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978-1-107-19415-1 — Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning

Edited by James Conant, Sebastian Sunday

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WITTGENSTEIN ON PHILOSOPHY, OBJECTIVITY, AND MEANING

This volume of new essays presents groundbreaking interpretations of some of the most central themes of Wittgenstein's philosophy. A distinguished group of contributors demonstrates how Wittgenstein's thought can fruitfully be applied to contemporary debates in epistemology, metaphilosophy, and philosophy of language. The volume combines historical and systematic approaches to Wittgensteinian methods and perspectives, with essays providing detailed analysis that will be accessible to students as well as specialists. The result is a rich and illuminating picture of a key figure in twentieth-century philosophy and his continuing importance to philosophical study.

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Preface

Wittgenstein's famous example, in the opening section of the *Investigations*, of the transaction between a shopkeeper and someone who has been sent shopping with a slip of paper marked "five red apples" is followed by this equally well-known dialogue:

— It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. — "But how does he [the shopkeeper] know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" — Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. — But what is the meaning of the word "five"? — No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used. (PI §1)

Thus ends the opening section. This dialogue will be as intelligible, or unintelligible, to an otherwise intelligent reader as the shopkeeper example itself and the discussion of a quotation from Augustine which precede it. Most readers are likely to have many questions at this point. Is it true that one operates with words in the same way (or similar ways) as the shopkeeper? Why does Wittgenstein say "explanations come to an end somewhere," before he has even begun to give any explanation at all?

On the other hand, if a reader knows the later philosophy of Wittgenstein well, they might recognize in this brief passage several key elements of it, including Wittgenstein's conceptions of meaning as use; of rule-following as a practice; of a philosophical problem as being of the form "I don't know my way about"; his notion of a language-game as an object of comparison; and his emphasis on description over explanation in philosophy.

It is noteworthy that Wittgenstein's description of the shopkeeper example does indeed give nothing but descriptions as opposed to explanations. In the subsequent dialogue, quoted above, Wittgenstein underlines this feature of the example: first, by adding the qualification that "it is in this *and similar ways* that one operates with words"; and, second, by

refusing to give explanations in his responses to the interlocutor's questions ("Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described"), and even adding—somewhat preposterously—that "explanations come to an end somewhere."

This latter statement ("Explanations come to an end somewhere") is perhaps the clearest indication, in this short dialogue, of the kind of interest that Wittgenstein takes in the interlocutor's two questions ("But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" "But what is the meaning of the word 'five'?"). Wittgenstein responds to these questions, which are apparently innocent, as if they embodied some kind of objectionable philosophy. This is a feature that these questions and Wittgenstein's responses to them have in common with the earlier quotation from Augustine and Wittgenstein's response to it. In both cases, Wittgenstein appears to think that there is important philosophical work to be done, although (or, perhaps, because) the relevant type of problem is less well defined than a particular philosophical view or theory; the type of problem that Wittgenstein is interested in appears to lie at a somehow deeper or more general level.

The opening section of the *Investigations* is a nutshell, in many ways. It presents various elements of Wittgenstein's philosophy in a nutshell. And, like Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole, it too is a hard nut to crack. Given this relative inaccessibility of Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is perhaps not surprising that, nowadays, Wittgenstein scholarship—that is, the historical study of the philosopher and his philosophy—continues to thrive, while Wittgensteinian philosophy—that is, both Wittgenstein's philosophy itself and philosophy practiced in the same manner—is increasingly perceived by many philosophers as being, at best, at the periphery of current concerns and debates. Wittgenstein's influence on the analytic tradition was particularly strong, but analytic philosophers are evidently finding it increasingly difficult to see the relevance of much of Wittgenstein's work for contemporary analytic philosophy. This volume strives to repair this recent disconnection of the analytic tradition from one of its founding figures by analyzing Wittgensteinian methods and points of view both from an exegetical perspective and with a view to the contemporary significance of Wittgenstein's philosophy. For this purpose, we decided that it would be best to give our contributors the freedom to treat their subjects with varying degrees of exegetical detail. Since the volume seeks to both interpret and apply Wittgenstein's philosophy, it seemed to us that more free-spirited variations on it should be permitted, or indeed encouraged.

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Preface

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The thematic focus of the volume is on metaphilosophy, epistemology, and the philosophy of language. Naturally, Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and various related issues concerning the metaphysics, epistemology, and methodology of philosophy itself figure most prominently as a topic of discussion throughout. The chapters of this volume follow no strict sequence, and may be read in any order. However, those new to Wittgenstein's philosophy would do well to start at the beginning: the first two essays are both in-depth yet accessible discussions of the nature of Wittgensteinian philosophy, with the first one developing its argument largely in the form of exegesis and the second proceeding more freely. The following six essays then bring into focus various more narrowly defined questions. The first of this group tackles one central notion for this volume head-on, namely that of objectivity; the second presents a Wittgensteinian perspective regarding the role of intuitions in philosophy; the third offers a detailed and innovative interpretation of Wittgenstein's famous remarks on what he called "aspects," with a focus on related issues regarding the cognition (or perception) of meaning; the next essay also discusses Wittgenstein's remarks on aspects, and in this way develops a new solution to a problem about the nature of perceptual experience; the fifth applies lessons from Wittgenstein's work on aspect perception to questions of conceptual creativity in philosophical analysis; and the sixth discusses (related) questions concerning Wittgenstein's method and an influential type of revisionism in analytic philosophy. The following three essays each discuss linguistic meaning. The first argues against a prominent Wittgenstein-inspired use-theory of meaning; the second develops an alternative such theory; and the third presents a response to two recent criticisms of the related view that facts about meaning—or, more specifically, semantic facts—supervene on (non-semantic) facts about the use of words and concepts. The final essay in this volume is an exam on Wittgenstein and Socrates.

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