

## Introduction

For about thirty years following the publication of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* the concept of a criterion came to hold a central place in the discussion of his work, beginning with Norman Malcolm's review of the book in 1954.<sup>1</sup> To many commentators, it held the key to what was revolutionary in Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophy. However, since the early 1980s, criteria seem to have slipped rather quickly out of focus. In Wittgenstein commentaries that have appeared during the past thirty to forty years, with few exceptions, criteria are not paid much attention.<sup>2</sup> This shift has also taken place in the minds of individual commentators. While Malcolm was apparently the commentator who first lifted the concept to prominence, it is mentioned only in passing in his late work, *Nothing is Hidden: Wittgenstein's Criticism of his Early Thought* (1986).<sup>3</sup> Again, consider the work of Gordon Baker. In his essay 'Criteria: A New Foundation for Semantics', published in 1974,<sup>4</sup> he hailed Wittgenstein's introduction of the concept of criterion as the beginning of a revolution in the philosophy of language: an approach he termed Constructive Semantics was to replace Classical Semantics – the outlook which he claimed, no doubt with some justification, to underlie most contemporary theories of meaning (whether explicitly or not). However, in the posthumous collection of Baker's essays, mainly written in the 1990's, called *Wittgenstein's Method: Neglected Aspects*,<sup>5</sup> hardly any attention is given to criteria.

In this Element, I shall try to present a reading of some of the central uses of the term 'criterion' in Wittgenstein's work, focusing primarily on *Philosophical Investigations*. After that, I shall present and comment on the main issues and lines of argument in the post-Wittgensteinian debate concerning criteria. I shall conclude by proposing an account of why interest in criteria gradually faded.

What are criteria? Without prejudging the discussion to follow, let me propose a preliminary definition of the word 'criterion'. The criterion for something being so, we may say, is that which is crucial for the thing being so, this being bound up with the meaning of the claim that it is so. Thus, the criterion of a goal in football is the ball passing the goal line while in play; that is what the referee has to go by in awarding a goal to the attacking team.

<sup>1</sup> *The Philosophical Review*, 63 (1954), 530–59. Reprinted, in slightly different form, in Malcolm's collection *Knowledge and Certainty*, and in Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, 65–103. References are to the Pitcher volume.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few exceptions are Wright, *Realism, Meaning and Truth*, 2nd ed.; Glock, 'Criteria', 92–7; McDowell, 'Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge', 369–94; Hanfling, 'Criteria, Conventions and the Problem of Other Minds', 38–50; and Loomis, 'Criteria', in 160–8.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.      <sup>4</sup> *Ratio* 16 (1974), 156–89.

<sup>5</sup> Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2004.

This is the meaning of the word ‘goal’ in the context of football (or, in the terminology occasionally adopted by Wittgenstein, this is part of the ‘grammar’ of the word ‘goal’ as used within the practice of playing football). If I’m outside the stadium I can tell that the home team has scored a goal by the sudden roar rising from the audience, but that is not what is *meant* by a goal in football. For another example, the criterion of a person having died is (or used to be) her heart having stopped beating. We may, of course, judge her to have died when she ceases to move or to be responsive to external stimuli, but this judgment may turn out to be mistaken, whereas the heart-beat mark may not. Here, by the way, we also have a case of criterial change: in some countries, the legal criterion of death is no longer the heart but the brain ceasing to function.

The word ‘criterion’ (plural ‘criteria’) – in German ‘*Kriterium*’ (‘*Kriterien*’) – occurs very frequently in Wittgenstein’s notebooks and lectures from 1929 onwards. In most of these cases, the word is used in connection with his making a point about the use of some expression, in ways seeming to take it for granted that the word will be understood without explanation. In other words, Wittgenstein is evidently reckoning with the reader’s familiarity with the word.

Wittgenstein’s remarks containing the word ‘criterion’ are not, on the whole, meant to throw light on what is meant by ‘criteria’; rather, for him, talk of criteria is a tool for drawing attention to some uses of words. Wittgenstein thought it meaningful to distinguish, in clarifying the use of certain words within a practice, between the sorts of grounds for applying the word that are constitutive of the role of the word in that practice – the criteria – and the sorts of grounds that are dependent on empirical connections.

Suppose, in the course of conversation, I ask a question beginning, say, ‘When do we say ...?’, or ‘How does one tell ...?’, or ‘What is meant by calling something ...?’ I may do so to get clear about the use of some word in the course of being introduced into a practice (or maybe to get a sharper sense of the use of some word of which I only have a vague grasp). Or, when involved in a discussion, I may ask ‘When would *you* say ...?’ (etc.), perhaps because I have a notion that you and I may not be talking about the same thing. I would suggest that, when Wittgenstein talks about criteria, what he has in mind are, roughly, the answers people would give to questions like these. We might call them ‘criterial claims’. (Another type of criterial claim which he also seems to have in mind at times is that of announcing a stipulation about how some word *is to be used* in the context of a practice.) I am not implying that in making criterial claims, people will typically use the word ‘criterion’ – nor, on the other hand, are they necessarily making this sort of claim whenever they use that word.

(As will be made clear later, in Section 5.2, criterial claims are not only used in connection with describing practices.)

Questions beginning ‘How does one know . . . ?’ (except where they can be replaced by questions of the first type) or ‘What makes you think . . . ?’ are typically not requests for criteria in this sense but rather for (empirical) evidence (or, as Wittgenstein occasionally says, ‘symptoms’) of something being the case – the way the roaring of the audience is evidence of the home team having scored a goal, or the way a person’s being totally unresponsive and motionless may be evidence of her death.

Rogers Albritton, in an early paper on criteria, says that criteria for Wittgenstein ‘are primarily criteria that men “accept”, “adopt”, “fix”, “introduce”, and “use” or “apply” in connection with their use of certain expressions’.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis here is on what Albritton calls the conventional character of criterial claims. This gives a strong emphasis to cases in which the appeal to criteria is conscious and deliberate, sometimes even a matter of choice. However, it is important to note that in many cases something being criterial is simply a given for those who participate in a practice, and that, often enough, reflection may be required for us to become aware of where we place the criterial conditions for the use of some word within a practice.

Only on a very few occasions is the word ‘criterion’ foregrounded in Wittgenstein’s writings. This is true in particular of a passage in *The Blue Book*,<sup>7</sup> which came to receive a great deal of attention and seems to have guided the understanding of the word in much of the ensuing debate, in ways that are not really warranted by Wittgenstein’s own actual use of the word. I shall get back to some of these ‘foregrounding’ remarks later, but wish to focus for now on the cases in which the word is doing yeoman work.

The word ‘criterion’ occurs only once in Wittgenstein’s early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (published in 1921)<sup>8</sup>:

6.1271 It is clear that the number of the ‘primitive propositions of logic’ is arbitrary, since one could derive logic from a single primitive proposition, e.g. by simply constructing the logical product of Frege’s primitive propositions. (Frege would perhaps say that we should then no longer have an immediately self-evident proposition. But it is remarkable that a thinker as rigorous as Frege appealed to the degree of self-evidence as the criterion of a logical proposition.)

<sup>6</sup> ‘On Wittgenstein’s Use of the Term “Criterion”’. First published in *The Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1959), 845–57. Reprinted in Pitcher (ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, 231–50. The quotation is from p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> In Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 1–74.

<sup>8</sup> Translated by Pears & McGuinness (1961).

Let me make a brief remark on this passage. ‘Criterion’ is here used in characterizing a position that Wittgenstein rejected. He thought, at the time, that logical truth could only be established through mechanical calculation, say, by means of truth-value tables. The idea that logical truth could be established on the basis of whether a proposition is self-evident to us would constitute a return to the psychologism that Gottlob Frege had successfully criticized, and the criticism of which had been an important influence on Wittgenstein’s own thinking. Wittgenstein could conceivably have countered Frege’s notion by saying that the criterion of logical truth is rather whether a proposition gets the value ‘true’ for all possible truth-value combinations. (For example, a proposition of the form ‘ $p \vee \sim p$ ’, in this strand of thought, is true whether or not the constituent proposition for which ‘ $p$ ’ stands is true or false: ‘It’s either raining or not raining’, it will be said, is true in all possible situations, true whether it is raining or not.)

It is not hard to see why Wittgenstein had little use for the term ‘criterion’ in the *Tractatus*: in that work he was interested in the formal conditions for chains of words constituting propositions and in the formal connections between propositions; on the conception he held at that time, the way we tell whether something is so had no bearing on those issues. Relations between propositions were either truth-conditional or contingent. Considerations of language use were not then part of his concern.

The one time he does use the word in the quoted passage, he is not speaking of the sense of propositions, but rather what it is to *speak about speaking* about propositions; in this case, what it means to call a proposition logically true. The remark belongs to a debate about how to construct the scaffolding for an account of language, not to the account of language itself.

I shall, then, concentrate on occurrences of the term ‘criterion’ in Wittgenstein’s later work, in particular *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>9</sup> By limiting the scope of inquiry, I hope to be able to focus on some of the central concerns in connection with which Wittgenstein used the term.

Let me briefly indicate what kind of work *Philosophical Investigations* is. As in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is concerned with getting clear about issues concerning language and meaning. However, the spirit in which he approaches these issues is altogether different from that of the *Tractatus*; we might even say the issues themselves are different. Meaning is now regarded in the context of

<sup>9</sup> References to this work (previously known as ‘Part I’) will be given as *PI* followed by the numeral I, ‘§’ and section number. References to *Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment* (previously known as ‘Part II’), contained in the same volume, will be given in two ways: first with the initials ‘*PPF*’ followed by ‘§’ and paragraph number, then by *PI* followed by the numeral II, chapter, and page number.

the different roles linguistic expressions have in the lives of the speakers of language. What is brought to the fore here is the great variety of uses of language. Whereas the concept of representation was the pivot around which the inquiry turned in the *Tractatus*, in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein does not presuppose that there is a unified notion of representation which lies at the basis of communication by means of language.

In the preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that the thoughts in it ‘concern many subjects: the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition and sentence, of logic, the foundations of mathematics, states of consciousness, and other things’ (4).

He goes on to characterize his mode of proceeding as follows:

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into ... a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and meandering journeys. (4)

According to the conception held by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, philosophical problems often arise because we regard the uses of words through preconceived notions, typically by disregarding the difference between uses that appear to be analogous. The temptation to do so is to be overcome by looking closely at the various uses ‘despite an urge to misunderstand them’ (*PII*, §§ 66, 109). Thus, one and the same word may occur in quite different roles in different conversational contexts (e.g. ‘know’, ‘understand’, ‘think’, etc.). Or two words may on the surface seem to behave similarly, but their actual use may be radically different (e.g. ‘say’ and ‘mean’, § 664).

The aim of his work, it could be said, is to teach the reader how to come to terms with the seemingly intractable problems to which the words discussed give rise, by reminding ourselves of the ways they are used in common conversation. Appeals to criterial considerations belong to this job of description.

*Philosophical Investigations* was the final outcome of an extended effort to formulate a conception of philosophy which had started in the early 1930s, that is, at the time Wittgenstein returned to philosophy after an absence of almost a decade (at the same time as he returned from Vienna to Cambridge, where he had been studying before the outbreak of the war in 1914). The extensive work which has been preserved in his notebooks and typescripts from that time and

until his death in 1951, was in large part work preparatory for a book he intended to publish, the nearest approximation to which is *Philosophical Investigations* as we have it today, a work that can be called final only in the sense that Wittgenstein was no longer in position to go on working on it. The book, whose German title is *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, appeared posthumously in 1953 under the editorship of the three persons Wittgenstein had designated his literary executors: Elizabeth Anscombe, Rush Rhees, and G. H. von Wright, in a bilingual edition with an English translation by Anscombe.

Wittgenstein's huge literary *Nachlass*, his notebooks, earlier compilations of his remarks, as well as notes based on his lectures have gradually been made available over the years.

*Philosophical Investigations* contains 1,065 numbered remarks (693 in Part I and 372 in *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment/Part II*) as well as 13 unnumbered remarks (all in Part I). The word 'criterion' ('criteria') occurs in 41 remarks, spread fairly evenly throughout the text. In 39 of those remarks, the criteria spoken about concern matters attributed to persons (sensation,<sup>10</sup> experience,<sup>11</sup> state of mind or brain,<sup>12</sup> understanding,<sup>13</sup> activity such as reading<sup>14</sup> or calculating in one's head,<sup>15</sup> mastery or ability,<sup>16</sup> acting correctly or making a mistake,<sup>17</sup> recognizing a feeling,<sup>18</sup> seeing,<sup>19</sup> a thought being complete at an earlier moment,<sup>20</sup> looking without seeing,<sup>21</sup> having an image of red<sup>22</sup>). The remainder concern identity of persons,<sup>23</sup> how a rule is meant,<sup>24</sup> fit (a cylinder fitting into a hollow cylinder), change of fit, change of weight,<sup>25</sup> rain.<sup>26</sup>

In twenty-one of the remarks, the word 'criterion' occurs in a question: 'what is the criterion for . . . ?' Here, Wittgenstein is evidently inviting us to reflect on what it would mean to accept something as a criterion for the word in question, or to decide what the criterion is to be. Sometimes, he is suggesting that there is no criterion; sometimes that the criteria vary between contexts. Often, settling on a criterion is a way of determining whether or not two speakers mean the same by some word in a given context.

In many cases, Wittgenstein is not telling us what *he* considers the criteria to be, rather the only authority within sight is *the reader*. The invocation of criteria is often an aid in describing this or that actual or imagined linguistic practice.

<sup>10</sup> I §§ 258, 288, 290.    <sup>11</sup> I §§ 239, 322, 509, 542, *PPF* § 146/IIxi, 198.

<sup>12</sup> I §§ 141, 149, 572, 573, *PPF* § 36/IIvi, 181.    <sup>13</sup> I §§ 182, 185, 269, 288.

<sup>14</sup> I §§ 159, 160, 164.    <sup>15</sup> I § 385.

<sup>16</sup> I §§ 159, 160, 164, 182, 185, 190, 238, 269, 385, *PPF* §§ 36, 180/IIvi, 181, xi, 203.

<sup>17</sup> I §§ 51, 56, 258.    <sup>18</sup> I § 625.    <sup>19</sup> *PPF* § 236/IIxi, 212.    <sup>20</sup> I § 633.

<sup>21</sup> *PPF* § 242/IIxi, 211.    <sup>22</sup> I § 377.    <sup>23</sup> I § 404.    <sup>24</sup> I §§ 190, 692.    <sup>25</sup> All I § 182.

<sup>26</sup> I § 354.