Philosophical Investigations
The Augustinian Picture

Owen Griffiths
oeg21@cam.ac.uk

Churchill and Newnham, Cambridge

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We sketched some central theses of TLP.

We introduced the *Augustinian picture of language*:

1. names mean what they denote
2. language consists of arrangements of names
3. names are introduced into language by ostension

An attractive feature of the view is the *uniformity* offered.
Wittgenstein accepted something like 1. and 2. in TLP:

A name means an object. The object is its meaning. (3.203)

One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group – like a tableau vivant – presents a state of affairs. (4.0311)

Wittgenstein never explicitly endorsed 3. but Russell did.

Wittgenstein begins PI by attacking this picture.
Talk outline

Against the Augustinian Picture

Ostension

Objection: internal states
I send someone shopping. I give him a slip of paper marked “five red apples”. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked “apples”; then he looks up the word “red” in a chart and finds a colour sample next to it; then he says the series of elementary number-words – I assume that he knows them by heart – up to the word “five”, and for each number-word he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. (1)
The Augustinian Picture

- The shopkeeper’s understanding of these words is very different to that predicted by the Augustinian picture.
- When they see ‘apple’, they open a drawer.
- When they see ‘red’, they look at a chart.
- So a uniform account here seems hopeless.
- Of course the problems will multiply as we consider more of language.
- Could the Augustinian picture hold anywhere?
Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right: the language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass him the stones and to do so in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose, they make use of a language consisting of the words “block”, “pillar”, “slab”, “beam”. A calls them out; B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. – Conceive of this as a complete primitive language. (2)
Uniformity was an attractive feature of the Augustinian view.
The words in the builders’ language are used uniformly as names.
But the words in the shopkeeper’s language lack any uniformity.
There is no good sense in which the shopkeeper treats ‘five’ as a name in the same way as ‘apple’.
We could *insist* that the grocer’s words refer.

*Suppose someone said: “All tools serve to modify something. So, a hammer modifies the position of a nail, a saw the shape of a board, and so on.” – And what is modified by a rule, a glue-pot and nails? – “Our knowledge of a thing’s length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of the box.” – Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions? –* (14)

Analogously, we could insist that all words ‘refer’.

But that stretches the term to the point of saying nothing.

The uniformity here doesn’t reveal a similarity but disguises a difference.
Sameness of form can tempt us to infer sameness of function. *It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. There are handles there, all looking more or less alike. (This stands to reason, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank, which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two operative positions: it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder one pulls on it, the harder the braking; a fourth, the handle of a pump: it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro.* (12)
We shouldn’t be misled by the common forms.

‘Red’, ‘apple’ and ‘five’ have some similarities in appearance: they are all words derived from the same alphabet, printed in the same font, etc.

But they, like the handles, can function very differently.

Wittgenstein thought this search for unity arose from scientific enquiry, e.g. gravitational theory unites disparate phenomena.
Objection

- Objection: these hardly count as languages, since they are too impoverished.

- Response:

  *If you want to say they are therefore incomplete, ask yourself whether our language is complete – whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated into it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. ... Our language can be regarded as an ancient maze: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.* (18)
Communication

- This claim takes Wittgenstein away from a popular thought about language: that it is a means of communicating thoughts.
- On a roughly Lockean/ Fregean view, my utterances represent the world.
- For Locke, words name ideas (Essay III.i.8).
- If a red object matches my experience of red, I should deploy the word ‘red’.
- Locke extends his account to number terms.
- For all we know, something like this is going on with the shopkeeper.
Communication

- For Locke my communication is successful, I somehow transfer this representation to your mind.
- (Locke’s view faces famous problems with communication.)
- Nothing like this is possible in the builders’ language.
- Nevertheless, it’s a language, for Wittgenstein.
  
  The word “language-game” is used here to emphasize the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (23)
Wittgenstein asks us to consider a non-English speaker who hears ‘Bring me a slab!’. They may think this is a single word for building stone. This speaker’s inner workings are then different.

What goes on in you when you give such an order? Are you conscious of its consisting of four words while you are uttering it? (20)

This is the introduction of a central theme: what goes on ‘in your mind’ may have no relevance for meaning.
Talk outline

Against the Augustinian Picture

Ostension

Objection: internal states
Another component of the Augustinian picture is that meaning is learnt by *ostension*.

This is another example of uniformity.

Sections 28–35 argue against the importance of ostension.

Suppose I attempt to define the number-word ‘two’ by pointing to two nuts.
But how can the number two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know what it is that the one wants to call “two”; he will suppose that “two” is the name given to this group of nuts! – He may suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake: when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might take it to be the name of a number. ... That is to say, an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in any case. (28)
Ostension

- I may try to narrow down the possible referents by saying, ‘I mean the number two’.
- That will only work if my audience understands ‘number’ but can that be introduced by ostension? (29)
- Maybe I point to several pairs of things: two plums, two door handles, two rabbits.
- But my audience may take the number ‘two’ to be true of just these things.
These observations go only so far.

Can ostension ever work?

Only if the audience takes the definition in the right way:

*Whether the word “number” is necessary in an ostensive definition of “two” depends on whether without this word the other person takes the definition otherwise than I wish. And that will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to.* (29)
What is it to take the definition the right way? 

*And how he ‘takes’ the explanation shows itself in how he uses the word explained.* (29)

The only evidence we have of whether the definition is successful is in how the student goes on to use the expression.

This is the first appearance of the meaning-is-use idea.

This view is soon stated more explicitly:

*For a large class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” – though not for all – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in language.* (43)
Talk outline

Against the Augustinian Picture

Ostension

Objection: internal states
Objection

Possible objection: perhaps there is something about me that makes it the case that I am *attending to number* when I say ‘two’.

And perhaps you have this same internal state when you hear my ostensive definition.

To take the definition in the right way is to have this state.

My behaviour isn’t enough so it must be some *mental* process.
Wittgenstein makes various responses.

First, there are many experiences that we may call ‘attending to number’ (33).

Second, suppose there is some internal state playing the role.

Even if there is such a process, it is still open to misinterpretation.

I could be attending to number and you to colour.
Ostension

But suppose someone said: “I always do the same thing when I attend to a shape: I follow the contour of my eyes and feel …” And suppose this person gives someone else the ostensive explanation “That is called a ‘circle’”, pointing to a circular object and having all these experiences – can’t his hearer still interpret the explanation differently, even though he sees the other’s eyes following the contour, and even though he feels what the other feels? That is to say, this ‘interpretation’ may also consist in how he now makes use of the explained word; in what he points at, for example, when told “Point to a circle!” (34)
Ostension

- This *style* of argument recurs in PI.
- All appeal to the mental has done here is appeal to a replacement body.
- And just as the behaviour with our body can be misinterpreted, so can the behaviour of our replacement body.

> And we do here what we do in a host of similar cases: because we cannot specify one bodily action which we call pointing at a shape (as opposed to the colour, for example), we say that a mental, spiritual activity corresponds to these words.
> Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a spirit. (36)

- Similarly:

> The human body is the best picture of the human soul. *(Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment)*
No experience

- In other cases, there is no plausible experience.
- Maybe there is a characteristic experience of pointing at a shape or colour.
- But consider games, like chess.
- What could be the experience of pointing at a chess piece? (35)
Ostension

In summary: we may add some non-physical experience to our explanation of ostension.

But this cannot be sufficient because that experience could mean something else.

And it cannot be necessary because often there is no such experience.

All that is left is behaviour and subsequent use.
Augustine described the learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, as if the child could already think, only not yet speak. And “think” would here mean something like “talk to himself”. (32)
Lessons

- Ostension cannot work in a vacuum.
- Some background ability is required.
- This cannot be the possession of some internal state.
- So it must be in how the term is subsequently used.
- Nevertheless, we cannot learn *everything* by ostension.
- We already need to be able to *think*, which requires a language.
- And we can’t have learnt *that* by ostension?