

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 5

1. Towards the end of his discussion of the nature of philosophy Wittgenstein relates the mythology surrounding ‘This is how things are’ to truth and falsity. For it looks as though we can draw a distinction between statements that pick out real features of the world (‘The cat is on the mat’) from those that do not (‘Murder is wrong’) by appeal to the notion of *truth*. Only the first kind of statement is literally true or literally false, it seems; the applicability of truth can therefore look like an independent standard met by some but not all assertoric sentences i.e. those that *seem* to be making claims about reality. Thus it might seem that philosophy really does have revisionary consequences—I mean, revisionary of ordinary use (contrary to *PI* 124). For now it seems as though in everyday life we apply truth and falsity to sentences that do not fit them.
2. But this is wrong, for the applicability of truth or falsity is not an external standard. Instead ‘It is (“*really*”) true/false that murder is wrong’ says no more than that murder is wrong (*PI* 136a). ‘True’ and ‘false’ fit a sentence only to the extent that we are prepared to use them in application to it. But then there *is* no external standard: their application to a sentence is simply an extension of a language-game that by no means demanded it (see the comparison with letters of the alphabet at *PI* 137).
3. He now uses the notion of ‘fitting’ as a kind of pivot on which to turn to more general and deeper issues. For what lay behind the idea of fitting is that there is a way of grasping a sentence that is not the use but which *guides* it: a standard that we can meet or fail to meet. Of course this goes wholly against the idea that the meaning *is* the use rather than something that guides it. And what makes it so tempting to say that the meaning (what you understand) guides the use is the well-known experience of grasping something in a flash. For the use is extended in time and so cannot be grasped in a flash; so what you were grasping when you grasped the meaning in a flash must have been something *other* than the use (*PI* 138, 146a). This objection inaugurates the lengthy series of points now known as the ‘rule-following considerations’.
4. The first important point is the ‘cube’ argument; this is an instance of a pattern that we have seen before (*PI* 35, 86c). What comes before your mind when you grasp the meaning of the word ‘cube’? Well, it might be a picture: but in whatever sense one pattern of use can be said to ‘fit’ a picture, so can another. (This is particularly graphic in the cube case because there it depends on one’s method of projection—that was why Wittgenstein chose this example: *PI* 139d).
5. But then why do we say that when you see the picture you grasp it in a flash? The diagnosis is that we have built in to our concept of meaning two different features that might well come apart. One of these is that we normally do say that people know what ‘cube’ means if they can e.g. draw one. The other is that we also regard their grasp as decisively manifested through competent usage. But these two criteria could come apart; and if they did, Wittgenstein thinks, *our* concepts of ‘meaning’ and ‘understanding’ would lose their point. (Compare a concept like ‘square’. We normally have tactile as well as visual

criteria for applying it; but what would happen if they came apart?) This last point is the point of the ‘cheese’ argument: see *PI* 142 and the note at the bottom of that page.

6. There follows a more elaborate discussion of the case where one is asked to continue a numerical sequence after being given its first members. At first Wittgenstein is interested in the difference between the case where the learner makes systematic mistakes—that is where he understands *something* only it was not what we intended—and the case where his mistakes are random. The point is that here the line between the two kinds of mistake is not a sharp one.
7. But how can that be? Isn't it that when you have got it right you have grasped the right *formula*, and when you make a systematic error you have grasped the wrong formula, and in the random case you haven't grasped anything at all. For don't we derive the sequence from the formula? But this gets us no further: if there is a problem with deriving a sequence from its initial segment then there is a problem with deriving it from its formula (*PI* 146b).
8. But of course the sequence is infinite and my use of it can only ever be finite: so there must be some difference between my understanding of the sequence and any particular set of applications. At this point it is (if you are a philosopher) almost reflexive to suppose that understanding something is a *dispositional* mental state. That is to say—an actual state of my mind (or if you like of the brain) that underlies the truths of (perhaps infinitely many) subjunctives as ‘If I had been asked to name the such-and-such member of the series I'd have said so-and-so’. Wittgenstein's response is that if any such state is to be identified with understanding we ought to have some other way of identifying it i.e. other than what produces this behaviour (*PI* 149). Otherwise all you are doing is explaining the fact that somebody behaves in such and such way by saying *just* that he has a mental state disposing him to behave in that way.
9. But we *do* have another way of identifying such a state: it is the experience of ‘grasping in a flash’ (or so you might object). Wittgenstein treats this illusion at length in the subsequent discussion of ‘reading’ (which in this context means something like sight-reading a musical score). It is important to note that this isn't just a long version of the cube argument. There he was attacking the idea that the conscious state is an awareness of an image that guides me. Here he is attacking something else: the idea that the state that produces my behaviour, whatever it is, is something that we are aware of in conscious experience.
10. In this connection he considers the case where somebody who learns to read gets a few things right early on. The teacher thinks that he isn't reading yet: but not much later he gets everything right and clearly *is* reading. Was the teacher wrong in his initial judgment? There need be no answer to that question (*PI* 157a; cf. a game need not be bound everywhere by rules at *PI* 84). So when did he begin to read and stop just mouthing? But on the other hand how can there be any question here? Reading is something you do; and there isn't any doubt about what he *did*.

11. But we *are* ignorant about what went on in his brain. So couldn't it be said that you are reading when the right connections are made in your brain? At *PI* 158 he discusses that possibility. It is important to see that this passage is *not* denying or even doubting whether your brain is what causes your behaviour. The point is rather that detailed knowledge of the brain's workings need not shed light on when he was reading. For the concept of reading just leaves this open; and so there is just as much need for semantic decision here as there was when we sought a behavioural or sensory definition of reading (*PI* 157b, c). What Wittgenstein finds interesting is our *a priori* confidence that there *is* such a 'reading' connection: it indicates how deeply rooted is a certain picture of things.