

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 1

1. Much of *PI* either directly criticizes or somehow develops Wittgenstein's earlier work. It is therefore worth briefly sketching those three *Tractatus* doctrines that have the most relevance to it. These are: logical atomism, the picture theory of meaning and the saying/showing distinction.
2. The *Tractatus* drew what its author always regarded as the inevitable consequence of a conception of language that the early Wittgenstein shared with Russell (and which Russell developed in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*). It has two essential components: (i) that meaning is not contingent (ii) that the meaning of a name is its reference. Claim (i) can itself mean either that one is *certain* of what one's words mean or that their meanings cannot have failed to exist. Russell took the first line; Wittgenstein took the second. In conjunction with (ii) this means that the genuine names of a language (not the ordinary ones: *PI* 39a) refer to the indestructible and therefore simple basic components of the world (*TLP* 2.02-2.023; cf. *PI* 46). This is logical atomism.
3. Now the primary vehicle of meaning is not the word but the sentence (this was Frege's famous *context principle* to which Wittgenstein adhered consistently: *TLP* 3.3; *PI* 49). Accordingly the theory of meaning as so far described is inadequate: we need to be told how names can combine to make sentences. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein's answer was the picture theory. A sentence consists in an arrangement of names like symbols on a map; *that* two names stand in a relation (for instance that 'Jane' and 'John' stand to the left and the right of the word 'loves') tells us—truly or falsely—that a certain state of affairs obtains in reality (e.g. that Jane loves John): *TLP* 3.1432.
4. According to this pictorial theory of meaning a language can never *say* what its terms refer to without presupposing another one; and if my thought is itself in a language ('that language which alone I understand'—*TLP* 5.62) then this means that the formal similarity between my language and the reality it describes can never be explicitly grasped. However language itself is in a sense an inarticulate signal about that form: it reveals the nature of the world (see *TLP* 6.124). But this is something that can only be *shown*. It cannot be *said*. It is evident how this doctrine contributed to the mysticism for which the *Tractatus* is famous; perhaps also that Schopenhauer is here exerting a strong influence on Wittgenstein—by no means for the last time. And that there are limits to what can be said was a theme that haunted Wittgenstein throughout his career. In the later work it re-emerges in the treatment of ostension (*PI* 28-36) and of rule-following (*PI* 85-7, 138-201). What was mysterious in the earlier work was located in the hidden nature of reality as revealed by language. But in the later work—and this is why it is so disorienting—it is the everyday things that we do and say that start to seem mysterious achievements.
5. The first 100-odd sections of *PI* are criticisms of the picture theory and also of logical atomism. Perhaps the best way to sum up their drift is as follows: it is a mistake to think that there is a *single* philosophical account of *all* language.

6. Returning to doctrine (ii) of part 2 above: we see it, and much else, in the passage from St Augustine with which *Philosophical Investigations* begins. We may begin with these three points: (a) that names mean what they refer to, (b) that language consists of arrangements of names (both present in the *Tractatus*: see *TLP* 4.0311, 3.203), and (c) that names may be introduced into language by means of ostension. This last was not a doctrine of the *Tractatus* but it was one of Russell's; one of its instances is the target of the 'private language argument' (*PI* 258). The picture is certainly attractive: it looks on the face of it as though grasping a word is *some* kind of cognitive achievement i.e. that it involves a grasp of some *thing*. And what could that be other than the reference of the word? And how could we grasp it other than by having it pointed out to us?
7. Wittgenstein doesn't explicitly argue against this line in the sense of presenting counterexamples. Instead he looks at the way we *use* words and ask just what that has got to do with the meaning that St Augustine identified. In this lecture I consider the conjunction of (a) and (b) from #6 above. Look at the 'grocer' example (*PI* 1d). Here we are not told that 'five' or 'red' means something other than what it refers to. The point is rather that our actual operations with these words continue in blithe indifference to *what* they refer to. (It might occur to you to wonder why Wittgenstein chooses this highly unrealistic as well as slightly mechanical example. The answer—see S. Mulhall: *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*—is that the passage has a second and hidden meaning. We shall see it when we look at Wittgenstein's philosophy of mind.)
8. The next three sections (*PI* 2-4) expand on the theme of *PI* 1c: that the Augustinian picture is more appropriate to some kinds than to others. There is no reason to think it applies to all of them. Thus compare the first 'builders' example (*PI* 2b) with the 'grocer' example. There is some sort of point in attributing to the word 'block' what Augustine thought was its meaning i.e. blocks: for it is blocks that the second builder picks up when he hears the word 'block'. Does any analogous point about the customer's operations with the word 'five' motivate saying that it refers to what Augustine would have called *its* meaning (i.e. the number five)?
9. Now none of this can *compel* us to drop the idea that the meaning of an expression is in all cases its reference. We can if we like say that however it is *used*, each word refers none the less to *something* (including 'five', 'not' and so on). But what is the point? The question is not whether that doctrine can be defended through thick and thin but rather whether it was worth proposing it in the first place. And here Wittgenstein thinks we are misled: we take the apparent uniformity in the *form* of our words to indicate a real uniformity in their meaning (cf. the 'locomotive' example: *PI* 12). And if we *do* insist that all words stand in a relation called 'reference' to some bit of extraverbal reality then the notion of 'reference' becomes so strained that so far we have said *nothing* (cf. the 'tools' example: *PI* 14).