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Playing the Language Game Game

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## Playing the Language Game Game

The invented practices Wittgenstein called language games seem susceptible to three possible uses. The first of these - the construction of 'first approximations' to the ordinary use of words - was rejected by Wittgenstein from the start. But that rejection has been mistakenly taken for the eschewal of another use Wittgenstein actually embraced for a time - the analysis of language into its constituent language games. The third use - as objects of philosophising - is the one which stuck; but it proved more hazardous than it looked.

### 1. Language games as first approximations

Wittgenstein wrote in one of his notebooks: 'When I describe certain simple language games, this is not in order to construct from them gradually the processes of our developed language - or of thinking - which only leads to injustices (Nicod and Russell). I simply set forth the games as what they are, and let them shed their light on the particular problems.'<sup>1</sup> The procedure Wittgenstein is objecting to is the following. In order to construct our developed language, we start by imagining a simplified world to which we could apply simplified concepts. Then once we have seen how the application would go in the simple case, we introduce more complications, and revise the application to deal with them. Thus Russell has us 'imagine that each mind looks out upon the world, as in Leibniz's monadology, from a point of view peculiar to itself; and for the sake of simplicity let us confine ourselves to the sense of sight, ignoring minds which are devoid of this sense.'<sup>2</sup>

In Nicod's work, the method is greatly expanded and systemised. He first asks us to imagine 'a creature having no other sense than hearing transported along a line divided into little segments such that with each passage over any segment A, a particular sound a is produced.'<sup>3</sup> Such a creature would have enough material, according to Nicod, to apply some of the laws of the geometry of lines. In subsequent chapters creatures and worlds with different features are imagined, and the possibility of applying more extensive geometries is demonstrated. The meaning such a creature assigns to 'point' in such an example is not the meaning which Nicod would have physics assign it, but helps us on our way to determining that meaning. At the

end of his thesis Nicod writes, 'Of course, such reconstructions are easy alongside of those which the existence of heterogeneous fields imposes, and which, in addition to the profound changes the latter brings about in all things, postulates objects as well as sense-organs. However, our work already contains the idea of the method to be followed: it shows that the road is arduous, but also that it is practicable.' (p.192) Why Wittgenstein thought these methods led to 'injustices' is outside the scope of this paper. The important thing here is to see just what kind of 'analysis' he was rejecting, so as to avoid the mistake, made by Rhees for instance, of concluding that the remark rules out 'any analysis at all.'<sup>4</sup> That does not seem to have been his intention.

## 2. Language games as analysis

A year or two after the remark quoted above, Wittgenstein wrote: 'We must be clear that our examples are not preparations to the analysis of the actual meaning of the expression so & so, (Niquod sic), but giving them effects that "analysis".'<sup>5</sup> The suggestion here is that the simple language games are not merely like our language, but actually belong to it as self-contained fragments. It is followed up in more detail in the Blue Book where Wittgenstein says 'There is no one exact usage of the word "knowledge"; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used.' (p.27) and '(Many different games, resembling each other more or less, are played with this word. Think of the different uses of the numeral "1".)' (p.50). This seems to remain his strategy in the Brown Book discussions of 'infinite' and 'can' (pp.95 and 100-119). By contrast, this attempt actually to exhibit the use of a term by means of invented language games is entirely absent in the Investigations. Why? The difficulty is in showing that the simplified use of a term succeeds in isolating the cause of our troubles - that our worries about infinity, say, already arise in BrB 32's use of 'open', and can be resolved there.<sup>6</sup> It is plausible to suppose so if our language is seen as no more than a collection of these games, with new additions leaving the earlier games unchanged; then our use of 'infinite' would have to be 'just as straightforward as that of "open"' (p.95). But if new additions to language

alter the games we already play, the strategy is doomed.

That the structures of language games can change as they grow is illustrated by 'that looks red'.<sup>7</sup> The language game it extends uses 'that is red', and allows no justification for this statement. Since one way the addition changes the game is to provide the possibility of justifying 'that is red' in some situations, one wouldn't want to say that in this expanded language game the use of 'red' is just as straightforward as in the first. Another example is temporal discourse. Wittgenstein claims that in BrB 51-56 'we don't come across the ideas of the past, the future and the present in their problematic and almost mysterious aspect.' (p.106). But as Dummett explains, it is not the assertion conditions for simple past tense sentences which present a problem, but complex cases which exploit their 'truth value link' with present tense sentences.<sup>8</sup>

Since the use of language games for the purpose of analysing concepts into their self-contained fragments is given up, there is less need to emphasise that each invented language game is 'complete'. Sometimes the claim of completeness can be helpful in focusing our attention on the actual example before us, and showing that we are inclined to philosophise over even these simple cases in mistaken ways. But not all Wittgenstein's invented games require this sort of completeness. For instance, the game 'when A gives an order B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule' (PI 143) achieves its aim whether or not one tries to imagine it as a complete primitive language, which in this case would be a distraction. Again, there is no point in imagining 'When I call you, come in through the door' as a complete language.<sup>9</sup> Complete or not, it serves its purpose. In the Brown Book Wittgenstein says without qualification that his language games are 'languages complete in themselves' (p.81); in the Investigations merely that he will sometimes 'speak of a primitive language as a language game.' (7). This shift of emphasis indicates a sharpened sense of the appropriate uses of invented language games, to which we now turn.

### 3. Language games as objects of philosophising

What remains in the Investigations is the use of language games as objects of

philosophising. Their philosophical purpose is not to use a problematic concept or some proxy for it, but to set out a practice which we are inclined to use such a concept to describe. The very first language game of the Brown Book (BrB 1) is the one in which a builder A calls out a word and his assistant B brings a stone of a certain shape. Wittgenstein claims that it is a game for which 'Augustine's description of learning the language was correct' (p. 77). By studying it we learn something about the terms of that description: that is why the language game is retained in the Investigations (as PI 2). The other invented language games of the Investigations are of a similar character. Consider the two which extend the original builders' game by adding numerals, the words 'there' and 'this', colour samples, and the names of tools (PI 8 and PI 15). We are inclined to claim that all the words of these games 'signify' objects, and Wittgenstein uses the games to show, for instance, that this claim can disguise the importantly different ways the words are used. Wittgenstein then introduces questions and reports into the builders' language game (PI 21), so that he can discuss, among other things, our inclination to describe the differences between statements and commands in terms of the Fregean theory of proposition and force. A language for describing combinations of coloured squares on a surface is meant to be a language game for which the account Wittgenstein quotes from the Theatetus is really valid (PI 48). That is, we are meant to feel happy to claim that its words---'R', 'G', 'W', 'B'---are the 'bare names' of 'primary elements'---its red, green, white, and black squares. Wittgenstein can then use the game to investigate the sense of that kind of claim. The game is altered at PI 64 'so that names signify not monochrome squares but rectangles consisting of two such squares.' Since we may be inclined to

say that 'the symbols of this language game stand in need of analysis' Wittgenstein can use the game to draw out and question that inclination. Similarly with the language game PI 60, which has two ways of playing it: 'in one (a) the composite objects (brooms, chairs, tables, etc.) have names . . .; in the other (b) only the parts are given names and the wholes are described by means of them.' We feel like saying 'that a sentence in (b) is an "analysed" form of one in (a)', so the game can be used to throw light on that tendency. Wittgenstein considers the concept of 'following a rule' with the aid of a builders' game using a table (PI 86); the concept of 'understanding' with the aid of the two games in which A gets B to write down a numerical series (PI 143), and in which A writes a series and B tries to find a law for it (PI 151). The two language games at PI 630 involve, in one, orders and obedience; in the other, predictions of chemical reactions. Both might be described in terms of the concept of 'prediction', and this can be used to tell us something about the way we might be inclined to think about voluntary actions. The point about all these language games is that their purpose is to draw forth certain problematical concepts and claims which we are inclined to use in discussing them. None of them uses the terms or remarks they are concerned with elucidating--by the time of the Investigations, that kind of invented language game has dropped out of the picture.

Within this general technique, however, there are some pitfalls. One of the most striking is connected with Wittgenstein's use of patterns (colour samples, schematic drawings, etc.) in the Blue Book to discredit the idea that mental images can play the role of meaning in language. 'If the meaning of the sign... is an image built up in our minds when we see or hear the sign, then first let us adopt the method we just described of replacing this mental image by some outward object seen, e.g. a painted or modelled image. Then why should the written sign plus the painted image be alive if the written sign alone was dead?' (p. 5). At this time he was extremely confident of this procedure, and even wrote: 'We could perfectly well, for our purposes, replace every process of imagining by a process of looking at an object or by painting, drawing, or modelling; and every process of speaking to oneself by speaking aloud or by writing .' (p. 4) He apparently uses it as part of the elucidation of 'A is in pain' (p. 53), a passage which Kenny has cited, together with Investigations 300, as evidence for his view that Wittgenstein retains the basic elements of the picture theory of meaning in his later philosophy.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the contrast between these two passages is instructive. Kenny takes his references to

express the view that imagining A in pain is picturing something, namely A's behaviour. But that Investigations 300-301 are a criticism of this view is clear from the discussion of imaginability in later sections (390-397). The actor who is supposed to imagine that the person he is playing is in pain and concealing it is not having a mental picture or anything that can be replaced by a real picture or a real action (393). More importantly, what is 'going on' in the person is irrelevant - even if we should always describe imagining something as having a private picture of it, that does not make the use of the concept perspicuous (392). The absence in the Investigations of even the effective ploys of the early Blue Book signals a deeper understanding on Wittgenstein's part of the difficulties involved in 'describing private experience'. Replacing the image by a pattern relies on the similarity of the two; if one is dead, so is the other. But where did this idea of their similarity come from? They are not so similar that one might mix them up (Investigations 386). In his Zettel Wittgenstein wrote, 'The tie-up between imaging and seeing is close; but there is no similarity. The language games employing these concepts are radically different - but hang together.' (625) He eliminated from the Investigations the early techniques which suggested a similarity, even when they were justified by this much similarity, that pattern and image are equally 'dead'. But to pursue his claim about 'radically different' language games would lead well beyond the scope of this paper.

One of the earliest invented language games involves a similar, and perhaps equally suspect, comparison between patterns and sentences. In the Grammar, Wittgenstein notes that 'I read a story and don't give a hang about any system of language,' which seems to conflict with the view that propositions must belong to a system of language. So he asks us to imagine a simple language game to which this observation also applies: 'a picture story in schematic pictures, and thus more like the narrative in a language than a series of realistic pictures.' Being schematic, the pictures would belong to a system, yet they would still have a certain power of their own. Wittgenstein goes on to remark that 'A sentence in a story gives us the same satisfaction as a picture.'<sup>11</sup> The example would succeed if it helped to resolve the conflict in question, if it brought into prominence a

feature accounting for the 'soul' of words. But the most prominent feature of the schematic pictures is their resemblance of the situations they represent, which can only lead us back to the compelling but deeply misguided theories of the Tractatus.

#### 4. Are language games really languages ?

The employment of Wittgenstein's examples changes. Yet all along it rests on an important presupposition, namely that we in some sense understand them as languages. We do not, however, reach this understanding in the way Wittgenstein describes the people in the games themselves as having learnt them, but by description, and as he writes in Zettel: '..... I describe the language game "Bring something red" to someone who can himself already play it. Others I might at most teach it. (Relativity)' (432). What does this difference consist in? It is a trivial point insofar as one cannot describe anything to someone unless he understands the words of the description, and yet in this particular case it has ramifications. For the present descriptions use the terms 'language' and 'language game', and our understanding of them is governed by these terms. One point is that although Wittgenstein merely gives us examples of the use of the language, we take these examples as the explanation of customs. Thus we take them as typical of actions repeated over time and in similar circumstances, and as specifying correct uses of the language in question. Does that mean we take them as rules? Once we have grasped the language in question, we might be able to describe it in terms of rules, but this does not imply that what Wittgenstein provides are themselves rules. Sometimes they approximate more or less to rules, sometimes they sound more like general descriptions, and sometimes they are just particular uses. This is parallel to how words are explained in our own language, and it seems that in neither case is it necessary to assimilate the explanations to laying down rules. For this is no less obscure than saying that they explain a language.

But that Wittgenstein is describing customs is not the only crucial condition for understanding, because something might strike us as a custom and yet fail to be intelligible to us. This is the case he describes at Investigations 207 - a people apparently employ an articulate language which we find impossible to learn. Several invented practices in the Foundations of Mathematics are of this character, and from these he rightly withholds the title 'language game'.<sup>12</sup> But language games may also be more or less intelligible: for instance, we do not play the game in which people have names for rectangles consisting of two monochrome squares, but not for the squares themselves (PI 64), and yet it might be possible for us to learn it. Perhaps this explains the remark '(Relativity)' - for in saying that the example is not a language, I mean first and foremost that 'I am lost when people talk, I cannot react in agreement with them. "For me this is not a language game.' (F. Maths. p. 96, italics added.) Fortunately, the invented language games of the Investigations are intelligible, and so can serve the purposes for which they were designed. Or are they? Two distinguished commentators have raised doubts about whether the largest group of language games, played by the builders, are languages at all.

Kenny has objected to the first builders' game 'that it has no syntax.' (Wittgenstein, p. 169) If this is to claim that 'the distinction between words and sentences... does not arise' (p. 16), then it misses one of the main points of these games, to elucidate the distinction between words and sentences. Whether we call something a sentence has to do with its place in the whole activity of the language game, while what we call the words of the language depends on comparisons among its sentences. The result is that in BrB 1 and PI 2, 'you can call "Slab!" a word and also a sentence; perhaps it could appropriately be called a "degenerate sentence" (as one speaks of a degenerate hyperbola.)' (Investigations 19). It is 'degenerate' because it is just a word; but it is a sentence because of its position in the game. That is, one of the grounds we have for distinguishing words from sentences, the rules of sentence formation (cf. Investigations 136), is lacking in this game, but another is present; to say that 'slab!' is both a word and a sentence does not deny the distinction. Wittgenstein seems clearer on this point

in the Investigations than in the Brown Book, where he says that words are the 'constituent signs' of sentences (p. 82) and that a proposition 'may consist' of only one word. These characterisations are based in a language which contains rules for combining words into sentences - in BrB 1 'slab!' is hardly a constituent sign of 'slab!'

But Kenny also raises more difficult problems which Wittgenstein adduced in the Tractatus arguments for the pictoriality of propositions. One is that it is only by means of the complexity of propositions that we understand new propositions, which are formed by new combinations of known expressions.<sup>13</sup> Let us follow Wittgenstein's example and consider a language game in which 'understanding new sentences' takes place. It is like PI 2, but with a hundred different kinds of building stone; the learner is taught to name each kind of stone by ostensive teaching, and trained to respond correctly to a range of uses (sentences). When A calls for a stone which B can name but has never actually brought at command, B brings such a stone. In this language game, it is plausible to ascribe mastery to the learner, even though he has not heard all the possible sentences of the game; hence the room for understanding new sentences. Yet there is no composition of words in this game. What we have got is a rule for ascribing mastery without testing the use of every sentence (and, as in our own language, the possibility that such an ascription might be undermined by the pupil's subsequent performance). The rule makes use of the difference between being able to give the names of the stones, and knowing the full meaning of these words. In the crystalline theory of the Tractatus, no such difference arises - all the possible uses of a word must already be determined by its Bedeutung, its reference. So a 'new' one-word sentence would be inconceivable. But from the perspective of the Investigations, the ability to name the stones is only part of understanding the use of these words, making one-word sentences unproblematic. More generally, the present discussion contrasts the emphasis given by the analytical picture of the Tractatus to the individual words of new sentences, with the importance in the Investigations of mastering a language game: 'To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.' (199).

There is another powerful argument in the Tractatus to the effect that a proposition must be composite in order to be bipolar (4.06ff). A proposition represents a possible state of affairs. It may be true or false, because that state of affairs may or may not exist. But in either case it would still have sense, because all its names have meanings. A name, however, represents an object. Should that object have failed to exist, the name would be meaningless. So if a supposed one-word 'sentence' represents anything at all, then what it represents exists: if it has any 'sense', it must be 'true!', and so it has only one 'pole'. What, then, are we to say of a language game like PI 48, in which the one-word sentence 'R' apparently does describe a coloured square, and may be either true or false? As before, our language game provides for a distinction which the Tractatus overlooks; in this case, the distinction between using a word as a name and using it as a description (cf. Investigations 49). The practice of the game itself is the basis of the distinction - the activities which surround the use of 'R' in the two cases are different.<sup>14</sup> In both cases 'R' may be said to 'represent' the colour red, but that obscures rather than illuminates the issue at stake.

Rhees brings up a different objection to the builders' games. He thinks they leave out something crucial to language - that when a person learns to speak 'he learns to tell you something; and he tries to'; that in a language there is conver-  
sation and 'we may learn from a conversation and from what is said in it. Generally each of us brings something to the conversation too: not as he might bring skill to the game, but just in having something to say.'<sup>15</sup> Rhees certainly has a point in wanting to deny that the builders are speaking a language; but Wittgenstein has a point in wanting to affirm it. His point is that in these language games we have a pattern of human activity of which we are inclined to say, 'the words signify objects', and that is the sort of thing people may consider an essential feature of language. By imaginatively isolating such an activity, Wittgenstein can show us some highly enlightening things about our use of the concept 'signify'. We need only be worried here if the two men's points are in genuine conflict: if the reasons Rhees gives for withholding the term 'language' undermine Wittgenstein's uses

of his examples. This cannot be settled by any general contention that these games 'aren't really language', but only by showing that these specific uses of them are inappropriate, an enterprise Rhees never undertakes.

##### 5. Conclusion

We have seen that Wittgenstein's invented language games had an evolving purpose - to serve not as fragments of the use of difficult concepts, but as objects of philosophising. It was a use that stuck - the builders are still working for Wittgenstein in On Certainty's discussion of knowledge and belief (564-566). And as this example shows, there is no reason why language games should not be helpful throughout philosophy. Their main use was in the philosophy of language only because that was Wittgenstein's main interest. What is important is to learn from Wittgenstein's experience that this particular philosophical technique has a certain form, with its own pitfalls and limitations. Wittgenstein wrote: 'There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies' (Investigations 133). This paper has been concerned with understanding one such method. But its motive is to encourage that method's use.

Notes

1. Quoted by Rush Rhees, 'Preface' to L. Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Books (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. x. The source is Wittgenstein Papers (microfilm, catalogued by G.H. von Wright, Philosophical Review 78, no 4 (October 1969)) number 213 ('The so-called Big Typescript. Probably 1933') p. 202.
2. Bertrand Russell, Our Knowledge of the External World (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926), p. 94.
3. Jean Nicod, 'Geometry in the Sensible World', in Foundations of Geometry and Induction (London: K. Paul, 1930), p. 99.
4. 'Preface', p. xi.
5. Wittgenstein Papers 148 ('Large notebook. Called C4. 1934-1935'), 71st page, numbered 21. This is the first of the notebooks used for Rush Rhees (ed), 'Wittgenstein's Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data"', Philosophical Review 77, no 3 (July 1968).
6. Language games are referred to in abbreviated form thus: BrB 1: game 1) in the Brown Book; PI 2: the game in L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) section 2. All references to Wittgenstein's work are by section number unless otherwise indicated.
7. L. Wittgenstein, Zettel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 418-425.
8. M. Dummett, 'The Reality of the Past', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 69 (1968-9), p. 247; and Frege: Philosophy of Language (London: Duckworth, 1973), p. 469.
9. L. Wittgenstein, On Certainty (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 391.
10. A. Kenny, Wittgenstein (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 228-9.
11. L. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Grammar (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 171; reprinted except for the last sentence as Zettel 243, 241, 242.
12. L. Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). Cf. the list in B. Stroud, 'Wittgenstein and

- Logical Necessity', in G. Pitcher (ed), Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 487.
- 3). L. Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.03 ff.
  - 4). See the discussion in G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). I am indebted to both authors, who supervised the B.Phil. thesis on which this paper is based.
  - 5). Rush Rhees, 'Wittgenstein's Builders', in Discussions of Wittgenstein (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 79, 81.