accounts is already a large move.

In his investigations of the notions that can play a role here, Wittgenstein intends to give this altogether too broad characterization content by teasing out the ways in which these notions are illicitly taken as separable when exploited for certain ends. Now, one lesson we are to learn from Wittgenstein is that there is no accurate general characterization of how one can go wrong – we can expect no systematic account of what it is to treat notions in isolation from the surroundings that ordinarily give them life. Further insight can be gained only by detailed examination of cases. I shall consider one such examination, that in §§19–20, which poses the question of how words are meant.

2.

In §§19 and 20, Wittgenstein examines what I have called the notion of the animation of language by thought by looking at the relations among the builders' call "Slab!", *our* command "Slab!", and our sentence "Bring me a slab". Here he is using our hesitations regarding the language of §2 to raise questions about our language, and in particular about what *our* meaning our words consists in. It disperses the fog to consider the builders, not because such primitive languages settle anything directly, but because they force certain questions back on us.

The things the interlocutor says in these sections have a very commonplace air: our order "Slab!" is elliptical for "Bring me a slab"; when I say "Slab!" I mean "Bring me a slab"; when I say "Slab!" I want that you should bring me a slab; and so on. Wittgenstein does not deny these commonplaces, but seeks to show that the interlocutor, in taking them to evidence something deep about language, is putting on them a burden they cannot bear.

The interlocutor starts by claiming that the builders' call is not our command, since our command is elliptical for "Bring me a slab". He is trying to locate our uneasiness with the builders in something specific about their calls as opposed to our sentences, i.e., in something finer than the overarching fact that the builders' lives are, after all, different from

ours. Wittgenstein agrees that our one-word command is elliptical (as it surely is). But how does this humdrum observation show a difference between it and the builders' call? The interlocutor responds that the conclusion follows simply because the builders' language does not contain the longer sentence. The interlocutor must, then, be construing the ellipticality of our command "Slab!" for "Bring me a slab" to imply that the functioning of the former is parasitic on that of the latter. He conceives of our one-word command as a conventionally shortened form of the *real* sentence "Bring me a slab". Something is left out in the former, and we are in some way more accurate when we put it back in by filling in the ellipsis. He is claiming that any account of what we do with the shortened sentence must go by way of the longer one: our command "Slab!" can function as it does only *because* it is at bottom the longer sentence.

The interlocutor here is headed towards a philosophical theory of language. Agreement with his characterization of the relation between the shorter and longer sentences will rapidly drive towards the idea of there being a full sense of our sentences (or a proposition, as some have put it), viz., what is obtained when *all* of the "ellipses" have been filled in. To block this drive at the start Wittgenstein will call our attention to the ways in which the notion of ellipticality, when construed in this way, is groundless.

Thus he asks, with an innocent air, why we don't take the one-word command as the basic form, and the longer sentence to be "conventionally lengthened". (If we do this, there is no bar to identifying the builders' call with our command.) Why is the longer sentence to be taken as the standard?

The interlocutor answers that it is because you really mean the longer sentence when you utter the shorter sentence. Again, in one tone of voice this is a triviality. The interlocutor, however, is in effect emphasizing "really", and is thereby voicing the deep-seated conviction that the longer sentence has some sort of priority. He is construing "really meaning" as a relation to something. The something here is the longer sentence *as opposed to* the shorter. In the philosophical not-so-long run, the something turns out to be the full sense, or the thought in its entirety, which may well go beyond the sentence as uttered.

To point out the need for some support for taking such talk of "really meaning" as showing that one form of the sentence is more basic than the other, Wittgenstein dismissively asks, "Do you say the unshortened

sentence to yourself?" The answer, of course, is no. All that can be concluded is that the two sentences mean the same, and that the shorter one is, well, shorter. Wittgenstein even asks, "Why should I not say 'When he says "Slab!" he means "Slab!"'?"

Now, we normally do not say such things. Perhaps then we should pause at this question. For it suggests that the interlocutor could (although he does not) point out the following: we say "When he says 'Slab!' he means 'Bring me a slab'", but not "When he says 'Slab!' he means 'Slab!'". Nor do we say "When he says 'Bring me a slab' he means 'Slab!'". Surely this shows that the longer sentence is a more accurate locus of meaning.

But how does this show that? We say "When he says X he means Y" in response to a question, when something about the utterance is unclear. It is hard to imagine a case in which we would be unclear about "Bring me a slab" yet would have understood had "Slab!" been said. Hence the shorter sentence is not, in general, useful for explaining the longer. This is an innocent observation, but the interlocutor concludes that the shorter sentence depends on the longer one. Of course there is a jump here that amounts to an implicit adoption of an inchoate conception of "full sense". For the full sense represents the complete explanation of meaning, the one that handles any unclarity that could possibly arise. The assumption of such a final resting point provides a notion of a "direction of analysis". It is this notion that funds the interlocutor's claim that "Bring me a slab" is more basic than "Slab!". Now Wittgenstein criticizes this conception in many ways. He challenges the idea of complete explanation and all possible unclarity, and denies that questions and doubts elicit something already there, somehow, in the original sentence. These criticisms, however, need not be rehearsed here.⁷ For the present task is to show that the observations we make about meaning when we stick to the descriptive level do not by themselves substantiate the interlocutor's claims. If these claims are substantiated only when we import a conception of full sense or something tantamount to it – a philosophical picture of the essence of language is ever there were one – then that is enough.

(Clearly, no one Wittgensteinian attack of the sort I am discussing could be conclusive. A defender of the conception under attack can, at each juncture, claim that something else – not the putative fact under consideration – furnishes its true support. But enough cases like this will surely make these disavowals ring hollow.)

In any case, the interlocutor of §19 does not invoke features of how we explain what we mean. He takes a different tack. To show that something about the one-word command can be gotten at only via the four-word one, the interlocutor says, "When I call 'Slab!', then what I want is, *that he should bring me a slab?*" Again Wittgenstein agrees to the commonplace, but challenges its efficacy. The interlocutor is speaking as if the wanting had isolatable parts corresponding to the longer sentence. He passes from a certain description of the speaker's desires to something about the "real sentence". But what is the justification for this move? Note, by the way, that we can equally well say, "When I say 'Slab!', I want a slab", or, "When I say 'Slab!', I want him to obey the command 'Slab!'". The various ways we can transform the description here constitute no evidence for taking one sentence rather than the other as basic.

In trying to base his claim on what the utterer of "Slab!" wants, the interlocutor is taking there to be an object of the wanting, viz., a state of affairs that is wanted and that has a specific character given by a canonical verbal description. Wittgenstein asks for the grounds for such a construal of the wanting. The question with which Wittgenstein concludes §19 suggests that the construal is grounded only if the utterer of "Slab!" in some sense thinks the longer sentence. Clearly, however, no such *conscious* thought is, in general, present. Hence the construal either is groundless or else relies upon some notion of unconscious or implicit thought. And in the latter case, the interlocutor is simply presupposing what he needs to substantiate. He must support the idea that the one-word command depends on the four-word command. But to assert that unconscious or implicit thought of the longer sentence always occurs is already to assume that "Bring me a slab" is a more accurate expression of the "elliptical" command "Slab!": it is to assume that our operations with "Slab!" are mediated by some more basic relation to "Bring me a slab".

Yet if we cannot rely on a basic level of language to anchor what we mean, what is it to mean "Bring me a slab" itself, i.e., to mean the longer form? In §20 the interlocutor suggests a plausible answer: it is to use the sentence in contrast with other sentences that share some of these words, like "Bring him a slab", "Bring me a pillar", etc. I shall call these other sentences "variants".

The interlocutor's suggestion may seem obviously right, but it can give rise to yet another philosophical conception: the idea that the

meaning of the sentence is constructed out of something specific located in each word – something that can be gleaned from contrasts with those variants in which that word alone is replaced, and that tells what is done in using just this word as opposed to the alternatives. It is not far to the idea that we understand the sentence by grasping its constituents and seeing how they are combined.

However, when “using a sentence in contrast to its variants” is taken to ground the notion of how we mean a sentence, it appears that to use a sentence in contrast is to perform an act that explains the speaker’s uttering that sentence. Here, as before, Wittgenstein notes that no introspectible features of mental life support such a localization of “using it in contrast” in a particular act. The absence of such introspectibilia highlights the jump that has been made in ascribing a certain character to the otherwise unobjectionable notion of using in contrast, for it indicates that this ascription rests on no facts whatever. Wittgenstein adduces the following further considerations to undermine the ascription: the usual talk surrounding particular acts is inapplicable; questions like “Do all the variants enter into the act?” and “When does it happen?” seem completely inappropriate.

Wittgenstein then points out that we say we use the sentence in contrast because our language contains the variants. It is, of course, a truism that we could not use a sentence in contrast to others if the others were not available. Wittgenstein means more, however: to say one uses the sentence in contrast to the variants is to say *no more* than that the language contains these variants, and when one utters the given sentence one is not uttering the variants. The whole content of our talk of using a sentence in contrast lies in the availability of alternatives in our language. There is no particular act which is the “using in contrast”, except for the utterance of the sentence itself.

It might be objected that we do have a richer notion of using a sentence in contrast to others, e.g., when I have thought about whether to write “quite talented” rather than “very talented” in a letter of recommendation. Exactly so, but in specific settings like these we have the particular facts that anchor the “using in contrast”. The act of choosing is visible, there are specific alternatives, and questions like “When does it happen?” are answerable. The interlocutor’s notion is not like this. He is talking of “using the sentence in contrast” as a general phenomenon – as always occurring – with the contrast class including all the possible variants. And then there are no facts that could ground a notion of a

particular sort of act. Nothing is being added to the description “I said these words and meant them”.

Thus the interlocutor may be charged with illicitly importing features that emerge in special contexts into an overly general notion. However, the diagnosis may be taken further. Wittgenstein claims that in general no more is going on than that I said this sentence and meant it, though I could have said any of those other sentences, but didn’t. One wants to object that more must be going on. For the fact that I could have said those other sentences, but didn’t, *bespeaks* something. The notion of “using in contrast” gives what lies behind my saying *this sentence* and not those others. There must be something behind my utterances to explain why I make *them* rather than others that are available to me. I must in some way be constantly weighing, checking, and selecting my words, just as I do consciously when I write letters of recommendation. Either acts of picking (or something like picking, but not *exactly* picking) go on all the time, or else I am not speaking – I am only mooing.

The Wittgensteinian response to all this would be to scrutinize both the picture of rational language use at work here (including the picture of rationality it embodies) and the felt need for explanations of our utterances. Why, after all, isn’t my meaning what I say explanation enough? What is to be secured by demanding something further? Is there anything that, in the end, would satisfy these demands? Questions like these surface frequently in the *Investigations*, for Wittgenstein sees the desire for explanation as operating powerfully, pervasively, and misleadingly in philosophy. With regard to §20, however, we need only say that that desire is operating prematurely. To rely on unexplored presuppositions about the nature of rational language use is to assume far too much about the subject that we are supposed to be investigating from the ground up.

Once again, then, Wittgenstein has tried to show that what we all agree to concerning meaning does not by itself support the idea that “what I mean” picks out a privileged sentence – a sentence whose internal features will explain how my utterance does its job. When we recognize this, it is no longer dangerous to speak of a sentence’s being elliptical. Such talk does not commit us to thinking that the sentence leaves something out that I supply by “meaning it”. “Slab!” is elliptical for “Bring me a slab” because they mean the same and the former is shorter. The feeling that the former leaves something out arises from the fact that, given the whole of our language, certain forms – like the latter – can

be taken as paradigmatic. (Forms, for example, that can forestall unclarity in a wide enough range of circumstances, or forms that simply are familiar enough and used frequently enough. As the occurrences of “enough” indicate, there are no absolutely paradigmatic forms.) Ellipticality does not point to any notion of the complete content of our words – that which may go beyond the words as uttered and which those words in some ultimate way express.

In short, that two sentences have the same sense does not imply that there is a privileged way of expressing that sense. Indeed, in the last paragraph of §20, Wittgenstein puts off a request for just such a privileged verbal expression with the observation that what it comes to for two expressions to have the same sense is that they have the same use.

It might be objected that this is false, and that, indeed, no two sentences have (exactly) the same use, since there will inevitably be some occasions where one would be employed but not the other. The reply to this is not simply that Wittgenstein means “more or less the same use”. To ascribe sameness of sense to two sentences is to say that they have features of their application in common. What features might be essential to the ascription is not given beforehand, for that depends on our aims in the classification, on the reasons we are talking – in the particular context – of sense at all. Indeed, I would argue that there is *no* general notion of use, and would claim that Wittgenstein agrees. For such reasons, I do not read his notorious “definition” of meaning as use in §43 as a definition, or as explanatory, or as suggesting a “use-based theory of meaning”. (This reading is closely connected with taking Wittgenstein not to be a behaviorist. It should be clear that if he is not, then little can be made of talk of “use” simpliciter.) Given that invoking use by itself carries little information, I take his remark in §43 to be, by and large, a denial of the possibility and appropriateness of theorizing about meaning.

In sum, Wittgenstein is concerned in §§19–20 with ways in which philosophical questions about meaning can arise. His point may perhaps be summarized by a remark from the *Zettel* §16:

The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in.

Yet, of course, he is hardly denying that we can and do mean sentences in various ways. Rather, he is trying to get us to resist the impulse to localize meaning something in a specific act or event. Admittedly, it is no easy matter to pin down precisely what the denial of this status to meaning something amounts to.⁸ Partly, Wittgenstein is urging that the

answer to a question of how a sentence is meant depends on no one thing, or few things, in particular, but rather on a variety of features of the utterance and the utterer, and on the circumstances in which the question is asked. More important, Wittgenstein is denying that the notion of meaning something supports certain conceptions of language, and, in particular, that it supports the idea that there is *the* thing that is meant (which would be the content or relatum of the act).

In taking meaning amiss, Wittgenstein charges, we illicitly use the ways we have of talking about the surface level of mental life in talking of notions like meaning, wanting, and understanding. His pointing to the lack of introspectible phenomena of the appropriate sorts is a way to show that an unwarranted step has been taken. It is this step – rather than any specifically mentalistic theory – that he wishes to undercut. To use his term of art, it is a question of the grammar of crucial notions like meaning. Given certain misunderstandings of that grammar, a naive philosopher might attempt a mentalistic account. But reactions to mentalism seek only to replace one explanans with another, and hence rely on the same presuppositions about the explanandum.

Indeed, the move Wittgenstein discerns, here as elsewhere, is not tied to any one developed philosophical view. Rather, it is made on the way *into* philosophizing. Once it is made, there will be questions that philosophers will begin to debate, notions that philosophers will begin to refine. Wittgenstein wishes to snap such debates off before they begin by showing that at the start we have misread the facts. He is indicating the groundlessness of our insistence that these facts, expressed in commonplaces we all agree to, point inevitably to the notions that are the subject of philosophical debate.

As we've seen, he does this by constantly challenging the ways we might want to exploit the commonplaces. By themselves, the commonplaces are perfectly unobjectionable (that is why Wittgenstein can claim in §305 that he is not denying anything). Yet every time we try to make something of them, it turns out that a jump has been made: we have already assumed a special interpretation of the commonplaces. This raises the question of where the insistence that the facts must be so read comes from.

That question, in turn, can serve to uncover unexamined preconceptions – protopictures of thought as animating language, of what explanations of meaning must rest on, of the nature of rational language use, etc. His point then is that these preconceptions affect what we take

as data. We read the commonplaces through philosophically tinted spectacles.

Of course, such protopictures are powerful, and cannot be simply dismissed. In a sense, the opening sections of the *Investigations* set an agenda. To substantiate the charge that philosophers groundlessly misconstrue the commonplace, Wittgenstein must go on to investigate further aspects of what he sees as the fuel for such misconstruals. It is the subtle and interwoven nature of these factors that makes the *Investigations* appear to proceed "criss-cross in every direction".

The opening sections of the *Investigations*, though, have the crucial role of bringing to light that there is something to be examined at this level. What makes it possible for philosophizing even to begin is a decisive move that is ordinarily unrecognized, very natural, and hard to conceive of avoiding. Wittgenstein is trying to expose the distance between how we take matters when we first start philosophizing and what we really have to go on. It is not easy to recognize this, and it may be far more difficult to accept the "pictureless" view of things that such a recognition entails.

NOTES

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¹ Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1980), p. XI.

² Allegations of disguised mentalism often arise from the view that the logicolinguistic theories of Frege and of the early Wittgenstein presuppose some sort of "epistemological" foundation. Thus, it is alleged, these philosophers have to subscribe to some implicit epistemology which, *faute de mieux*, must be psychologistic. That is where the mentalism resides. (The best example of this line of thought is in P. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), Chapter II.) Such allegations seem to me to rest on a lack of appreciation of the ways in which the theories of these philosophers undermine received views (then and now) of the place of epistemology in philosophy. See H. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), especially Chapters 1 and 2, and T. Ricketts, 'Objectivity and objecthood: Frege's metaphysics of judgement' (forthcoming, *Synthese*).

³ Cf. G. Baker and P. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), Chapter 1.

⁴ E.g., A. Kenny, *Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,

1973), p. 154; N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 71; and G. Baker and P. Hacker, *loc. cit.*

⁵ That the example of the builders may be read in two ways was first suggested to me by Stanley Cavell.

⁶ See R. Rhees, 'Wittgenstein's builders', in *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

⁷ §§87–89 and perhaps §209 are most directly relevant.

⁸ I take, e.g., §§140–160 to be attempting to pin down the related idea that understanding is not a specific, isolatable mental state or process.

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