

## Grammar

Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read

“We might feel that a complete logical analysis would give the complete grammar of a word. But *there is no such thing as a completed grammar.*” (Emphasis ours).

Wittgenstein; AWL (Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge 1932–3, ed. Alice Ambrose); p.21.

If you are someone with a little familiarity with Wittgenstein’s philosophy but no more, it might well be that you know him best through having heard of some of his famous ‘terms of art’: language-games, ‘private language’, family-resemblance concepts - and logical grammar. This article concerns the last of these. What does Wittgenstein mean when he talks of the task of the philosopher being in some way akin to the task of the grammarian? That is the focal concern of this article. We will reach that focus in an ‘indirect’ fashion, via thinking about the influences on Wittgenstein’s thought and the context of that thought in the cultural milieu of his time. When one delves into Wittgenstein’s biography and development as a thinker, one finds an ongoing engagement and dialogue with modernism, including with many of the forefathers and contemporary representatives of modernism. When one looks for instance at the significant influence of the Marxist economist Sraffa on the development of Wittgenstein’s later thought, or (still more obviously) at his interest in Adolf Loos and his own remarkable architectural work in Vienna,<sup>1</sup> one is left in little doubt that Wittgenstein was a thinker whose thought should be, to a significant extent, understood as deeply engaged with modernism—albeit idiosyncratically and critically.<sup>2</sup>

And then there is Freud. For, while it’s true that Wittgenstein writes of Freud that he is emblematic of a decline in our culture<sup>3</sup> and that psychoanalysis is a “powerful mythology” that is likely to do

---

<sup>1</sup> On which, see for example “Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism”, by Peter Galison, in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer, 1990), pp. 709-752.

For Wittgenstein, the elimination of pointless ornament and a constant striving for an honest, exact (and exacting) presentation of matters was a moral imperative - in architecture, in work on the self, and in philosophical writing. As one can see if one reads his *Culture and Value*, he saw all three of these, in fact, as—in their essentials—one.

<sup>2</sup> In this latter connection, see especially the final footnote to this article.

<sup>3</sup> See M. O’C. Drury, “Conversations with Wittgenstein”, in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees, Oxford: OUP, 1984; p.112.

harm,<sup>4</sup> he also called himself nothing less than a *disciple* of Freud<sup>5</sup> and incorporated central elements of the therapeutic method into his philosophical practice.

Compare the following two quotes:

“Difficulty of Philosophy not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude. Resistances of the will must be overcome. //

What makes a subject difficult to understand — if it is significant, important — is not that some special instruction about abstruse things is necessary to understand it. Rather it is the contrast between the understanding of the subject and what most people want to see.

Because of this the very things that are most obvious can become the most difficult to understand. What has to be overcome is not difficulty of the intellect but of the will. [Nicht eine Schwierigkeit des Verstandes, sondern des Willens ist zu überwinden.]

(Wittgenstein, “Philosophy” (chapters 86–93 of the so-called Big Typescript), p. 161.)

‘The pathogenic idea which has ostensibly been forgotten is always lying “close at hand” and can be reached by associations that are easily accessible. It is merely a question of getting some obstacle out of the way. This obstacle seems . . . to be the subject’s will’ (Freud, ‘Psychotherapy of Hysteria’, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 271).

So how should one understand Wittgenstein’s relationship to that high priest of modernism, Sigmund Freud? Did he accept Freud’s reduction of much in human life to sex? No, he thought it a crudification, a reductivism -- and at the same time an overcomplication: Wittgenstein remarks tellingly that Freud never talks about explicitly sexual dreams, which are as “common as rain”.<sup>6</sup> Did he accept Freud’s theory of the mind? No; he thought it too a scientific crudification. Overall, his verdict on Freud was harsh: he considered Freud a myth-maker masquerading as a scientist, and he thought the myths likely to harm those coming under their power.

What then did Wittgenstein owe to Freud that justified so strong a term as “disciple”? Why did he famously speak (in *Philosophical Investigations* 133) of his method(s) in philosophy as “so to speak” a therapy or therapies?

---

<sup>4</sup> Pp.51-2 of Wittgenstein’s *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966); edited by Cyril Barrett.

<sup>5</sup> See Rhees’s comment, *ibid.*, on p.41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

Basically, because Wittgenstein owed a crucial aspect of his philosophical method to Freud. His actual approach to the *doing* of philosophy. Wittgenstein figured philosophy as akin in its practice to psychotherapy, to psychoanalysis.

Where previous philosophers had mostly engaged in theorising, Wittgenstein sought a kind of fluidity—a willingness to go wherever the prose needed, in pursuit of clarity and of the right level of depth—in his writing and his thinking and his interaction with others, a fluidity that was influenced by the dynamic practice of psychoanalysis. In particular, the idea that the acceptance by the ‘analysand’ of the analyst’s interpretations was a *criterion* for their correctness. There was/is no room in Wittgenstein for interpretations or descriptions being imposed onto others.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Wittgenstein made *philosophy* - its practice (whether on another or on oneself), its writing, *new*. Modern, if you will. And, in his central insistence on writing effectively, on seeking “the liberating word”,<sup>8</sup> the intervention that could help one to escape the prison of one’s dogmatic assumptions or one’s intuitive certainties or one’s theoretical leanings, he achieved a form of writing that had no direct precedent.

Wittgenstein’s explicitly ‘methodological’ remarks show how this Freudian legacy should be taken<sup>9</sup> and why ‘therapy’ and ‘liberation’ are apt terms via which to characterise Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy. For example, consider:

“We can only convict another person of a mistake... if he (really) acknowledges this expression as the correct expression of his feeling. // For only if he acknowledges it as such, *is* it the correct expression. (Psychoanalysis.)”<sup>10</sup>

This is pretty unequivocal. It makes clear that the person in question is the ultimate authority for the successful resolution of the problem. Compare this remark with the following:

It is a long superseded idea . . . that the patient suffers from a sort of ignorance, and that if one remove this ignorance by giving him information. . . he is bound to recover. The pathological factor is not his ignorance itself, but the root of this ignorance in his inner resistances; it was they that first called this ignorance into being, and they still

---

<sup>7</sup> And Wittgenstein thought that Freud himself violated this crucial point, when he (Freud) became scientific.

<sup>8</sup> See especially p.77 of *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, for this key phrase.

<sup>9</sup> See on this front the well-known PI passages; passages such as 133 (see in particular Read’s “The real philosophical discovery”, *Philosophical Investigations* 1995); 130-2. See our “Towards a Perspicuous Presentation of ‘Perspicuous Presentation’”, *Philosophical Investigations* 31: 2 (2008), 141-160); 108, 116 & 120. See also the chapters by each of the authors of the present chapter, in addition to our co-authored chapter, in Jolley (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Key Concepts*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Big Typescript*, 410. For more detail on the parallel with psychoanalysis, see the relevant chapters of Baker’s (2004). One might also look at O.K. Bouwsma’s outlining of a person-specific Wittgensteinian therapy, modelled on psychoanalysis: see Bouwsma’s (1982), “A Difference Between Wittgenstein and Ryle”, in J.L. Craft and R.E. Hustwit (eds.), *Towards a New Sensibility* (U. Nebraska Press, pp.17-32.)

maintain it now. The task of the treatment lies in combating these resistances. (Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 11, p. 225)<sup>11</sup>

This, we are suggesting, is the very core of Wittgenstein's promotion of the therapeutic analogy for philosophy. It is what makes Wittgenstein a successor to the Enlightenment project: Freedom is something that cannot be given to one. One must attain it for oneself. It is also precisely what makes Wittgenstein in this one key regard a true successor to Freud.

Consider some further remarks of Wittgenstein's:

[W]e do not call a '*rule of grammar*' a law of nature to which the course of language conforms, but a rule **which a speaker states** as a rule of **his language**. (VoW pp. 103-105, our emphases)

[O]ne can only determine the grammar of a language **with the consent of a speaker**, but not the orbit of the stars with the consent of the stars. **The rule for a sign, then, is the rule which the speaker commits himself to.** // This commitment to a rule is also the end of a philosophical investigation. For instance, if one has cleared away the scruples about the word 'is' by making two or three signs available to a person instead of the one, then **everything would now depend on his commitment** to this rule:  $\varepsilon$  is not to be replaced by  $=$ . (VoW p.105)<sup>12</sup>

Here then is the fullness of the difference between science and philosophy to which, we submit, Wittgenstein is committed. Our claim here draws upon what we have already suggested is the radically non-scientistic stance involved in Freud's vision of psychoanalysis, before Freud himself corrupted and sought to effect a kind of re-scientising of psychoanalysis. What is radical is the requirement of acknowledgement by the 'therapee' of the therapist's interpretations, which is considered as a *criterion* for the truth of those interpretations.

One way of putting our central point is this: the gulf in purpose and methods between the natural sciences and philosophy that Wittgenstein over and again wished his readers and students to understand has (nevertheless) not sufficiently been understood. As with so many of the differences

---

<sup>11</sup> Of course, this quotation is as yet not clear on whether the task of combatting resistances can be 'farmed out' to the analyst... This is why Wittgenstein said (p.42 of Barrett (ed.), *Lectures and Conversations...*): "Sometimes [Freud] says that the right solution, or the right analysis, is the one which satisfies the patient. Sometimes he says that the doctor knows what the right solution or analysis of the dream whereas the patient doesn't"—here, in the latter case, there is a danger of analysis becoming a kind of authoritarian cult.

<sup>12</sup> See also, VoW, "On the Character of Disquiet" pp. 69-77; cf. also pp. 233-237, pp. 277-279, and pp. 303-305. See also p.55ff. of Baker (2004).

that Wittgenstein meant to teach (between finite and infinite, mind and body, etc.), there has been a tendency to assimilate the two terms, to make one more akin to the other than they actually are.

It can be tempting to read Wittgenstein's appeals to 'grammar' as appeals to a set of externally-imposed rules that one must robotically follow, and many (perhaps still in thrall to traditional modes of philosophizing) succumb to this very temptation. If one does so succumb, however, one has ignored Wittgenstein's explicit cautionary remarks and misunderstood the relevant elements of therapeutic practice that Wittgenstein seeks to incorporate into the practice of philosophy. 'Grammar' marks the locus of the difficult work of aligning oneself with the language one inherits but in a way that is always open to disputation, clarification and innovation. Grammar is something we create as much as we discover it. Grammar is something we *do*.

There is a scientific desire that leads some<sup>13</sup> to see grammar to be independent of consent, or to *acknowledge the role of consent but then to, in practice, ignore it*. Succumbing to this desire would lead one to practice a kind of grammatical conventionalism and determinism: where grammatical rules are read off a stock of uses and these rules then determine meaning. Understood in this way, appeals to grammatical rules become akin to appeals to laws, which exist independently of those to whom they apply. The danger in treating grammar as if it were independent of consent comes from the extent to which the humanity or indeed 'autonomy' of language-users comes to be downplayed, ignored or indeed occluded.

We propose that one resist the temptation to conceptualise 'grammar' in such a way that its arbiters—people—lose their autonomy. Rather than make a claim—vouchsafe an opinion or thesis—that 'Grammar is autonomous', and so run the risk of seeing it as a kind of system within which individuals are powerless, one might seek a proper acknowledgement of human mental/linguistic autonomy and power as urging that one acknowledge the person- and occasion-sensitive conception of grammar as philosophically crucial and invaluable.

In fact, when one reads the appeal to grammar in Wittgenstein adequately—as requiring the consent of the speaker—then one sees that the project of answering the question as to what meaning is cannot be something that Wittgenstein undertook. For what a word means, in a large class of cases, comes down to the use to which someone puts it when they use the language (PI 43). The use to which they put the word will be such that it can in principle be explained through appeal to 'grammatical rules' and the like. *But*, again: we recommend caution; it can seem natural to take this appeal to use or to rules in the wrong way. To help guard against this, consider the following remark of Wittgenstein's that one might helpfully hear as sounding a cautionary note:

---

<sup>13</sup> Including (we would suggest) even some well-known 'Wittgensteinians'. We fill out this suggestion, and name names, in our forthcoming book, *Liberatory philosophy*.

“What is it that is repulsive in the idea that we study the use of a word, point to mistakes in the description of this use and so on? First and foremost one asks oneself: How could that be so important to us? It depends on whether what one calls a ‘wrong description’ is a description which does not accord with established usage – or one which does not accord with the practice of the person giving the description. **Only in the second case does a philosophical conflict arise.**” (RPP I 549; our emphasis).

The descriptions, or uses, or rules—the rules that proffer-forth meaning—are not akin to, not shadows cast by, nor are they modelled on, the laws of nature; rather they are the rules **which a speaker states** (or could state, or could assent to) as a rule of **his language**. (cf. VoW pp. 103-105). To emphasise this, to emphasise the *practice* of language, including its always being open to newness, to reconception by the speaker, is *to leave behind* the idea that the outsider-philosopher can usefully come in with a theory, or even a pre-established account, of the grammar of a term and trump the language-user(s) in question. It is to begin the novel project of returning philosophical authority to the everyday. That is, of *equalising* the dialectical situation existing between the philosopher and her ‘patient’,<sup>14</sup> of giving up the pretention to have some superior place in a hierarchy of knowledge concerning (say) language use. And, rather, as we might put it, finding everyday language to be ‘its own master’, truly to take care of itself – ‘through’ us. Put another way, we might suggest that what concerns Wittgenstein is the logical consistency of philosophical practice. A philosopher does not need, is not required of necessity, to employ words in accordance with conventional usage on pain of lapsing into nonsense, but rather needs in her philosophical practice to be logically consistent. Equivocating on ‘process’ when talking of mental processes, or finding oneself unwilling to commit to a rule for the use of the term process, in the phrase ‘mental process’, is to be, in practice, logically inconsistent.

Clearly then, this ought *not* to be mistaken for a relativist thesis about language or meaning. Neither is it an intentionalist thesis, which claims meaning to be conveyed exclusively by or directly responsive only to the pre-existing intentions of the language user. Rather, this move is a radical re-orientation of one’s centre of attention in philosophy, of one’s *focus*. For what we are saying includes that *everything* that *we* are saying (if we are in fact *saying* anything) is only true inasmuch as it is ultimately taken to be so by our interlocutor. The philosopher as would-be expert must stand aside, and let the enculturated individual who is using the term in question come to equilibrium concerning how they are willing to commit to a particular usage. The assistance offered

---

<sup>14</sup> Thus the deepest affinity between Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy on the one hand and psychoanalysis on the other is arguably with the later Sandor Ferenczi, more than with Freud. With Ferenczi’s groundbreaking concept of ‘mutual therapy’ / ‘mutual analysis’. A latter-day inheritor of Ferenczi’s mantle here is the Co-Counselling movement.

in this process is akin to midwifery, not expert-instruction nor dictation. This, we propose, is what it means to take the radical turn in philosophy's evolution that Wittgenstein offered. In a way, it involves the dissolving<sup>15</sup> of philosophy into the ongoing, always ethical practice of everyday living.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of exegesis, the point (if that is the right word) is about the status of the term "grammar" in Wittgenstein's writings: to what use does Wittgenstein put that term? The point is not to advance another account of meaning, or an a-contextual definition of the term "grammar". Rather, the point is that if we are to know what the language-user meant by their words, if we are to determine the grammar of their language, we can only do so "with the consent of a speaker. The rule for a sign, then, is the rule which the speaker *commits himself to*" (VoW p.105). We need to gain the speaker's consent regarding the grammar of the language they are using—the rules in accordance with which they are using their words.

We propose that ultimately one must take the language user as final arbiter on the grammar of the terms they employ in philosophical discourse principally because this needs to be the case for therapy to *work*. Why? Because: for hitherto-unconscious assumptions or 'pictures' of how things must be, to be brought to consciousness in such a manner that they lose their power over one, *it must be the person suffering the 'mental cramp' that freely comes to acknowledge the picture*. (Otherwise, whatever remains repressed—whatever in the resolution of the mental cramp is not acknowledged freely—will merely remain, and return...) Dialogue with that person presupposes much mutual understanding and what Wittgenstein calls (cf. PI 240-2) 'agreement', and, it presupposes also a genuine *commitment* on the part of that person; but for it to be *dialogue*, as opposed to simply an impositional monologue coming from us, such freedom must be preserved.

A last word.

We have explicated Wittgenstein on grammar; we have shown how this usually misunderstood term in Wittgenstein's lexicon actually takes one in the opposite direction from theory or from language-policing, and potentially into a fluid realm of 'experimental' forms of writing, in the service of a

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. this, from that other prophet of Modernism, Karl Marx: "The philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognise it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realise that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life." (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p.447). This remark intriguingly anticipates Wittgenstein's own emphasis on 'the everyday'. See also on this <https://libcom.org/library/when-language-goes-holiday-philosophy-anti-philosophy-marx-wittgenstein>

<sup>16</sup> We do not of course mean by this that everyday life always involves ethical as opposed to *unethical* behaviour. Rather, we mean to index what the ethnomethodologists capture (and that was already an insight of Wittgenstein's in TLP): the way in which ordinary life is *saturated* by ethics. The way that members-of-society's practices can be seen as always having an accountable ethical aspect, even if it is often suppressed or taken for granted.

thinking that would liberate. What then of Wittgenstein applied specifically to thinking the writing of literary modernism?

Here we find some of the most powerful writings to be those of a Wittgensteinian lettrist: James Guetti. It was Guetti's contention that Wittgenstein did not provide anything so clunky as a literary theory. Rather, Wittgenstein provided what might be called a framework, to be judged primarily by its utility, for thinking about how literature works, and thus for seeing it (or, better, hearing it) as it is. Guetti's Wittgensteinian presentations of authors such as Hemingway and Faulkner, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens enabled literature to be fully present. Wittgenstein made aspects audible that were otherwise liable to be silenced (in part, by the very rush to Theory). Wittgenstein's work on 'seeing-as' and 'meaning-blindness' was a key inspiration for Guetti.<sup>17</sup> Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination<sup>18</sup>—sometimes. Those occasions are occasions when a word is being heard for more than its practical use. Guetti sought to bring out the way in which words in literature are typically or even quintessentially words *on display*. Showing, if you will, more than saying. That is indeed where (when) literature, in Guetti's conception, begins. It is most certainly an important moment in literary modernism.

In sum, then: One has *to take responsibility for* one's words, and this is another way of putting the point about being *committed* to what one means, quoted from Wittgenstein above. A speaker is committed to what her words mean—and only *this*, and not a philosopher's pet theory or reading of the language, tells us what we need to know about grammar, hereabouts – in 'our (sense' of the word) "grammar". Wittgenstein helps us to appreciate the works of the modernist literary masters, by helping us to appreciate their sounds of / at least as much as their senses, their form as constituting so much of their content. And when we appreciate Wittgenstein himself as a kind of post-literary modernist<sup>19</sup>—as someone who chose carefully the placing of every single word, as someone who sought to radically modernise the practice of philosophy by figuring it as a process of therapy or liberation by means of the very thing that would enslave thought/us: language—then we are in a position to avoid misunderstanding any longer Wittgenstein's use of the term "grammar".

---

<sup>17</sup> See especially his "Idling Rules. The Importance of Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*", in *Philosophical Investigations* Volume 16, Issue 3, pages 179–197, July 1993.

<sup>18</sup> See *PI* s.7.

<sup>19</sup> A category that has than nothing to do with 'post-modernism'. Lest we be misunderstood by our favourable references to modernism in this article, we should also note here that there are also key aspects of Wittgenstein's thought which are not only anti-post-modernist, but anti-modernist. See e.g. Read's <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEPcQ6sIOTY>; Read's "On philosophy's (lack of) progress: From Plato to Wittgenstein, in *Wittgenstein and Plato: Connections, Comparisons and Contrasts*; eds. Luigi Perissinotto, Begoña Ramón Cámara; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; and the close of Cora Diamond's "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of the *Tractatus*", in *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Contrary to widespread understanding of his work, grammar is not what one is imprisoned by, for Wittgenstein. Grammar is something we—we philosophers, and we ordinary members of society—*do*.