DESCRIBING REALITY: WITTGENSTEIN ON METAPHYSICS

by

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A THESIS

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The later Ludwig Wittgenstein appears to be critical of philosophy. But what does that mean? In this paper, I will examine Wittgenstein's treatment of metaphysical questions. I will argue that he sees philosophers' attempts to answer these questions as a misuse of language, and that by uncovering the nature of language, Wittgenstein hopes to resolve this philosophical confusion. My belief is that Wittgenstein makes a fatal error, preemptively killing metaphysics with what may be a reductive philosophical framework.

Thesis Paper

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The early and later philosophies of Wittgenstein both possess strong critiques of the philosophical misuse of language, and the associated misunderstandings of what language can accomplish. His earlier work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* seemed to want to mark the bounds of language. This is exemplified in the closing quote, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[1] We might see Wittgenstein's second book, *Philosophical Investigations*, as giving more force to language; however, I believe it is saying something similar: that philosophers demand more from language than it is prepared to provide. This amounts to a metaphilosophical critique, which is described by Robert J. Fogelin as having two dimensions: "the first is an attack on what I call *referentialism*, the second is an attack on what I shall call, for want of a better name, *logical perfectionism*."[2]

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[1] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1921, 7.
[2] Fogelin, Robert J.. 'Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophy,' *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed., ed. Sluga, Hans and Stern, David G., 31.

The former, "referentialism," regards the conflation of naming and meaning. The first words in the *Investigations* are a quote from Augustine of Hippo, which Wittgenstein wants to argue against. The quote, presented in the original Latin, describes Augustine's memory of learning language as a child. Augustine recalls his elders pointing to objects and naming them. "When they called something by name and pointed it out while they spoke, I saw it and realized that the thing they wished to indicate was called by the name they then uttered."[3] Wittgenstein describes this as

"Logical perfectionism" refers to the philosopher's attraction to ideal structures, the "tendency to sublime the logic of our language."[4] Neither of these critiques of philosophy amount to a critique of metaphysics, however, unless one assumes metaphysical questions are a mistake of language.

One might say Wittgenstein is offering a conceptual scheme in the *Investigations*. Indeed, we might see Wittgenstein's language-games themselves as conceptual schemes. Either way, there is definitely some conceptual scheming. Fogelin writes, "Taking him at his word, Wittgenstein is not attempting to replace earlier philosophical theories by one of his own. His aim is not to supply a new and better pair of glasses but, instead, to convince us that none is needed."[5] So, instead of providing a metaphysics, Wittgenstein is ostensibly showing us why metaphysics is a futile endeavor. I share the opinion of Willard Van Orman Quine, who writes, "One's ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences,

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[3] Outler, Albert, translator. *Confessions*, by Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. Book 1, Chapter VIII.
[4] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell, 1953, 38.
[5] Fogelin, 29.

even the most commonplace ones."[67] What's motivated this paper is my desire to save metaphysics, which I believe, in line with Quine, is necessary for one's conceptual scheme.

I do not disagree with Wittgenstein's assessment that language is often misused, even within philosophy (especially within philosophy). My disagreement is in what Wittgenstein infers from this. After observing this confusion of language, he jumps to the conclusion that *all* metaphysical inquiry is such a confusion. He writes, "Philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language,"[8] and again later, "Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language."[9] The *Investigations* is littered with additional examples of Wittgenstein repeating the many failures of language in the projects of philosophical investigation, even referring to philosophy as a disease.[10] In different words, Quine articulates Wittgenstein's mistake: It's unsurprising that "ontological controversy should tend into controversy over language. But we must not jump to the conclusion that what there is depends on words."[11] This is an easy leap to make, if one thinks that discussion of the soul, for instance, is actually a discussion about the concept of a soul.

[6] Quine, Willard Van Orman. 'On What There Is,' *From a Logical Point of View*, 1953, 10.
[7] Donald Davidson, in his Presidential Address at the Seventh Annual Eastern Meeting of the American Philosophical association, criticized this view. He faithfully described Quine's position as one where "reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another." See: Davidson, Donald. 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 1973, 5.
[8] Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, 109.
[9] Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, 124.
[10] Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, 593. See also, Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44.
[11] Quine, 16.

Wittgenstein's core mistake is his assumption that we are never actually talking about metaphysics, but rather metaphysical *concepts*. He writes, "We do not analyze a phenomenon (for example, thinking) but a concept (for example, that of thinking), and hence the application of a word."[12] How separable is the concept from its application? The answer to that lies in how much one trusts language to accurately convey concepts, but the more important question is: How separable is the concept from the thing being conceptualized?

This is a puzzle that Wittgenstein appears to struggle with. He asks, "Tell me what the object of painting is: the picture of the man (for example), or the man whom the picture portrays?"[13] For our purposes, the "object of painting" is the object of our language, the "picture of the man" is our metaphysical concept, and "the man whom the picture portrays" is the metaphysical reality. When we paint (read: when we ask metaphysical questions), are we asking about our concept of the metaphysical entity, or are we asking about the metaphysical entity itself? Like many questions in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not answer this. One might begin to tackle this question by asking if it is even possible to say we are looking at a picture of a man, if "a man" (apart from the idea of him) does not exist.

We've arrived at the question of nonexistent objects. Wittgenstein struggles with this paradox in his example of the word "Nothung," which he uses to mean a sword. When the parts of that sword are deconstructed, Nothung ceases to exist, and the word "Nothung" loses its meaning. "But then the sentence 'Nothung has a sharp blade' would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be

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[12] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 383.
[13] Ibid. 518.

nonsense. But it does have a sense; so there must still be something corresponding to the words of which it consists."[14] Wittgenstein hopes to escape this paradox by claiming that some language-games preserve the meanings of names even when the objects to which they correspond are nonexistent. He writes, "In this language-game a name is also used in the absence of its bearer."[15] However, if we aren't using a language-game that allows for that, the sentence is nonsensical. For example, suppose a language-game where names can only be used in the presence of their bearer. When we declare, "Nothung does not exist," "we do not want to say that expression *says* this, but that *this* is what it would have to be saying *if* it made sense."[16] This answer is unsatisfying. The interesting question isn't whether or not the name "Nothung" preserves its meaning inside or outside of a particular language-game, but whether the *idea* of Nothung can exist, while the *object of that idea*, Nothung the sword, does not.

In Quine's essay "On What There Is," he invents two philosophers McX and Wyman, who both hold the view that behind every name is an entity which is being named. Quine goes on to describe the various ways that McX and Wyman attempt to deal with the aforementioned paradox of nonexistent objects. To the example of Pegasus, McX decides Pegasus must exist, albeit as an object of the mind, and Wyman invents the term "possible entity" to account for Pegasus' existence. Quine dismisses both of these. He argues that the fundamental error these philosophers make is the conflation of *meaning* and *naming* (recall Fogelin's *referentialism*). "Therefore Pegasus, initially confused with a meaning, ends up as an idea in the mind. It is the

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[14] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 39.
[15] Ibid., 44.
[16] Ibid., 58.

more remarkable that Wyman, subject to the same initial motivation as McX, should have avoided this particular blunder and wound up with unactualized possible instead."[17] I believe Wittgenstein is making a similar mistake. Although he seems at times self-aware of this inclination, Wittgenstein makes the mistake of conflating the *named object* with the *meaning* of the name.

Wittgenstein repeats the phrase, "Don't think, but look!"[18] With this, he means that by supposing we can think our way out of philosophical puzzles, we have fallen into the trap of *explaining*, where we should be *describing*. "Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything."[19] Underlying this claim is Wittgenstein's greatest observation, that there are limits to what language can accomplish. Again, I take no issue with this. The trouble for Wittgenstein is that, even within his framework, these philosophical questions remain intelligible.

Wittgenstein's essential conception in the *Investigations* is that of language-games, which he says have "blurred edges."[20] The meaning of the word "game" is explained by Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, which holds that rather than having an essential characteristic, all games nonetheless share a similarity. "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'.'"[21] There seems to me no reason why, in attempting to describe a more obviously metaphysical entity such as a deity, we can't simply desribe *deities*, and

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[17] Quine, 9.
[18] Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, 66.
[19] Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*, 126.
[20] Ibid., 71.
[21] Ibid., 69.

then add "and similar things" at the end of it. The fact that we can't draw strict borders around terms (philosophical or otherwise) doesn't prohibit us from having constructive conversation about them. If it did, then neither could we communicate about simple concepts, like apples, chairs, or even language-games. Wittgenstein, in a candid moment of frustration, writes, "When one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound."[22] If Wittgenstein held other types of inquiry to this standard, he would nearly give up on language altogether. Perhaps that's what his third book would have been about.

For someone so critical of metaphysics, Wittgenstein engages in it a great deal. Other ontological questions he ponders in the *Investigations* are: the existence of simple and composite objects,[23] existence paradoxes,[24] and – a personal favorite of mine – the notion of ownership.[25] Despite its efforts to dissuade this type of analysis, Wittgenstein's *Investigations* encourages profound philosophical inquiry.

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[22] Ibid., 261.
[23] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 46-47.
[24] Ibid., 39-58, 446.
[25] Ibid., 283-286.

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