

#### Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 4

1. At *PI* 81a Wittgenstein makes a point whose immediate application is to the surrounding discussion of whether a meaningful sentence must deliver a verdict on every *possible* situation (e.g. *PI* 80: is it right to say ‘There is a chair’?) but which also makes a more general point about the whole approach of the *Tractatus*. In the earlier work Wittgenstein had been clear that a meaningful sentence must restrict reality to two alternatives (*TLP* 2.21). But that earlier vision cannot be regarded as an accurate description of our language. The mistake is then to think that it describes an *ideal* language: a language to which our use is at best an approximation, but to which it can become a better and better approximation. This is a mistake in so far as it makes it seem as though there was something that natural language is trying to do and which it doesn’t quite succeed in doing. Hence the illusory ideal of clarity or the ideal of simplicity; but in actual fact our language, just as it is, is as clear as it needs to be (cf. *PI* 87c); and there *is* no single ideal of simplicity (*PI* 47).
2. He drives home the point about expressions that leave room for doubt over certain of their applications by considering at *PI* 82-3 what it is for such application to be governed by a *rule*. At *PI* 83 he mentions a fourth point of comparison with games. It is possible to play a game in which rules do *not* everywhere bind one’s activities (*PI* 83a); also the possibility that one makes up or alters the rules as one goes along (*PI* 83b). If we consider how this last point of application applies to actual language use we can see in outline the problem that is going to get extensive treatment (also foreshadowed in another way at *PI* 81b): what is there in virtue of which someone can be said to be meaning the same as before as opposed to changing them from one time to another? In the case of a name and its associated descriptions (*PI* 82) we can give this a pretty clear sense; but we shall see cases where this is no longer true.
3. He then considers what it could mean for one’s use of a sign to be bounded everywhere by rules. Perhaps the clearest example in this connection is the addition to the first language game of the builders (*PI* 2b) of a table relating each expression to a picture of what it denotes (*PI* 86a). Wittgenstein points out that even here there is *a* sense in which everything is still open: for the table can itself be read in many different ways. Nor would it help to add a schema consisting of arrows telling you how to read *it*. In *that* sense a rule *cannot* cover all possibilities; but in the *other* sense of ‘bounded by rules’ (the ‘empirical’ one—*PI* 85—in which it means ‘leaves no room for doubt’) wouldn’t it be true to say that the original language *was* completely so bounded? ‘The sign-post is in order—if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose’ (*PI* 87).
4. There now begins (*PI* 89) a lengthy and soul-searching exercise in which Wittgenstein asks himself how he could have got into the position from which language, logic and reality appeared to him as described in the *Tractatus*. This is where he introduces his conception of philosophy as essentially a grammatical and therapeutic exercise. The idea of philosophy as grammar has already been illustrated in connection with the discussion of ostension. It

seems as though there must be going on *when* you point at a man in virtue of which you mean *him* and not e.g. his colour; and it seems this way because we say ‘I meant him *then*’ (see lecture 2 no.9-no.11). Here we have a ‘misunderstanding caused... by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language’ (*PI* 90b; cf. ‘sewing a dress’ at *PI* 195b).

5. The idea of philosophy as a kind of therapy is related. Wittgenstein agrees with his earlier self that philosophy cannot be or involve any sort of *scientific* enquiry (*TLP* 4.111; *PI* 109). It is rather a matter of removing the temptation to think that there are philosophical problems by *describing* matters in an appropriate way. This is because the problems themselves arise from language itself (*PI* 111).
6. In the *Tractatus* the problem had been how propositions can represent reality: how any such thing as an ordinary sentence could achieve the miracle of sense i.e. of being able to say ‘this is how things are’ (*PI* 95). This puzzlement led to two developments. The first was what he calls the *sublimation* of logic (*PI* 94): dissatisfied with the ordinary signs themselves we seek a pure *abstract* intermediary to be the thing that reaches right out to reality (*PI* 94; cf. the postulation of a *spiritual* mechanism lecture 2 no. 8). He rejects this at *PI* 108: the philosophy of logic treats of the natural and spatiotemporal phenomenon that we meant by ‘language’ all along.
7. The second development was to say that words—i.e. names—reach ‘right out’ to reality because their *possibilities* mirror those of what they denote: for a word to refer to something is for its permissible combinations in a sentence to mirror those possible facts into which the corresponding objects can enter (*TLP* 2.15-2.225; cf. *Notebooks* entries for November 1914). Thus logic, the essence of thought, represents not this or that contingent aspect of reality, but the ‘order of *possibilities*’ (*PI* 97).
8. But now he thinks that this is all the result of attaching an unnecessary mystique to a perfectly ordinary piece of English. Saying ‘This is how things are’ is not some metaphysical magic on the part of a sentence: it has a perfectly ordinary meaning. And when we remember that (for didn’t we know it all along?) we lose the temptation to erect a theory on its basis. That temptation arose from the fact that one bit of language, perfectly ordinary in its domestic context, was temporarily on holiday, where it appeared exotic, and we were hypnotized by it.
9. So what makes the investigation a grammatical one is also what makes it therapeutic. So philosophy does not force us to change anything that we say (*PI* 124): for instance you can still say, in connection with the example of ostension, that he *meant* the man and even that he meant him *then*; what philosophy does (in its therapeutic phase) is to remove the temptation to find this problematic (cf. *PI* 187).
10. It is difficult to square this view of philosophy with anything other than a very limited view of its history e.g. one that takes it to have begun in Cambridge at

the start of the twentieth century. For instance no philosopher of the enlightenment would have recognized it. Thus Hume regarded his investigation as a kind of psychology—indeed he is the grandfather of the modern discipline. And Berkeley saw nothing objectionable in the idea that one might use the science of his day (in his case optics) as part of an investigation into the nature of experience—one that made a major scientific as well as philosophical contribution. (It is true that Locke regarded himself as clearing the way for other scientists: but at least he thought that he was investigating reality rather than grammar.) Perhaps more to the point it is difficult to square with a great deal of what Wittgenstein himself says and does.