

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 2

1. We saw in the last lecture that one of the key doctrines of the *Tractatus* was the idea that what is essential to meaningful language is its capacity to state *facts*. Recall that the picture theory shows how a proposition—itself a fact—gets meaning by stating that such and such *is the case*. Now the two ‘builders’ examples—at *PI* 2 and 8—do not have this feature: in those cases the essence of the languages in question is only to give a command. Wittgenstein thinks that this hardly prevents them from counting as fully-fledged languages (*PI* 18).
2. Wittgenstein exploits this feature of those examples to make two points. The first is directed against Frege’s idea that an order essentially consists of *two* parts: one bit—its force—that indicates that it is an order, another bit—its sense—that indicates *what* is being ordered and which can in principle be common to an order, a question and an assertion (cf. *TLP* 4.064). ‘Slab!’ is on this account an essentially elliptical way of saying: ‘Make it the case that: you bring me a slab.’
3. By rejecting this idea (*PI* 20b, 363) Wittgenstein is rejecting a fundamental and very natural component of Frege’s account. It is the idea that language is a means for communicating thoughts, that is, representations of reality. Thus it is natural to think with Locke, for instance, that when A gives B the order ‘Slab!’ he is transferring some representation of a of affairs from his own mind to his auditor’s. But there need be nothing like that going on at all. All that we imagined was a certain pattern of activity that included the utterance of certain words. There is as yet no question of using them to represent anything. But that is no reason—unless a certain picture holds you captive—not to call it a *language* (*PI* 23, 114).
4. The second point is ominous because it introduces a theme that will have great significance later on: the idea that what is going on ‘in your mind’ need not have any relevance to what you are meaning at the time. This point, on which Wittgenstein and Frege agree, first appears in the context of an imaginary foreigner who believes that the English command ‘Bring me a slab!’ is like the builders’ expression a single word. The question Wittgenstein asks is whether there is something going on in his mind when he says the words by virtue of which he conceives it as a *single* word. And of course there need not be *anything* of relevance that *accompanies* the commands (*PI* 20a).
5. Let us move on to another aspect of the Augustinian conception: the idea that the reference of names can be introduced by ostensive definition. You point at the referent of a word as a means of introducing the latter into the learner’s language. Wittgenstein’s point is not that ostension cannot be used in that way; it is that it would be a serious misunderstanding to think that it is all that is necessary to make the connection between words and their referents. This is important not just because of its relevance to the Augustinian picture but also for its relevance to the private language argument (*PI* 258) and to the fantasy of the spiritual mechanism (*PI* 36). Here we shall look at the first and the third of these points.

6. The first point is that pointing cannot be regarded as a presuppositionless way of introducing to a language a child who has none. For the child has to know how to interpret *what* I am pointing to. If I point at a man and utter his name, how is the child to know that it is this *man* that I am naming and not his colour or race or even a direction of the compass (*PI* 28)? So that for instance 'This is the king' will only serve to define a piece in a chess game if the learner already 'knows what a piece in a game is' (*PI* 31).
7. It is also true—though the point is not being made just yet—that here must be certain tendencies present in all learners that are *not* themselves learnt. Thus it must be true, for instance, that we respond to pointing gestures by looking in the direction from shoulder to fingertip, and not the other way. (If we did make that mistake it could not be corrected by a *second* pointing gesture.) There is therefore a sense in which Augustine was correct to speak of a 'natural language of all peoples'. But Wittgenstein only makes this point later, and when he does make it it is in the dazzling light of the rule-following paradox (*PI* 234).
8. The other point, the point about the mythological spiritual mechanism, arises when we ask what fact about *me* makes it true that *I* am pointing at the man and not at his colour or at a direction of the compass. Clearly the accompanying *behaviour* will not normally be enough to settle it: it is not as though I screw up my eyes or move my fingers in a particular way when I am pointing at a man rather than his colour.
9. And it is because of this that we feel a strong temptation to postulate an accompanying *mental* process. There is something going on in my mind, something that I am *aware* of, that distinguishes my pointing at a man from my pointing at his colour. Here we see a characteristic theme of Wittgenstein's later work: that the appeal to the mental or spiritual is typically an appeal to a sort of replacement *body*. 'Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a *spirit*' (*PI* 36b); 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' (*PI* p. 178).
10. But truth is independent of motivation. Is it the case that some concurrent mental process distinguishes pointing at one thing from pointing at another? No. Wittgenstein argues that the supposed experience is not sufficient (*PI* 34) and not necessary (*PI* 35a). Not sufficient because you could have *just* those experiences but *mean* something else. Not necessary because often there is *no* such experience (see also *PI* 171b).
11. But then what *does* make the difference between pointing at a man and pointing at his shape. The answer is not to look within for something behind the behaviour; the answer is to look at *other* aspects of behaviour. What gives the pointing episode its particular character is what subsequent use is made of it.

