

CHAPTER I

*From referentialism to human action: the
Augustinian theory of language*

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Words are deeds
– CV 46

In this way, I should like to say the words “Oh, *let* him come!” are charged with my desire. And words can be wrung from us, — like a cry. Words can be *hard* to say: such, for example, as are used to effect a renunciation, or to confess a weakness. (Words are also deeds.)

– PI 546¹

I INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present an interpretation of the first twenty or so sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*. My presentation has three parts. First, I briefly compare and contrast Wittgenstein’s philosophical intentions in the *Investigations* with his intentions in the earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Second, against that first backdrop, I explicate Wittgenstein’s famous thesis that *meaning-is-use*. Third and finally, against that second backdrop, I unpack Wittgenstein’s opening argument for the meaning-is-use thesis. This opening argument is a philosophical *roadmap* for Wittgenstein’s other arguments in support of the meaning-is-use thesis, in the pregnant sense that the basic concepts and strategies he later deploys are already etched into it and guide his further moves.

II FROM THE TRACTATUS TO THE INVESTIGATIONS

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* brings a definitive closure to Logical Atomism by pushing the reductive project of logical-decompositional analysis to its limits and beyond. The *Tractatus* clearly indicates or shows – even if it

¹ I generally follow the standard English translations from the German texts, but have occasionally modified them where appropriate.

does not explicitly describe or say – the inadequacy of Logical Atomism and of the very idea of logical-decompositional analysis. Or at least this is how Wittgenstein himself came to regard the *Tractatus* by the time of the *Investigations*. Indeed, in the *Investigations* the later Wittgenstein explicitly rejects and radically rethinks his own Tractarian theory of logical analysis:

Four years ago I had occasion to re-read my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas to someone. It suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.

For since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago [in 1929], I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book. (*PI* p. x)²

It would be a mistake, however, to say that there are no continuities between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. On the contrary, the central topics of both books are exactly the same: logic, language, meaning and mind. And both books take philosophy to be ‘critique’ in the quite Kantian sense of an inquiry into the limits of possible human experience and the intelligibility of human cognition (*Erkenntnis*), and into its *a priori* presuppositions and underlying structures. In the *Tractatus*, the critique of human cognition has become the critique of human *language* (*Sprache*):

All philosophy is ‘Critique of language’ ... Russell’s merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form. (*TLPO* 4.0031)

This ‘Critique of language’ is necessary precisely because philosophers and others ordinarily use language, our fundamental means of representing our world and ourselves, without an adequate insight into *its* presuppositions and structures.

But there is also a deep sense in which the *Investigations* is intended by Wittgenstein to be the antithesis of the *Tractatus*. Whereas the *Tractatus* had proposed an essentialist *a priori* reduction of logic, language, meaning, and even the world itself to solipsistic mind –

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. (*TLPO* 5.61)

In fact what solipsism *means*, is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself. That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of language (*the language which I understand*) mean the limits of *my* world. (*TLPO* 5.62)

The world and life are one. (*TLPO* 5.621)

² See also, e.g., Hacker 1996b: ch. 5.

I am my world. (The microcosm.) (*TLPO* 5.63)

– the *Investigations* fully sinks logic, language, meaning and mind into the everyday actions and practices of natural-language-using rational human animals in their ordinary world. The basic results of this radical move in the *Investigations* are:

- (1) that under the slogan ‘what has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say, *forms of life (Lebensformen)*’ (*PI* p. 226), Tractarian essentialism and Tractarian transcendental solipsism are sharply criticized and replaced by an anthropocentric metaphysics of the commonsensical or the ordinary, in which essences and structures are all manifest – ‘nothing is hidden’ (*PI* 435) although normally unseen by us because of our concentration on everyday tasks or philosophical confusion,
 - (2) that under the slogan *meaning is use* (*PI* 43), the nature of linguistic meaning becomes fully embedded in human action and human life,
 - (3) that under the rubric of *language-games* (*PI* 23), the scope of meaning is radically widened to include direct and indirect speech-acts (implicature), indexicality or context-dependency, emotive expression, metaphor, and more generally linguistic actions of all sorts,
- and
- (4) that under the slogan *human mind requires human behaviour* (*PI* 281) the Cartesian and Schopenhauerian solipsistic mind of the *Tractatus* becomes the activating structure of embodied human comportment.

There is also a radical turn in the *Investigations* from philosophy as *logical analysis* or the ‘logical clarification of thoughts’ (*TLPO* 4.112) to the thesis that *logic is grammar* (*PI* 90), or the thesis that logical form is a mirror of the dynamic structure of language-in-use. This raises a fundamental point about philosophical explanations in the *Investigations*. It would be a mistake to hold that the *Investigations* rejects the very idea of a philosophical explanation. On the contrary, the *Investigations* extends the very idea of a philosophical explanation from the context of *decompositional analysis*, to the context of *giving reasons for actions*, in the sense later articulated by Donald Davidson:

In the light of a primary reason, an action is revealed as coherent with certain traits, long- or short-termed, of the agent, and the agent is shown in his role of Rational Animal.³

In the *Tractatus*, the explanation of some fact or phenomenon typically took the form of a systematic decomposition to simple entities, plus a systematic reconstruction of the same fact or phenomenon in terms of

³ Davidson 1963: 690.

those simple entities, using classical logic. Classical logic, in turn, was taken by Wittgenstein to be *a priori*, universal and essential for thought, language and the world:

Logic is not a theory but a reflexion of the world. Logic is transcendental. (*TLPO* 6.13)

In the *Investigations*, by sharp contrast, logic is *not essentially separate from the original phenomenon of meaningful language itself, and is essentially normative*, that is, logic is fully embedded in the all-encompassing rational human constructive activity we call language, which is why Wittgenstein calls this logic ‘grammar’:

F. P. Ramsey once emphasized in conversation with me that logic was a ‘normative science’. I do not know exactly what he had in mind, but it was doubtless closely related to what dawned on me later: namely, that in philosophy we often *compare* the use of words with games and calculi which have fixed rules, but cannot say that someone who is using language *must* be playing such a game. — But if you say our languages only *approximate* to such calculi you are on the very brink of a misunderstanding. For then it may look as if what we were talking about were an *ideal* language. As if our logic were, so to speak, a logic for a vacuum.—Whereas logic does not treat of language—or of thought—in the sense in which natural science treats of a natural phenomenon, and the most that can be said is that we *construct* ideal languages.⁴ (*PI* 81)

These considerations bring us up to the problem: In what sense is logic something sublime?

For there seemed to pertain to logic a peculiar depth – a universal significance. Logic lay, it seemed, at the bottom of all the sciences. – For logical investigation explores the nature of all things. It seeks to see to the bottom of things and is not meant to concern itself whether what actually happens is this or that. — It takes its rise, not from an interest in the facts of nature, nor from a need to grasp causal connections: but from an urge to understand the basis, or essence, of everything empirical. (*PI* 89)

Our investigation (*Betrachtung*) is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. (*PI* 90)

In light of the later Wittgenstein’s idea that logic is grammar, then, the basic explanation for the fact that meaning is use is twofold: first, that meaningful language is essentially embedded in basic human linguistic practices called *language-games*, and second, that language-games in turn are essentially embedded in actual historical networks of human activity and

⁴ See also Hanna 2006a and 2006b.

human culture called *forms of life*. Thus human agents are shown in their role as Rational or Talking Animals.

One crucial consequence of this is that for Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, meaningful language is ultimately a kind of human action, indeed the characteristic kind of human action. To twist Goethe's famous line from *Faust* ('In the beginning was the Deed'), which in turn famously twists the even more famous line from John 1:1 ('In the beginning was the Word'), we can say that for the later Wittgenstein meaningful words just *are* deeds: 'words are deeds' and 'words are also deeds' (*PI* 546). Or otherwise put: *In the beginning were words that are (also) human deeds*. Humans, insofar as they are rational animals, are essentially linguistic agents and the use of language is essentially the mastery of a skill (*PI* 20) embedded in a form of human life: 'the speaking of language is part of an activity (*Tätigkeit*), or of a form of life' (*PI* 23). In turn, this opens up the very idea of meaning to every conceivable role that language can play in rational human activity (see *PI* 23).

Unlike the *Tractatus*, then, the *Investigations* is emphatically not a *treatise* in philosophical logic. Still, even in the *Investigations* there are *arguments*. So I think that we can reconstruct Wittgenstein's argument for the meaning-is-use thesis as a two-step line of dialectical reasoning:

- (1) sceptically display the inadequacies of the classical theories of meaning (deconstructive criticism),
- (2) offer the thesis that meaning-is-use is the best overall explanation of the phenomenon of meaning (inference to the best explanation, which turns out to be an *action-explanation*).

He carries out this two-step line of reasoning by means of studying simpler languages and simpler language practices than our own, which in *his* terminology is to say that he studies 'language-games' in a second sense of that term, and in particular the various 'Augustinian' language-games surveyed in *PI* 1–21.

III THE THESIS THAT MEANING-IS-USE

In the *Tractatus* the only admissible sort of meaning ('saying') is the meaning of (atomic⁵) propositions, and there are four different competing and

⁵ My view is that in the *Tractatus*, the atomic propositions all have sense, and then the molecular propositions *inherit* sense via the truth-functional operations that construct molecular propositions. It's possible, however, that only the atomic propositions have sense, and that the molecular propositions are supposed by Wittgenstein to be senseless. Many thanks to Michael Potter for many conversations about this recondite issue.

partially overlapping theories about the nature of the meaning belonging to (atomic) propositions:

- (i) All words are names, and the meaning of a word is nothing but the object it names. Furthermore all names are proper names, and the meaning of every basic proper name in a basic proposition (whether a basic singular term or a basic general term – a.k.a. a ‘concept-word’) is nothing but the referent or bearer of the name, i.e. an absolutely simple individual concrete object or a definite abstract concept or universal. (*Pure Referentialism.*)
 - (ii) The sense of every meaningful proposition is nothing but how it either isomorphically pictures a state of affairs (*Sachverhalt*) or is a truth-functional compound of such picturing sentences. (*The Picture Theory.*)
 - (iii) The meaning of any non-referring or non-picturing linguistic sign in a proposition – e.g. a logical constant – is nothing but a rule for manipulating or operating with that sign in a strict logical or mathematical calculus or in some other formal language-system. (*Rule-Based Semantics.*)
- and
- (iv) The ultimate meaning of any name, sentence or other linguistic sign is nothing but a conscious mental representation (or ‘idea’) in the mind of an individual speaker of a language. (*Semantic Solipsism.*)

By sharp contrast to all of these, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein wants to defend the thesis that for a great many but not all cases in which we employ the word ‘meaning’, the meaning of any part of a language – any word – is its use in that language, and the meaning of a name in that language is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer:

For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” (*Bedeutung*), the meaning of a word is its use in the language (*Gebrauch in der Sprache*). And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained (*erklärt*) by pointing to its *bearer* (PI 43)

It should be noticed that this thesis says that the meaning of a word is almost always its use, *including* a few cases in which the meaning of a name is *explained* by someone’s pointing to an object that bears the name. As regards that second clause, nowadays we would say that just as the semantic *content* of a demonstrative such as ‘this’ or ‘that’ requires a human *demonstration-act* of pointing as a vehicle of reference in order to fix the application of its variable *character* for a given *speech-context*,⁶ so too a name can have its meaning fixed by a human ostensive act, and thereby explained. Wittgenstein puts the same idea about the meaning of names and human demonstration-acts this way:

⁶ Kaplan 1989; Evans 1982; Perry 1979; and Hanna 1993.

The demonstrative “this” can never be without a bearer. It might be said: “so long as there is a *this*, the word ‘this’ has a meaning too, whether *this* is simple or complex.” — But that does not make the word into a name. On the contrary: for a name is not used with, but rather only explained by means of, the gesture of pointing. (*PI* 45)

But in any case, and for convenience, I will always refer to the two-clause carefully qualified thesis in §43 as ‘the meaning-is-use thesis’ and correspondingly to the concept of ‘meaning-as-use’.

The concept of meaning-as-use covers two distinct but intimately related sub-notions:

- (i) *semantic function*, according to which the meaning of a word is its specific role (i.e. a specific normative pattern of operations) in a living human language, and
- (ii) *semantic application*, according to which the meaning of a word is determined by how it is applied by individual human speakers, in actual or possible communities of speakers, in actual or possible speech-contexts.

The semantic *function* of words is the fact that any meaningful part of a language is essentially a ‘tool’ which can be used correctly or incorrectly in the context of a larger totality of linguistic equipment or technology, and the semantic *application* of words is the fact that the meaning of a word depends on its implementation in actual or possible speech-contexts and speech-communities. Of course semantic function and application can come apart when language is either misused (which produces nonsense) or applied in new contexts (which produces new sense). But normally they are smoothly complementary:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule (*Maßstab*), a glue-pot, glue, nails, and screws. —The functions (*Funktionen*) of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* (*Verwendung*) is not presented to us so clearly. Especially not, when we are doing philosophy! (*PI* 11)

It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.) (*PI* 24)

Here, and more generally, it is crucial to note Wittgenstein’s appeal to semantic function and application (words as tools for doing things, or the action-embeddedness of language), *norms* (governing ideals or standards of language

use), *context-dependency* (indexicality), and *actual or possible communities of human speakers* (transcendental-anthropocentric communitarianism).

So, combining the notions of semantic function and application, norms, context-dependency, and actual or possible communities of human speakers into one complex concept, Wittgenstein's overarching thesis in the *Investigations* to the effect that meaning-is-use, is the same as the thesis that the meaning of a word is its specific role in a living and complete human language *together with* how it is applied by individual human speakers in actual or possible communities of human speakers in actual or possible contexts. Or, to sloganize: *meaning is the career of words in human action*.

It is very important to emphasize *all* of these factors and not merely the application factor in the meaning-is-use thesis, because the application factor alone gives the false impression of empiricism and relativism about meaning. For my present purposes, empiricism about meaning is the thesis that semantic content (or sense) and reference are both strictly determined by sensory experiences and other contingent empirical facts. And relativism about meaning is the thesis that semantic content (or sense) and reference are both strictly determined by either actual human individuals (solipsistic relativism) or actual human communities (communitarian relativism). But the meaning-is-use thesis in the *Investigations*, although it certainly has some empiricist and relativist features, is neither a form of semantic empiricism nor a form of semantic relativism, nor indeed some mere combination of the two. What resists such explanatory reductions of the concept of meaning-as-use are the *action-embeddedness*, *normativity*, *indexicality* and *transcendental-anthropocentric communitarianism* of meaning.

Here is a proposal about how best to understand Wittgenstein's theory that meaning-is-use, especially including his direct appeal to the four non-empiricist and non-relativist facts about meaning. The problem of philosophical interpretation is made substantially more difficult when we remember that the logic of Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Investigations* is dialectical. But even allowing for that, I think we can charitably and rationally reconstruct his dialectical arguments in the *Investigations* for the meaning-is-use thesis just by asking ourselves the following question: What are the implications and critical limitations of the four competing theories of meaning relevant to the *Tractatus* – Pure Referentialism, the Picture Theory, Rule-Based Semantics and Semantic Solipsism? The thesis that meaning-is-use will then be established in and through the critical deconstruction of the classical theories, together with the claim that meaning-is-use is the best explanation of all the relevant linguistic facts.

Now the primitive language-games are supposed to make the critical deconstruction of the classical theories of meaning directly evident to us in philosophical *dioramas*, or ‘living pictures’, at least as far as Pure Referentialism and the Picture Theory are concerned. Later in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein also offers separate deconstructive arguments against Rule-Based Semantics by developing the Rule-Following Paradox, and against Semantic Solipsism by developing the Private Language Argument.⁷ Finally, the failures of all the competing theories of meaning indirectly and cumulatively establish the several basic elements of the thesis that meaning-is-use. Then on Wittgenstein’s behalf we can conclude that the thesis that meaning-is-use is the best overall explanation of all the relevant meaning-facts or meaning-phenomena.

IV THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REFERENCE: WHAT THE BUILDERS DID

Referentialism holds that all words are names, and that the meaning of a name is nothing but the referent or bearer of that name. Referentialism, as its name obviously implies, identifies meaning with reference. Thus according to Referentialism ‘Fido’ means Fido and ‘dog’ means the concept DOG. Furthermore, according to *Pure Referentialism*, all names are proper names, and the meaning of every basic proper name in a basic proposition (whether a basic singular term or a basic general term – a.k.a. a ‘concept-word’) is nothing but the referent or bearer of the name, i.e. an absolutely simple individual concrete object or a definite abstract concept or universal. In turn, according to Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, there are two main problems with Pure Referentialism. First, identifying meaning with reference to individual objects in the case of singular terms does not account for systematic variations in the use-based meanings of ostensive terms having the same referent (*PI* 28–38). Second, identifying meaning with reference in the case of general terms fails because there are no uniquely identifiable concepts or universals (*PI* 66–71, and 75–8).

What follows now is a three-step, A-B-C style rational reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s opening argument against Pure Referentialism in the first twenty or so sections of the *Investigations*, as a paradigmatic case study in how he argues for the thesis that meaning-is-use. In turn, the meaning-is-use thesis is to be understood, as I have said, as the thesis that meaning is the career of words in human action, with its two distinct sub-notions of

⁷ See Kripke 1982 and Hanna 2006b: ch. 6.

semantic function and semantic application, taken together with the four non-empiricist and non-relativistic facts about meaning. For each of the steps in the reconstruction I will provide a detailed critical commentary on that step's rationale and implications.

(Step A) Referentialism holds that all words are names, and that the meaning of any word is nothing but the object it names. Furthermore, according to *Pure Referentialism*, all names are proper names, and every basic proper name in a basic proposition (whether a basic singular term or a basic general term) is nothing but the referent or bearer of the name, i.e. an absolutely simple individual concrete object or a definite abstract concept or universal.

Commentary on Step A

Referentialism as a philosophical thesis goes at least as far back as Plato's *Theaetetus*. Indeed, Wittgenstein explicitly quotes the *Theaetetus* in §46, in support of the particular version of Referentialism he is focusing on:

What lies behind the idea that names really signify simples? Socrates says in the *Theaetetus*: "If I make no mistake, I have heard some people say this: there is no definition of the primary elements – so to speak – out of which we and everything else are composed; for everything that exists in its own right can only be *named*, no other determination is possible, neither that it *is* nor that it *is not* ... But what exists in its own right has to be ... named without any other determination. In consequence it is impossible to give an account of any primary element; for it, nothing is possible but the bare name; its name is all it has. But just as what consists of these primary elements is itself complex, so the names of the elements become descriptive language by being compounded together. For the essence of speech is the composition of names." Both Russell's 'individuals' and my 'objects' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) were such primary elements. (PI 46)

This particular version of Referentialism thus includes two sub-theses to the effect that

- (i) the basic referring terms in basic propositions are all *proper names* (as opposed to, say, definite descriptions), including both *basic singular terms* in grammatical or logical subject position and also *basic general terms* (a.k.a. 'concept-words') in grammatical or logical predicate position,
- and
- (ii) the objects for which these basic singular terms and basic general terms stand are *absolutely simple concrete individuals* and *definite abstract concepts or universals*.

But not all Referentialists are as semantically puristic as Plato's Socrates was in the *Theaetetus*. So this raises the critical question of whether *every* possible version of Referentialism need be committed to the thesis that the basic

referring terms in basic proposition are all *proper* names. Indeed, it seems clear that a less puristic Referentialist might instead take the basic referring terms in basic propositions to be *demonstratives* or some other kind of essential indexical. It also raises the critical question of whether every possible version of Referentialism need be committed to the puristic thesis that the objects for which the basic singular terms stand are absolutely simple concrete individuals and that the objects for which the basic general terms stand are definite abstract universals. And indeed, it seems that a Referentialist might instead hold that the objects picked out by basic singular terms are only *relatively* simple concrete individuals, that is, simple relative to some particular way of humanly conceptualizing a decomposition of a complex perceivable object, and that the objects for which basic general terms stand are just *human concepts* in all their varying degrees of vagueness and variety.

I have been calling the special version of Referentialism that is committed to the puristic thesis that the basic referring terms are *proper* names (including both basic singular terms and basic general terms), and also to the further two-part puristic thesis that the simple concrete individual objects for which basic singular terms stand are *absolute* simples and that the objects for which basic general terms stand are *definite abstract* concepts or universals, *Pure Referentialism*. This is a crucial interpretive move. It is Pure Referentialism, and not Referentialism as such, that is the philosophical target of Wittgenstein's deconstructive critique of Referentialism in the *Investigations*.

Moreover, the bull's-eye of the philosophical target of Pure Referentialism is not in fact the semantics of names proposed by Plato's Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, but instead a dual bull's-eye consisting of *Russell's* semantics of names circa 1912 and *early Wittgenstein's* semantics of names in the *Tractatus*. Russell's semantics of names circa 1912, in turn, depends heavily on two doctrines:

- (1) the *multiple relation* theory of judgment, which says that a proposition is nothing but an ordered set of absolute simples, definite abstract concepts or universals, and abstract logical constants organized by the mind of a subject who stands in multiple acquaintance relations to these objects in the act of judging,
- and
- (2) the distinction between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description*.

Here is the gravamen of what Russell says about these doctrines.

When we judge that Charles I died on the scaffold, we have before us not one object but several objects, namely, Charles I, dying, and the scaffold. Similarly, when we

judge that Charles I died in his bed, we have before us the objects Charles I, dying, and his bed. These objects are not fictions: they are just as good as the objects of the true judgment. We therefore escape the necessity of admitting objective falsehoods, or of admitting that in judging falsely we have nothing before the mind. Thus in this view judgment is a relation of the mind to several other terms: when these other terms have *inter se* a ‘corresponding’ relation, the judgment is true; when not, it is false.⁸

Knowledge of things, when it is of the kind we call knowledge by *acquaintance*, is essentially simpler than knowledge of truths, and logically independent of knowledge of truths, though it would be rash to assume that human beings ever, in fact, have acquaintance with things without knowing some truth about them. Knowledge of things by *description*, on the contrary, always involves ... some knowledge of truths as its source or ground ... We shall say that we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.⁹

All our knowledge, both knowledge of things and knowledge of truths, rests upon acquaintance as its foundation. It is therefore important to consider what kinds of things there are with which we have acquaintance ... We have acquaintance in sensation with the data of the outer senses, and in introspection with the data of what may be called the inner sense – thoughts, feelings, desires, etc.; we have acquaintance in memory with things that have been data either of the outer senses or inner sense ... In addition to our acquaintance with particular existing things, we also have acquaintance with what we shall call *universals*, that is to say, general ideas, such as *whiteness*, *diversity*, *brotherhood*, and so on. Every complete sentence must contain at least one word which stands for a universal, since all verbs have a meaning which is universal ... [We must] guard against the supposition that whatever we can be acquainted with must be something particular and existent. Awareness of universals is called *conceiving*, and a universal of which we are aware is called a *concept*.¹⁰

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explicitly rejects Russell’s multiple relation theory of judgment as psychologistic (*TLPO* 4.1121), and also because he denies that logical constants stand for any sort of object – ‘my fundamental thought is that the “logical constants” do not stand for something (*nicht vertreten*)’ (*TLPO* 4.0312). But in the *Tractatus* he also explicitly *accepts* Russell’s distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description (in German, the distinction between *Kenntnis* and *Beschreibung*). As a consequence of explicitly accepting Russell’s acquaintance–description distinction, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein also explicitly accepts Pure Referentialism. Here are the relevant texts.

⁸ Russell [1910] 1966: 153. ⁹ Russell 1912: 46. ¹⁰ Russell 1912: 48–52.

If I know (*kenne*) an object, then I also know (*kenne*) all the possibilities of its occurrence in atomic facts. (TLPO 2.0123)

In order to know (*kennen*) an object, I must know (*kennen*) not its external but all its internal qualities. (TLPO 2.01231)

States of affairs can be described (*beschreiben*), but not *named*. (Names resemble points; propositions resemble arrows, they have sense.) (TLPO 3.144)

The simple signs employed in propositions are called names. (TLPO 3.202)

The name means (*bedeutet*) the object. The object is its meaning (*Bedeutung*). (TLPO 3.203)

In the proposition the name stands for (*vertritt*) the object. (TLPO 3.22)

Objects I can only *name*. Signs stand for (*vertreten*) them. I can only speak of them. A proposition can only say *how* a thing is, not *what* it is. (TLPO 3.221)

Reality must be completely described (*beschrieben*) by the proposition. A proposition is a description (*Beschreibung*) of a fact. (TLPO 4.023)

Now in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein wants to establish the meaning-is-use thesis. He therefore rejects the distinction that ‘the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*’ had accepted between acquaintance and description. Nevertheless the human *act* of acquaintance, in the form of a demonstration-act of ostensive pointing, plays an important yet subsidiary role in the concept of meaning-as-use. For as we have seen, Wittgenstein argues that although *generally* the meaning of a word is its use, *sometimes* the meaning of a name is explained by pointing to its bearer. This two-part claim is what he wants to prove in two steps, first by means of his deconstructive critique of the philosophical living picture of Pure Referentialism that is etched into the Augustinian theory of language, and then second by appealing to the meaning-is-use thesis as the best overall explanation of all the relevant linguistic facts.

(Step B) The Augustinian language-game of the builders in *PI* 2, 6 and 8 is a living picture or diorama of a Pure Referentialist language.

Commentary on Step B

The *Investigations* begins with a text from Augustine’s *Confessions*, I, 8:

When they (my elders) named some object, and some accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily

movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires. (*PI* p. 2 n1)

In order to understand Wittgenstein's use of this text from the *Confessions*, we must recall that the notion of a 'language-game' in this context means 'the idea of a language more primitive than ours' (*PI* 2). As the self-appointed Grand Inquisitor of his own earlier Pure Referentialist conception of meaning in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is deeply interested in the *Augustinian language-game* in particular, precisely because 'that [Pure Referentialist] philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions' (*PI* 2). Here is what Wittgenstein says about the Augustinian language-game:

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 the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", and "beam". A calls them out; – B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. — Conceive this as a complete language-game. (*PI* 2)

We could even imagine that the language of §2 was the *whole* language of A and B; even the whole language of a tribe. The children are brought up to perform *these* actions, to use *these* words as they do, and to react in *this* way to the words of others. (*PI* 6)

We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games "language-games" and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. And the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone might also be called language-games. Think of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses. I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions (*Tätigkeiten*) into which it is woven, the "language-game". (*PI* 7)

Let us now look at an expansion of language (2). Besides the four words "block", "pillar", etc., let it contain a series of words used as the shopkeeper in (1) used the numerals [to stand for finite cardinal numbers and counting out groups of objects] (it can be the series of letters of the alphabet); further, let there be two words, which may as well as be "there" and "this" (because this roughly indicates their purpose), that are used in connection with a pointing gesture; and finally a number of colour samples. A gives an order like: "d – slab – there". At the same time he shows the

assistant a colour sample, and when he says “there” he points to a place on the building site. From the stock of slabs B takes one for each letter of the alphabet up to “d”, of the same colour as the sample, and brings them to the place indicated by A. – On other occasions A gives the order “this – there”. At “this” he points to a building stone. And so on. (PI 8)

Wittgenstein never does tell us what the builders are building. But it is not too fanciful, and indeed it even makes very good instructive philosophical sense, to imagine that the builders described in §§2, 6 and 8 are trying to build either the Tower of Babel, as described in Genesis 11:1–9 –

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

– or perhaps the wall upon which Humpty Dumpty sat in *Through the Looking-Glass*:

‘Don’t stand chattering to yourself like that,’ Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, ‘but tell me your name and your business.’

‘My name is Alice, but –’

‘It’s a stupid name enough!’ Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. ‘What does it mean?’

‘Must a name mean something?’ Alice asked doubtfully.

‘Of course it must,’ Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: ‘my name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.’¹¹

It makes sense that the builders are trying to build the Tower of Babel. This is because we can think of the Logical Atomists, including both the author of the *Tractatus* and Russell circa 1912, as attempting to build a logico-semantic tower, called *the Ideal Language*, all the way up to Platonic heaven. But this project led inevitably to a logico-semantic Fall into the irreducible and sometimes almost incommensurable plurality of different natural languages and language-games scattered abroad upon the face of all the earth. The ultimately abandoned, half-built tower of Logical Atomism – and here we can think of that amazing painting by Peter Breughel the Elder – is then

¹¹ Carroll 1988: 105–6.

rightly called *Babel*. It also makes sense that the Builders are trying to build Humpty Dumpty's wall. This is because, at least as Lewis Carroll presents that bumptious egghead H.D., he is quite explicitly a Pure Referentialist who holds that his own proper name uniquely means his own shape, and that he can use his own name to point directly to his shape.

Whatever the possible subterranean philosophical influences of the Book of Genesis and *Through the Looking-Glass* on the *Investigations*, however, Wittgenstein's own explicit two-part gloss on the text from Augustine's *Confessions* says this:

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning (*Bedeutung*). This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

Augustine does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word. If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like “table”, “chair”, “bread”, and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself. (*PI* 1)

So the Augustinian language-game is a diorama of Pure Referentialism. But why did Wittgenstein use the passage from *Confessions* as his starting text, and not other very similar passages from the *Theaetetus* or, indeed, from *Through the Looking-Glass*? One obvious answer is that in addition to being a Pure Referentialist *avant la lettre*, Augustine also strongly anticipates Cartesian epistemology and metaphysics of mind, not to mention Edmund Husserl's semantic phenomenology in the *Logical Investigations* I, chapter 1, section 10, provocatively entitled ‘Expressions in Solitary Life’, as well as Rudolf Carnap's equally provocative notion of ‘methodological solipsism’ in the *Logical Structure of the World*. Augustine's *Confessions*, in short, strongly anticipates *semantic solipsism*. Augustine tellingly says this about his confessions:

Why then does it matter to me whether men should hear what I have to confess, as though it were they who were to cure all the evil that is in me? They are an inquisitive race, always anxious to pry into other men's lives, but never ready to correct their own. Why do they wish to hear from me what sort of man I am, though they will not listen to you when you tell them what they are? When they hear me speak about myself, how do they know I am telling the truth, since no one *knows a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him?*¹²

¹² Augustine 1961: 208.

Augustine's *Cartesian* semantic solipsism, in turn, captures the core of Wittgenstein's own *transcendental* semantic solipsism in the *Tractatus*, which I briefly previewed in section II. And in the early stages of his critical discussion of the Augustinian theory of language in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein directly addresses Cartesian and transcendental semantic solipsism alike:

If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view, you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: "What is a question?" – Is it the statement that I do not know such-and-such, or the statement that I wish the other person would tell me ...? Or is it the description of my mental state of uncertainty? – And is the cry "Help!" such a description? ... The significance of such possibilities of transformation, for example of turning all sentences into sentences beginning 'I think' or 'I believe' (and thus, as it were, into descriptions of *my* inner life) will become clearer in another place. (Solipsism.) (*PI* 24)

Of course, what he means here by things becoming clearer in 'another place' is the Private Language Argument.¹³

(Step C) It is manifest that not everything that is language has meaning in this way (*PI* 3), if only because the referring terms of the Builders' language also function as orders (*PI* 18). In fact it is more correct to think of words as tools embedded in language-games and in forms of life, and as playing any number of roles relative to different games and forms of life, than to think of them as playing a single decontextualized semantic role in the language, such as naming objects. (*PI* 19–23, 26–7)

Commentary on Step C

This last step in the opening three-step argument is the philosophically seminal one, insofar as it presents Wittgenstein's thesis that meaning-is-use. I have already discussed the nature and philosophical implications of this thesis in section III, so will not repeat that here.

As far as *establishing* the meaning-is-use thesis, however, the crucial move here is to get us to see how Pure Referentialism turns out to be either a completely tautologous and trivial thesis, or else a significant thesis that is clearly false. As to the former, Wittgenstein says:

When we say: "Every word in language signifies (*bezeichnet*) something" we have so far said *nothing whatever*; unless we have explained exactly *what* distinction we want to make. (It might be, of course, that we wanted to distinguish the words of

¹³ See Hacker 1986: ch. 8; Kripke 1982; and Pears 1988: chs. 13–15.

language (8) from words ‘without meaning’ such as occur in Lewis Carroll’s poems, or words like “Lilliburlero” in songs. (*PI* 13)

In other words, there are as many different uses of meaningful language as there are different kinds of human intentional action, and the only *real* point of asserting a thesis like Pure Referentialism would be to distinguish meaningful language in general from nonsense. This is not to say, however, that nonsense cannot have its *own* uses or career in human action – as, for example, in Carroll’s *The Walrus and the Carpenter*¹⁴ – but instead just that this specifically nonsensical kind of linguistic career is distinct from that of meaningful words. The human career of nonsensical language is distinguished fundamentally from the human career of natural or ordinary language by the manifest *playfulness* of nonsense as opposed to the manifest *everyday seriousness* of natural or ordinary language, despite the deep fact that both are language-games embedded in *forms of life*, or normatively rule-governed episodes in the total career of words in human action. So ultimately the difference in language use lies in different human act-intentions, as also of course do all real differences in meanings. If Pure Referentialism is taken in this way, then it simply restates the meaning-is-use thesis.

But if, on the other hand, Pure Referentialism is taken to stand for the substantive three-part thesis that all words are proper names, that the meaning of a word is nothing but the object it names, and that every basic proper name in a basic proposition (whether a basic singular term or a basic general term or concept-word) denotes either an absolutely simple individual concrete object or a definite abstract concept or universal, then it is simply false, by the following argument, which leads us deeper into the *Investigations*, and well beyond the simple constructions of the Builders:

- (1) In a Pure Referentialist semantics, there are two distinct types of basic proper names: basic singular terms and basic general terms or concept-words. Absolutely simple individual concrete objects are assigned to basic singular terms, and definite abstract concepts or universals are assigned to basic general terms.
- (2) Absolutely simple individual concrete objects are assigned to basic singular terms by ostension (*PI* 6). Singular reference is then best understood as ostensively attaching a name-label to an absolutely simple individual thing, i.e. by dubbing it (*PI* 37).
- (3) But every ostension is open to many distinct possible interpretations (*PI* 28–38), and only actual use will uniquely fix an interpretation.

¹⁴ See Carroll 1988: 65–71.

- (4) Moreover, if the meaning of a basic singular term were just the bearer of the name, then whenever the bearer was destroyed, the meaning would be destroyed, which is absurd because it would make true negative existentials with singular terms into nonsense (*PI* 40). But true negative existentials with singular terms, such as ‘Moses did not exist’, are in fact perfectly meaningful, although such sentences do also allow of irreducibly different meanings, depending on their use (*PI* 79).
- (5) Furthermore, there are no such things as absolutely simple individual concrete objects, because every object we can perceive is complex in various ways, and allows of no unique decomposition into ultimate simple parts (*PI* 46–64).
- (6) So Pure Referentialism about basic singular terms is false, and the thesis that meaning-is-use is the best overall explanation of how even basic singular terms have meaning.
- (7) Pure Referentialism as applied to basic general terms requires that every concept-word stand for a definite abstract concept or universal.
- (8) But not all concept-words, as actually used, mean definite abstract concepts or universals: on the contrary, at least some of them mean only family resemblances or clusters of partially overlapping human concepts, at least some of which have blurred or vague boundaries – see, for example, the concept GAME (*PI* 66–71). Only the actual use of the general term will adequately disambiguate its meaning as a concept-word. Indeed there are no analytic definitions of general terms, only our actual patterns of application of them (*PI* 75–8).
- (9) So Pure Referentialism about general terms is false, and the thesis that meaning-is-use is the best overall explanation of how even basic general terms have meaning.
- (10) So Pure Referentialism more generally is false, and the thesis that meaning-is-use is the best overall explanation of how words have meaning.

It then follows from **Step A**, **Step B** and **Step C** that the meaning-is-use thesis is true, including the important qualification that sometimes the human act of ostending an object that bears a name also explains the meaning of that name. In this way, the Augustinian theory of language leads directly from Referentialism to human action.