Analysis and explanation in the *Philosophical Investigations*

José Pedro Correia

Abstract

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, one can find a number of remarks that could be seen as antithetical with classic philosophical analysis. There are passages seemingly rejecting the ideas of concept decomposition, regression to first principles, and semantic substitution. The criticism, I argue, is aimed not at analysis in particular, but rather at some idealizations that pervade a certain picture of philosophy. This picture can be contrasted with Wittgenstein's pragmatist view of explanations of meaning which, I believe, can inform a different attitude towards philosophical method that aligns well with a vision of philosophy as conversation. If we think of philosophy as engaging in the development and exchange of explanations of meaning, we can see how various methods can coexist insofar as they are useful, and as long as the urge to sublimate them beyond our practices can be avoided.

1 Wittgenstein and philosophical analysis

Ludwig Wittgenstein is a central figure in 20th century philosophy. Interpretations of his work vary widely, with differing opinions on, for example, whether we should take his writings as a unified vision or consisting of different phases, how to interpret his unusual writing style and rhetorical methods, whether we can extract substantial views from his work and, if so, what exactly they are, among other things (see Kahane, Kanterian, and Kuusela 2007 for recent overviews). Part of the reasons for this variety of interpretations stems from Wittgenstein's views on philosophy itself, and how that intertwines with his own philosophical practice. In this paper I want to explore that aspect of his work, focusing on considerations in the *Philosophical Investigations*[1] that either relate to philosophical method in general, or that can be related to philosophical analysis in particular.

A significant part of the book is dedicated to metaphilosophical remarks that throw light on Wittgenstein's view of the source of philosophical problems and the adequate strategies to (dis)solving them. These are connected to the remaining remarks in a mutual relation: not only do the non-metaphilosophical observations ground remarks on philosophical practice, the latter also further elucidate the former. What Wittgenstein says about philosophy—what it should do and what it can achieve—has a direct impact on how he approaches philosophical problems related to, for example, language, meaning, or the mind. But what he says about language and meaning in particular also has an impact on the kind of philosophical methodology he criticizes or advocates. Given this interconnection between metaphilosophy and practice, I here discuss Wittgenstein's observations on philosophy and philosophical method, as well as some of his positions on language and meaning. In doing so, I am taking some remarks as substantial, rather than merely performative, purely satirical, or simply instrumental for some form of therapy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an overview of the variety of interpretations of later

[1] Since a large part of this paper is exegetical in nature, I make a large number of references to the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953). In order to reduce the dependence on a particular edition of the book, I mostly refrain from using a publication year and page numbers in citations, and instead cite numbered sections using the § symbol. In some occasions, the paragraph within a section is specified by using lowercase letters in the standard alphabetical order. For example, § 64b refers to the *Philosophical Investigations*, section 64, second paragraph. Quotes are taken from the revised 4th edition by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (2009). When quotes are used, publication year and page numbers to this edition are provided in the citation.

Wittgenstein and to precisely position this reading in that context. Briefly, my interpretation relies on a mostly immanent reading (Glock 2007) with pragmatist inclinations (see Haack 1982; Putnam 1994; Rorty 2007).

Before going into what is said about analysis in the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is important to get a clearer picture of what philosophical analysis is[2]. Looking through some well-known dictionaries of philosophy, one can find definitions like the following:

> The theory of conceptual analysis holds that concepts – general meanings of linguistic predicates – are the fundamental objects of philosophical inquiry, and that insights into conceptual contents are expressed in necessary 'conceptual truths' (analytic propositions). (Craig 1998)
>
> [T]he process of breaking up a concept, proposition, linguistic complex, or fact into its simple or ultimate constituents. (Audi 1999)
>
> The process of breaking a concept down into more simple parts, so that its logical structure is displayed. (Blackburn 2008)

These definitions highlight several aspects of analysis. First, analysis is a method or process used in philosophical inquiry[3]. Second, its inputs are concepts (in which case it can be called conceptual analysis) or other entities related natural language, like propositions, linguistics complexes, or facts. Analysis purportedly does not deal directly with words and sentences but rather with their general meanings. Third, these entities are seen, from the standpoint of analysis, as composed of parts or constituents. Fourth, the purpose of the method is to provide insights into these entities by revealing their internal structure in terms of those constituents. This summarizes what we can call the standard contemporary perspective of analysis in a narrow sense, and it is a notion that already can be seen as clashing with some remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

The core of Wittgenstein's observations on philosophy and method can be located in §§ 89-133. An important part of these sections engages in criticism of a certain way of doing philosophy. This is accompanied by what one could call a diagnosis of the motivations underlying the tendency to follow such a path. Wittgenstein sets off this discussion by asking the question: "In what way is logic something sublime?" (2009, §89a, p. 46e). The observations that follow are, however, not specifically about logic as a technical tool or field of research. They are more concerned with logical thinking as method, and more generally about what can drive us into believing that this kind of thinking has a "peculiar depth":

> Logic lay, it seemed, at the foundation of all the sciences. – For logical investigation explores the essence of all things. It seeks to see to the foundation of things, and shouldn't concern itself whether things actually happen in this or that way. (2009, §89b, pp. 46e-47e)

That this conception is to be questioned is already given away by the qualification "it seemed". Logic serves here as a representative of an attitude common in philosophy: the quest for essences, foundations, underlying structures. It is also evocative of the method of philosophical analysis.

The paragraph is followed by an example of a typical philosophical question taken from the writings of Augustine ("What, then, is time?") and subsequently by remarks that draw attention to the kind of urges triggered by this type of questions:

> We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena. So too, Augustine calls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration of events, about their being past, present or future.

[2] All unqualified uses of the term analysis in this paper should be interpreted as referring to the method of *philosophical* analysis.

[3] Craig's formulation of conceptual analysis as a theory can be read as highlighting the theoretical presuppositions of the method.

> (These are, of course, not *philosophical* statements about time, the past, the present and the future.)
> Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. [...] (2009, §90, p. 47e)

These remarks go against one of the aforementioned assumptions of philosophical analysis: that the method investigates not surface language but something beyond it. Wittgenstein says that, when exploring typically philosophical questions, even though one can believe to be making considerations directly about phenomena, in this case time, one ends up actually reflecting on statements that are made about the phenomena. This is partly what is meant when it is said that the inquiry is a grammatical one, where grammar is to be broadly understood (see Ocelák 2014).

Augustine continues his analysis as follows:

> Yet we speak of a "long time" and a "short time," though only when we mean the past or the future. For example, we say that a hundred years is a long time ago or a long time ahead. A short time ago or a short time ahead we might put at ten days. But how can anything which does not exist be either long or short? For the past is no more and the future is not yet. Surely, then, instead of saying "It is a long time" we ought to say of the past "It was a long time" and of the future "It will be a long time."
> My Lord, my Light, does not your truth make us look foolish in this case too? For if we speak of a long time in the past, do we mean that it was long when it was already past or before it became the past and was still the present? It could only be long when it was there to be long: once it was past it no longer was, and if it no longer was, it could not be long. (Augustine 1993, Book XI, §15)

We see here how Augustine goes back and forth from considerations of a linguistic nature regarding what we *say about* time and when we *call* time long or short, to ontological considerations of how time *can be* long or short. Underlying this approach is an implicit understanding of the bearing these statements have on the characterization of the phenomena. The relevance of exploring the former in order to understand the latter implicitly buys into a picture of language that sees linguistic entities as strongly connected with other kind of entities. It seems to presuppose at least two things: first, that because we have a word 'time' there is a Something (§ 261, § 293) to which the word corresponds; second, that the statements we make about 'time' are good approximations of the properties of that Something. Driven by this picture, philosophers can be lead to hypostatize linguistic entities, to think that things like language, propositions, thought, correspond to something that has a hidden essence that "an analysis is supposed to unearth" (2009, §92a, p. 48e).

This implicit understanding of language is strongly tied to an urge that goes hand in hand with analysis. The statements we make about phenomena seem to lack exactness. But if the linguistic entity corresponds to something, this something must (the philosopher doing analysis assumes) be well defined. We ask ourselves, like Augustine: 'What exactly do we mean when we say time is short?' Our craving for precision, coupled with the image of meaning as a Something, can lead us into thinking that these statements can be further analyzed and expressions completely clarified. Wittgenstein's allusion to this problem (§§ 91-92) is followed by examples of what could be said about propositions (§§ 93-94) and thought (§ 95), and how these statements can be muddled by the "tendency to assume a pure intermediary" (2009, §94, p. 48e). This idea can then lead us back into believing that what we really need to grasp is the essence of language, *i.e.* "the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth" (2009, §97b, p. 49e). We puzzle about vagueness in our everyday language (§§ 98-100) and then project the requirements of exactness and generality back into reality (§§ 101-107, §§ 110-115). Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that this craving for exactness and the picture of meaning as anchored in a form of correspondence reinforce each other in sending philosophers in "pursuit of chimeras" (2009, §94, p. 48e) and lead them astray into philosophical confusion. The correspondence picture is heavily criticized throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*. If it really is an important assumption of analysis in a narrow sense, this puts the latter in clear conflict with Wittgenstein's own picture of language and meaning.

However, one can also think of analysis in a broader sense. Michael Beaney (2016) argues that, although metaphilosophical conceptions and definitions of the method have varied throughout the ages, there are aspects of philosophical practice that can be subsumed under a broad conception of analysis, and these can be characterized by three main perspectives. One is the *regressive* conception of analysis, which conceives the method as aiming at "working back to first principles by means of which something could then be demonstrated" (2016). Another is to think of analysis as *decompositional*, *i.e.* as breaking down concepts (or propositions, or linguistic complexes, or facts) into their simpler constituents. Yet another conception emphasizes a *transformative* or *interpretative* dimension, in that performing analysis involves a type of translation from one form into another. These are not to be conceived as distinct characteristics of analysis, but rather as intertwined aspects of the method. To what degree each of these aspects or perspectives of analysis comes to the fore is something that varies with different philosophers, both in their practice when performing analysis, as in their explicit conceptions of the method.

In order to illustrate these three aspects of analysis, let us take as an example the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief[4]. We can say that this analysis is regressive in the sense that it motivates one to orient one's considerations about knowledge recursively as considerations about justification, truth, and belief, *e.g.* if you want to inquire whether someone knows X you should ask whether she believes X, is justified in believing it, and whether or not X is true. The analysis is decompositional in the sense that it purports to expose the internal structure of the concept of knowledge in terms of these other concepts, which are thus seen as constituting it. The transformational aspect relates to the idea that 'justified true belief' is like a translation of 'knowledge', an interpretation of it in a different form with the same characteristics, which should thus be interchangeable with it.

Although no explicit critique of analysis in this sense exists in the *Philosophical Investigations*, there are passages that raise issues with each of the aforementioned three aspects. Since they are intertwined with passages that I see as characterizing the proposed alternative, I will delve into these in more detail in Section 2. First I would like to focus on another point. The problem with analysis in a narrow sense is that it typically presumes a correspondence picture of language and that it is driven by a craving for exactness. The issues with each of the three aspects of analysis in a broad sense stem from what Wittgenstein sees as a misguided picture of language, and with an attitude towards philosophical methodology that goes hand in hand with that picture. I maintain that Wittgenstein's problem is not with a particular method like philosophical analysis, but rather with the attitude of idealizing the power and purpose of any method. A passage quoted earlier continues as follows:

> Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. And this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, brought about, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language. – Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called 'analysing' our forms of expression, for sometimes this procedure resembles taking a thing apart. (2009, §90b, p. 47e)

This passage seems to strike a conciliatory tone for analysis. Wittgenstein is suggesting that one *can* clear misunderstandings away by doing something which "may be called 'analysing'".

Wherein lies the problem, then? The section that follows § 90 immediately reveals that troubles start to arise when we expect too much of the method, when we believe that, because *once* an analysis helped clear up *one* misunderstanding, we can continue analyzing until we clear up *all* possible misunderstandings:

> But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our linguistic expressions, and so a single completely analysed form of every expression.

[4]I make absolutely no claims regarding whether or not the analysis is good, I merely introduce it as an example of an analysis that hopefully is familiar enough to motivate a better understanding of the aforementioned aspects of analysis.

> That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, still unanalysed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. As if, when this is done, the expression is completely clarified and our task accomplished.
> It may also be put like this: we eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were aiming at a particular state, a state of complete exactness, and as if this were the real goal of our investigation. (2009, §91, pp. 47e-48e)

Wittgenstein takes issue not with analysis in particular, but with overvaluing its merits or overestimating its potential. It is acceptable to think of analysis of a linguistic entity as regressive, as long as one does not expect to reach a final completely analyzed form of that expression; to decompose it, as if taking a thing apart, as long as one does not see this as recovering the actual components that already constituted the expression beforehand; to substitute one expression for another in a particular situation, as long as one does not get trapped in the illusion that the latter form is therefore always better than the former and that one can or should substitute it in every situation.

The rejection of these ideals is closely related to Wittgenstein's separation between philosophical and scientific questions, and his rejection of theory-building and explanation. The most notable passages on this issue can be found in § 109:

> It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones. [...] And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place. (2009, §109, p. 52e)

It has often been noted (*e.g.* Gruender 1962; Baker and Hacker 1980; Ben-Menahem 1998; Glock 2007; Hacker 2012) that the notions of theory, hypothesis, and explanation at stake in these remarks relate to scientific method and practice, especially with natural sciences in mind. Wittgenstein position is that philosophical problems are of a different nature than scientific problems, and thus require a different approach. It is important to understand the motives that underlie the rejection of scientific method as suitable for addressing philosophical problems. Explicit statements on this are unfortunately lacking in the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, we can find more enlightening remarks in *The Blue Book*:

> Our craving for generality has another main source: our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. Philosophy really is 'purely descriptive'. (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 18)

It is clear from this passage that, when saying that philosophy should not aim to explain anything, Wittgenstein is identifying explanation with this portrayal of the method of science as reducing explanations of phenomena to a small number of laws and striving for generalizations.

Note that the rejection of the scientific approach, has to do with the nature of the problems, rather than with an arbitrary classification of something as philosophy or science based on conventional or societal criteria. Thus, if a physicist decides to conduct an inquiry into "What, then, is time?", he is likely under the same predicament as the philosopher investigating the same question. As mentioned before, characteristically philosophical questions are about meaning, and problems arise from misunderstanding language and being driven to hypostatize words. A further passage is evidence of how Wittgenstein sees the relation between this issue and the attitude of philosophers towards the method of analysis:

> Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analysing, the meaning of words. But let's not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word *really* means. (Wittgenstein 1958, pp. 27-8)

Meaning is, for Wittgenstein, not something objective and fixed, and thus cannot be investigated like the objects of study of scientific inquiry.

Another way to understand the dichotomy is by looking into the opposition between explanation and description that is present in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Ben-Menahem (1998) points out a number of ways in which these concepts are different. They can be condensed, I believe, into three main points. First, scientific explanations purport to be objective. Natural laws are supposed to be independent of the scientist's idiosyncratic personal history and individual experience of the phenomena. Second, scientific theories are built on hypotheses that involve theoretical entities and nomological relations. Third, such theories typically result from inductive generalization and are presented as universal and atemporal. Again, Wittgenstein's view of philosophical problems is that their nature is linguistic, they arise in the context of particular language-games and result from confusions or misunderstandings. They are, therefore, situated and their resolution requires a first-person perspective, not an objective one. Regarding the second difference, evoking theoretical entities and pursuing nomological relations is undesirable in philosophy since it amounts to falling prey to the kind of urges that lead to philosophical problems in the first place. With regards to the search for universality and atemporal truths, this again conflicts with the nature of philosophical problems as afflicting individuals which occupy a particular position in space and time. Some of these positions will become clearer when we discuss an alternative conception of explanation in Section 2. For now, what is important to retain is that Wittgenstein's negative position against theory, theses, and explanation is rather aimed at the problems we apply these tools to, and the attitude we have towards them.

If this interpretation is right, Wittgenstein takes issue with a number of aspects of philosophical methodology that are not specific to analysis. First, problems start with a picture of meaning as a Something that has properties defined independently of us. Second, philosophical inquiry can fall prey to the urge of exactness and the quest for objectivity, lead astray in pursuit of the chimeras of universal atemporal truths. Wittgenstein notoriously eschewed explicitly naming the targets of his criticism. In the rare occasions where he does, some ideas of Frege, Russell, and his younger self are mentioned in a negative light. This, together with the ideas criticized, the historical context, and Wittgenstein's own path and influences in philosophy, should make it clear that a good example of the attitude under scrutiny can be found in the project of early analytic philosophy (Baker and Hacker 1980, pp. 259-293). But the criticism runs deeper, and some of the aspects just mentioned can be found in other schools of thought. Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks target not a particular method, like philosophical analysis, but rather a broader attitude towards philosophy that has an influence on how any method is used. Analytic philosophy has changed since its early days, but this attitude can still be identified in contemporary authors both within and beyond it.[5]

What does Wittgenstein advise philosophers alternatively do? Along with the remarks discussed so far come suggestions for different tasks for philosophy. The confusions that arise from misunderstanding language and craving for exactness are undesirable because they "send us in pursuit of chimeras" and "prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing extraordinary is involved" (2009, §94, p. 48e). If philosophy should not build theories, theses, or hypotheses, is there anything left for philosophers to do? A number of observations in §§ 89-133 seem to suggest that philosophy should be confined to clearing misunderstandings away (§ 90), describing rather than explaining (§ 109, § 124, § 126), bringing words back to their everyday use (§ 116), and throwing light on features of our language (§ 130) aiming to make philosophical problems completely disappear (§ 133). Does Wittgenstein propose a concrete method for such a task?

[5]It would be inappropriate to point fingers without proper argumentation, and to delve into that would divert us greatly from the point at hand. The arguments in this paper are therefore relevant today insofar as the reader agrees with this diagnosis.

Opinions vary (again, see Kahane, Kanterian, and Kuusela 2007). I have been discussing certain negative features of philosophical method (and of how one perceives them) that Wittgenstein advises avoiding. In the remainder of the paper, I want to suggest that one can also extrapolate positive recommendations by reflecting on what is said about how one typically clears away linguistic misunderstandings in everyday life.

2 Explanations of meaning

Wittgenstein's paradigmatic examples of misguided philosophical pursuits are those driven by questions like 'What is language?' or 'What is a proposition?' (see § 92). The inquiry these types of questions lead to can be fruitless if one uncritically relies on a certain picture of language. In particular, Wittgenstein criticizes the idea that words like 'language' and 'proposition' already correspond to a Something, and it is the nature of this Something that is the subject of investigation: "People say: it's not the word that counts, but its meaning, thinking of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, even thought different from the word." (2009, §120f, p. 54e) If one sees meaning as some form of correspondence, a question like 'What is language?' is thus concerned about that which is the meaning of the word 'language'. This picture of language and meaning is repeatedly brought into question in the *Philosophical Investigations*[6].

In reaction to this picture, we are typically offered remarks relating meaning to use. The well-known passage that provides the most explicit reference to this reads as follows in the revised translation by Hacker and Schulte:

> 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 the language. (2009, §43a, p. 25e)

This remark has been interpreted as supporting the idea that we can *define* meaning as use. A strong advocate of this proposal is Paul Horwich who defends a so-called Use Theory of Meaning. In his reading, § 43a is taken as clear evidence that Wittgenstein is concerned with "the facts in virtue of which a given word has the meaning it does—with the underlying characteristics that are responsible for its possessing that particular meaning" (2008, p. 134). This interpretation seems to me to be at odds with many aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, for reasons that would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail. I instead side with what Martin Stokhof (2013) has called a minimalistic interpretation of § 43a:

> The minimalistic interpretation of 'explaining meaning by looking at the use' reads it as a purely methodological statement. On this view it is not so much a connection between meaning and use that is made, but a shift of attention that is effected. It invites us to stop looking for some 'thing' that we can call meaning, and focus instead on the way expressions are used: that should suffice. (2013, p. 223)

The reading is that Wittgenstein's point is not to identify meaning with use, but to suggest that one should divert questions about meaning to discussions about use. Rather than falling prey to the temptation of trying to answer questions of the form "What is the meaning of X?" as "The meaning of X is Y", one should instead investigate the ways in which 'X' is used. And this is not meant as a first step towards later identifying those ways of using 'X' as the meaning of 'X', but simply as a different method of addressing the question.

For example, when facing the question "What is the meaning of the word 'game'?", how should one proceed? One could feel tempted to provide a definition; a philosopher endorsing analysis would most likely try to investigate the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be called a 'game'. Wittgenstein's advice goes in a different direction:

> How would we explain to someone what a game is? I think that we'd describe *games* to him, and we might add to the description: "This *and similar things* are called 'games'." (2009, §69, p. 37e)

[6]For more on this see, for example, Baker and Hacker (1980, Chapter I) or Stern (2004, Chapter 4).

Describing activities that one would call 'a game' is a way of describing the use of the word 'game'. It is also, for Wittgenstein, a perfectly acceptable way to explain the meaning of the word 'game'. This leads to a different way of addressing the paradigmatic philosophical questions that is anchored in the notion of explanation:

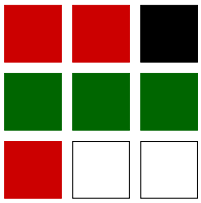
> "The meaning of a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains." That is, if you want to understand the use of the word "meaning", look for what one calls "an explanation of meaning". (2009, §560, p. 158e)

Similarly, if you want to understand the meaning of the word 'language' or 'proposition', look for what one calls an explanation of these words.

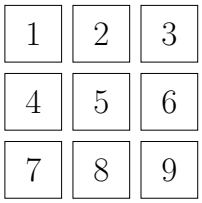
In general, then, Wittgenstein's recommendation is to replace questions of the form 'What is X?' with questions of the form 'How do we usually explain X?'. This kind of methodological advice is what links Wittgenstein with the so-called 'ordinary language philosophy' inaugurated by authors like Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin. I will say more on this interpretation in Section 3. What I am interested in now is the link between explanations of meaning and philosophical method. The ways that we explain the use of words to one another are, according to the view just adumbrated, relevant to how philosophers should go about understanding those words. This is, furthermore, suggested to be a better way of reflecting on the philosophical problems connected with those words and of avoiding falling prey to the typical misunderstandings that Wittgenstein warns of.

Before we get started, it is important to clarify the notion of explanation of meaning. A clear characterization is given by Baker and Hacker (1980, ch. 2). Wittgenstein talks about two ways language can be taught: training and explaining. Training is the most basic way of teaching the use of words. In § 5, it is said that it is by training, not explaining, that a child learns to talk. Part of this training can involve "the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word" (2009, §6b, p. 7e). This is what Wittgenstein calls "ostensive teaching of words". Other examples of activities learned by training include using a chart (§ 86), making calculations according to an algebraic formula (§ 189), following a signpost (§ 198), and obeying an order (§ 206), which are all instances of rule-following. Although a more explicit definition is lacking, one can surmise that linguistic training amounts to teaching someone how to perform an action in response to certain linguistic expressions, or vice-versa. Explanations, on the other hand, are ways of teaching the use of words by means of other words. Examples include ostensive explanation (also called ostensive definition) (*e.g.* §§ 28-36, § 73), giving examples (*e.g.* § 68, § 71), referring to samples (*e.g.* § 50), or sentence paraphrasing (*e.g.* § 20, §§ 60-64). For the sake of brevity, and alignment with the source text, in this section I will talk about explanations simpliciter, but it should be noted that the remarks in here are about explanations of meaning, not about nomological explanations (of the scientific kind). This is following the distinction made in the previous section. Although Wittgenstein rejects nomological explanations as appropriate for philosophy, explanations of meaning are different and, I argue, relevant to better understanding Wittgenstein's attitude towards philosophical methods.

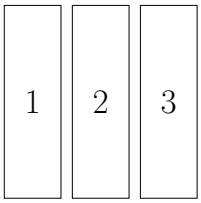
Going back to Beaney's three aspects of analysis, I would like to first draw attention to §§ 19-32, which discuss a number of questions that are closely linked with the transformative aspect. The initial sections question the idea that one can reveal the meaning of the words used in the builders' language of § 2 by translating them into a different form. Should we say that, in that language-game, the call 'Slab!' actually means 'Bring me a slab!'? That is one way one could explain the use of the call to someone who was not familiar with that particular language-game. But such a translation would only help someone who already knew how to use the words in the translated form, like 'bring' or 'me', *i.e.* someone who has played other language-games before. To the hypothetical primitive builder that only plays the language-game of § 2, the translated form would actually be incomprehensible because he does not know how to use those other words. This serves to remind us that just because we can translate a linguistic expression into another, that does not make the latter the *real meaning* of the former. We, who understand the longer expression, might use it to explain the shorter call to each other. But there is nothing more fundamental to the builder than the call 'Slab!', and there is no way in which he means 'Bring me a slab!' when he uses that call. This goes clearly against transformative ideals of unearthing true



(a) Arrangement of colored squares.



(b) Interpretation schema 1.



(c) Interpretation schema 2.

Figure 1: Arrangement of colored squares from § 48 and possible interpretation schemas.

or fundamental forms of linguistic expressions. One can think of some ideas of Frege (explicitly mentioned in § 22) or Russell's theory of definite descriptions (1905) as examples of projects that implicitly or explicitly held to that ideal.

The second point of these remarks is to draw attention to how verbal explanations of meaning are always anchored in particular language-games. This is very explicitly stated for ostensive definitions in §§ 30-31, where the motto is that "an ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of a word if the role the word is supposed to play in the language is already clear." (2009, §30a, p 18e) And to know the supposed role of a word is to know how to play a certain language-game. Wittgenstein uses, in § 31, the example of chess to drive home the point. The short explanation 'This is the king' (while holding or pointing to a chess piece) only helps the other if he already knows how to play, but does not know which piece is supposed to be the king in that particular board. For a less informed partner, the explanation 'This is the king; it can move in this-and-this way' can help if the other has played other games and knows what a piece is, what a move is, how these are coordinated (*e.g.* taking turns), and so forth. He needs to already know how to play games and how to use the words given in the explanation. Ultimately, this point should follow from the simple fact that, by definition, explanations of meaning always involve the use of words, and words are always learned in the context of particular language-games.

This point has implications for the decompositional aspect of analysis as well. The notions of simple and composite, the cornerstones of the idea that a concept can be broken down into its constituent parts, are put into question in §§ 47-48. Wittgenstein repeatedly draws attention to how these two notions are always relative to each other: what is simple depends on what kind of compositeness one is interested in, and this can vary depending on the language-game one is playing. This point comes back more markedly in §§ 60-64, where he reflects again on the language-game introduced in § 48. Consider Figure 1. Using the order represented by the numbers in interpretation schema 1 (Figure 1b), and the letters 'R', 'G', 'W', and 'B' for, respectively, the colors red, green, white, and black, one could describe the arrangement in Figure 1a by the sentence 'RRBGGGRWW'. In this language-game, it might seem obvious that each colored square is a simple, and the whole arrangement described by that sentence is composite. Already for this setup, we are invited to consider other possibilities: couldn't we consider each square as composed of two smaller rectangles, or of color and shape, for example?

In § 64, Wittgenstein refers back to this game and imagines a variation[7]. Consider interpretation schema 2 (Figure 1c) and the letters 'U', 'V', and 'X' as representing, respectively, a red square above a green square above a red square, a red square above a green square above a white square, and a black square above a green square above a white square. In this variation, one could say that the sentence 'UVX' also describes the arrangement in Figure 1a. Is then, the sentence 'RRBGGGRWW' a more fundamental analyzed form of 'UVX'? Thinking again of the transformative aspect of analysis, could we replace the language-game that uses interpretation schema 2 with the one described in § 48? Wittgenstein's answer is a negative one: "It is just a *different* language-game; even though it is related to (48)." (2009, §64b, p. 35e) Based on previous remarks, one can see at least two reasons underwriting this reply. First, someone who knew how to play the language-game of § 64, by using letters to describe columns could see each column as a unit with

[7]The following is not exactly what Wittgenstein describes, but it captures, I believe, the same point.

a special character, just like we see the French tricolor as more than just an arbitrary arrangement of three colors. Second, in order to understand the sentence 'RRBGGGRWW' one would need to know how to play the language-game of § 48. This includes knowing that the sentence is (in the context of that game) composite, knowing the colors associated with each of the letters, and knowing the order represented by the interpretation schema 1. Thus, explaining 'UVX' as 'RRBGGGRWW' is neither necessarily meaning-preserving nor self-contained. An explanation is always anchored in a language-game, and its value is relative to that language-game.

There are also remarks that hint at further issues with some expectations one might have regarding explanations, which are linked with the aforementioned regressive aspect of analysis. One of the first comes as early as § 1d. Wittgenstein sets up a hypothetical situation where a shopkeeper is given a paper with the words 'five red apples' written on it and describes the actions performed for each word. The following dialogue between narrator and interlocutor follows:

> "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'?" — 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. (2009, §1d, p. 6e)

We can see the interlocutor's questions as characteristic of a regressive urge. He is trying to understand the words 'red' and 'five' in this context, and for that he seems to be looking for some apodictic foundation. The narrator is going one level deep by describing the behavior of the shopkeeper when being handed the paper with the words on them, but the interlocutor wants to go deeper. The narrator deflects this urge twice, each being characteristic of Wittgenstein's thought. I already discussed some implications of the appeal to use in the second deflection. As for the first deflection ("Explanations come to an end somewhere"), it seems to me to be revealing of an attitude towards philosophical method that surfaces in other sections as well, particularly clearly in § 29 and § 87.

The problem with regression is clear and far from new. Whenever we provide an explanation of the meaning of a word, this is done in terms of other words. What keeps us from asking for an explanation of the meaning of the words contained in that explanation? And subsequently of an explanation of those? A foundationalist might argue that such a regress cannot go on indefinitely, otherwise no one could ever understand an explanation, so one must assume the existence of final self-sustained explanations. Wittgenstein, however, takes a different approach:

> These questions would not even come to an end when we got down to words like "red", "dark", "sweet". – "But then how does an explanation help me to understand if, after all, it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don't understand what he means, and never shall!" – As though an explanation, as it were, hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another – unless we require it to avoid a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to prevent a misunderstanding — one, that is, that would arise if not for the explanation, but not every misunderstanding that I can imagine.
> [. . .]
> The signpost is in order – if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose. (2009, §87ac, p. 45e)

Words (or other linguistic entities) do not require, in and of themselves, for their meaning to be explained. *We*, agents making use of words, may require or advance explanations whenever we encounter or expect a misunderstanding. If we place a signpost at a crossroads where one road leads to village A and the other to village B, indicating which leads where, and we subsequently find that people end up in the village they intended to go to, we do not need to add another signpost explaining how the first one is to be interpreted, or a third one explaining the second. If, however, people following the road usually get lost, we might indeed add a further explanation. But

that does not mean that, just because this possibility exists, a second signpost is always needed. In the context of analysis, this position is not exactly against the regressive aspect altogether. An explanation *may* rest on another, and that may be helpful to resolve a misunderstanding. Problems arise when one goes looking for an explanation without a misunderstanding that needs to be resolved, without a practical purpose, because without this target one does not have a stopping criterion and thus can end up in an infinite regress.

Not only should the need for an explanation be dependent on a practical purpose, but one should also bear in mind that both the explanation and the purpose are situated in a context. In §§ 28-29, Wittgenstein discusses an example of how one could explain the meaning of the word 'two' by pointing at a pair of nuts. The issues of regression quickly arise here too: if, in order to avoid a misunderstanding, one would accompany the gesture by the phrase "This *number* is called 'two'.", wouldn't one potentially also need to explain the word 'number'? And again to explain that explanation by means of other words, continuing this exercise *ad infinitum*? This concern is, however, countered by the following remarks:

> 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. (2009, §29b, p. 18e)

The dissolution of the issue is here similar to that in § 87: there is no need to provide further explanations unless the ostensive definition is taken otherwise than is intended, *i.e.* unless it fails to fulfill its purpose. The important addition to this is the reminder that whether an explanation succeeds or fails also depends heavily on context. This implies that there is no foolproof *a priori* criterion for a good explanation and "[a]ny explanation can be misunderstood" (2009, §28b, p. 17e). One can imagine a number of circumstances having an impact on this (*e.g.* whether one is pointing at two nuts isolated on a table, or whether they are far away and next to another group of three nuts), as well as personal idiosyncrasies that might make the listener fail to understand the explanation under the same circumstances (the most obvious being whether or not she knows the word 'number'). These observations fit well with Wittgenstein's picture of language as a practice by drawing attention to contingent circumstances and the involvement of agents. Explanations should thus only be pursued when driven by, and in the context of, a situated purpose; their success cannot be guaranteed independently thereof.

This conception of explanation motivates an attitude that is very different to the one discussed in Section 1. Explanations are not to be judged based on their intrinsic properties, but rather on whether they fulfill their purpose in the situated context where they are given. They can be ambiguous (§ 28b), vague (§ 71, § 88), and incomplete (§ 87), as long as they are useful. They can also be misunderstood, any explanation can (§ 28b, § 71) and there is, therefore, no absolute objective criterion for their success. Given how explanations are anchored in language-games, and that new ones are continuously invented and other ones get forgotten (§ 23), explanations are inevitably provisional; they are relevant while someone knows and is interested in playing the language-games that underwrite them. This attitude abandons the ideals of exactness, objectivity, and atemporality by pivoting on the primacy of contingent and situated purpose. The objective of the change is not to replace a set of ideals with another; it is rather to embrace the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of meaning, and reject the urge to look for *a priori* apodictic answers to requests for the meaning of a certain linguistic expression.

3 Consequences for philosophical method

The considerations about explanations of meaning discussed above have a bearing on philosophical method for a number of reasons. First, as was discussed in Section 1, philosophical inquiry starts, in Wittgenstein's eyes, from questions of meaning. A certain preconception of language leads the philosopher to look for exact, objective, atemporal answers to these questions:

> We ask: "*What is* language?", "*What is* a proposition?" And the answer to these questions is to be given once for all, and independently of any future experience. (2009, §92b, p. 48e)

Philosophical methods can be seen as attempts to systematize how one goes about addressing these questions. Philosophical analysis involves explaining a concept in terms of other, supposedly simpler, concepts. Other methods, like explication, connective analysis, or the methods of phenomenology, might prescribe different approaches, but they are ultimately trying to understand the use of words, *i.e.* philosophical problems are not empirical (§ 109), and the inquiry is rather a grammatical one (§ 90). Following a philosophical method can thus be seen as providing a sophisticated and systematic explanation of meaning, but an explanation of meaning nonetheless. Therefore, whatever virtues Wittgenstein exalts in explanations of meaning should be desirable in philosophical methods as well. Second, it is no coincidence that §§ 87-88, which heavily feature remarks on explanation, are followed by the most markedly metaphilosophical part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, namely §§ 89-133. Not only that, but they are even connected by the following passage: "With these considerations we find ourselves facing the problem: In what way is logic something sublime?" (2009, §89a, p. 46e) The immediately preceding considerations in §§ 87-88 defend a certain conception of explanations of meaning. That these lead to thoughts on logic (broadly construed), analysis, and method in philosophy, is further evidence that explanation and these topics are strongly connected.

Many interpreters of Wittgenstein focus on the *Philosophical Investigations* as defending a particular philosophical method or having an overarching strategy. Defenders of the so-called orthodox interpretation (started by Baker and Hacker 1980) describe it as grammatical clarification, which has been characterized as "marshalling an ordered array of familiar rules (grammatical rules) for the use of words" (Hacker 2012, p. 4). This can be supported by passages like § 122 and § 127. This interpretation is close to the idea of dissolving philosophical problems by studying and describing ordinary uses of language in more detail, which is characteristic of the so-called ordinary language philosophy (*e.g.* Ryle 1962; Austin 1975). Motivation for this approach can come, for example, from § 116. Others (*e.g.* Wisdom 1953; Baker 2004) have made a parallel with psychoanalysis, insisting that Wittgenstein viewed philosophy as a personal therapeutic activity. A remark that can inspire such a view is § 255. A related interpretation (*e.g.* Fogelin 1976; Stern 2004; Plant 2004) sees in the *Philosophical Investigations* a defense and example of the methods of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Part of § 133 certainly raises such motifs. And the list goes on (see Glock 2007).

One could argue about the particular nuanced differences between each of these proposed methods or strategies, and which of them is *the* one that Wittgenstein truly espoused. But the simplest explanation for the variety of interpretations regarding Wittgenstein's methodology, and for the ease with which each author can find passages supporting their own view, is that elements of *all* of these views might be present in the *Philosophical Investigations*. And this is not the result of accident or sloppiness on the author's part. Wittgenstein explicitly avows for methodological pluralism in philosophy:

> There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were. (2009, §133d, p. 57e)

To look for a unifying method or overarching strategy in the book is to ignore not only this passage, but also the variety of elements of different methods and argumentative strategies that can be found in the book. Making the parallel between explanations of meaning and philosophical methods can help us see this even more clearly. As I argued before, Wittgenstein's attitude towards explanations of meaning is highly contextualist: explanations are portrayed as always tied to particular language-games, and their interpretation and success as depending on the circumstances surrounding their use, including the person the explanation is given to. Furthermore, no language-game is necessarily privileged over another, some are simply different even if they can be related. If we see philosophical methods in a similar light, a defense of pluralism follows: if the force of a method depends on the context, and there is no privileged language-game, there can be no single optimal way to approach every philosophical question.

Wittgenstein's methodological pluralism is not full-blown relativism, on the contrary. First, philosophical language-games constitute the context in which each method is evaluated. Attempts to use conceptual analysis or formal logic in a conference on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida are likely to be as denounced as deconstructivist arguments in a meeting on analytic metaphysics, whereas the former methods would probably not raise any eyebrows in the latter gathering, and vice-versa. Importantly, as language-games are social practices, the success of each method further depends on the people involved and the way they act and interact with each other. Second, Wittgenstein has his own criteria of approval. As I argued in Section 1, they apply not to particular methods, but to the attitude one has towards them. Thus, he would likely reject the use of conceptual analysis if it was presented as finding some objective final analyzed form of a linguistic expression, but might not have any qualms with the method being used as a provisional tool to dispel some perceived misunderstanding. Furthermore, the position is supported by a particular picture of language and meaning, which itself is not independently supported. These constitute what Plant (2004) would call Wittgenstein's minimal dogmatism.

A common objection to pluralism could be raised. Isn't the claim that there is no universal objective optimal method itself in need of an Archimedean point to derive its force from? What are the basis for Wittgenstein's criteria and picture of language, and why should one accept them? Such concerns reflect the very attitude being criticized. They demand for ultimate foundations, where the claim is precisely that these foundations do not exist. Reflecting on the remarks on explanations of meaning discussed above can illuminate a possible reply. Wittgenstein's position with regards to explanations of meaning, I argued in Section 2, is an anti-foundationalist one: there are no ultimate self-explanatory explanations on top of which all the others rest. What can someone who defends such a position reply when continuously pressed for justifications?

> Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do" (2009, §217b, p. 91e)

Explanations come to an end somewhere. But this end is not a self-sustained foundation or an apodictic truth. It is simply the point beyond which communication breaks down, and disagreements persist. An anti-foundationalist cannot give an irrefutable argument that there are no irrefutable arguments. Nor can someone who claims that there is no single optimal method provide an infallible justification for that claim. But shouldn't the burden of proof be on the other side?

Exploring this issue in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, as it would require delving into a thorough discussion of the old and unresolved problems typically associated with relativism. And Wittgenstein himself does not provide a critical examination of his position. However, perhaps one can find him allies by establishing connections with another school of thought that often faces similar criticism: pragmatism. I have already discussed Wittgenstein's contextualism, methodological pluralism, and anti-foundationalism. Additionally, considerations on explanations in the *Philosophical Investigations* come interwoven with remarks that emphasize language as a social practice, and with calls for seeing meaning in the broader context of other practices that involve the use of words and sentences. This goes in tandem with a rejection of realist and representationalist conceptions of meaning that see it as a form of correspondence between linguistic entities and other things (entities in the world or ideas in the mind). Although Wittgenstein never identified himself as a pragmatist, it is difficult to ignore these quintessentially pragmatist aspects of his picture of language and philosophy.[8]

A great deal of work by Richard Rorty echoes and builds upon later Wittgenstein's concerns about a certain way of doing philosophy. Rorty has variously called it systematic philosophy (1979), philosophy as pure subject or *Fach* (1982b), or simply Philosophy with capital P (1982a). This is a vision of philosophy as the study of certain paradigmatic problems that are and should be solely within the purview of professional Philosophers. These problems have historically spanned over topics such as identity, subject and object, mind and matter, the nature and origin of knowledge,

[8] Again, see Haack (1982), Putnam (1994), and Rorty (2007) as authors that have argued for pragmatist strands in Wittgenstein's later work.

the relation between language, thought, and the world, among others. One additional thing that is characteristic of Philosophy is the belief that the problems it struggles with have definite solutions. According to Rorty, the history of Philosophy is the story of the search for an Archimedean point of view from where all apodictic truths about those issues would be clearly visible, from where universal commensuration could be achieved because the solutions to those problems would be obvious beyond dispute. Platonists and Positivists both fit this description (1982a, pp. xiii-xvii), differing only in whether they defend this to be guaranteed by, respectively, a transcendental realm, or a correspondence between our claims and a mind-independent reality.

Most ideas in the *Philosophical Investigations* were, according to Rorty, put forward in order to attack the mindset behind this approach to philosophy:

> One has to think of philosophy as a name for the study of certain definite and permanent problems—deep-lying problems which any attempt at vision must confront: problems which professors of philosophy have a moral obligation to continue working on, whatever their current preoccupations. The Nature of Being, the Nature of Man, the Relation of Subject and Object, Language and Thought, Necessary Truth, the Freedom of the Will—this is the sort of thing which philosophers are supposed to have views about but which novelists and critics, historians and scientists, may be excused from discussing. It is such textbook problems which Wittgensteinians think the *Investigations* may let us dismiss. (1982b, p. 31)

In Rorty's reading, Wittgenstein is someone who wants to abandon the ideas of truth as objectivity, language as in some special relation to reality, and philosophy as the rational quest for theories detailing those ideas. Wittgenstein is represented as trying to undermine Philosophy by undermining its vocabulary and replacing the way of thinking that it is entangled with by changing the subject and talking instead about use, language-games, family resemblances, forms of life, and so forth.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty puts later Wittgenstein together with so-called *edifying* philosophers, *i.e.* those who go against the normal discourse[9] of their times to poke holes in the project of finding necessary truths in order to achieve universal commensuration. These philosophers reject the vision of philosophy as inquiry and rather embody what Rorty likes to call philosophy as conversation:

> To see edifying philosophers as conversational partners is an alternative to seeing them as holding views on subjects of common concern. One way of thinking of wisdom as something of which the love is not the same as that of argument, and of which the achievement does not consist in finding the correct vocabulary for representing essence, is to think of it as the practical wisdom necessary to participate in a conversation. One way to see edifying philosophy *as* the love of wisdom is to see it as the attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into an exchange of views. (1979, p. 372)

This perspective elicits a picture of philosophy as a social practice, that is contingent to a time and place, contextualized in a historical setting and a culture, dynamic, adaptive, and open-ended. Philosophical methods, in this view, are no more than conversational tools one deploys for argumentative purposes. As such, they share many characteristics with explanations of meaning. Seeing philosophy as a form of conversation further motivates taking Wittgenstein's remarks on the latter and applying them to the former. To do so is to see philosophical methods as situated and local, in that different contexts may require or warrant different methods and there is no single optimal method that covers them all; it is to keep in mind that methods should be driven by a purpose and be allowed to be imprecise and incomplete; it is to understand that they are provisional and as the conversation changes so too should they be open for revision.

Although the main points of this paper are exegetical, the remarks in this section are not. It is not my intention to suggest that Wittgenstein defended a vision of philosophy as conversation.

[9] Meant as an extension of Thomas Kuhn's notion of normal science (1962).

Nor do I wish to be anachronistic and claim that he would back such an idea today. I merely want to propose that those who see the force of the remarks raised in the *Philosophical Investigations* against a certain attitude towards philosophy and philosophical method can perhaps find solace in this idea. As I see it, what makes this match work is that both Wittgenstein's remarks and Rorty's picture share the main tenets of pragmatism, including anti-foundationalism of justification, rejection of the idea of meaning as correspondence, methodological pluralism, an anti-realist distrust of the urge to hypostatize linguistic entities, and a focus on seeing and evaluating theories and ideas in the context of human social practices. Seeing philosophical methods as forms of explanations of meaning, and seeing philosophy as a form of conversation might thus be an additional way of seeing how the ideas of Wittgenstein and Rorty hang together and form a larger picture of the role philosophy can have in the broader conversation of mankind.

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