

## WITTGENSTEIN AND SURREALISM

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### Abstract / Introduction

There are two aspects to Wittgenstein's method of deconstructing pseudo-philosophical problems that need to be distinguished: (1) describing *actual* linguistic practice, and (2) constructing *hypothetical* 'language-games'. Both methods were, for Wittgenstein, indispensable means of clarifying the 'grammar' of expressions of our language -- i.e., the appropriate contexts for using those expressions -- and thereby dissolving pseudo-philosophical problems. Though (2) is often conflated with (1), it is important to recognize that it differs from it in important respects. (1) can be seen as functioning as a *direct* method of 'proof' (i.e., attempt to convince the reader of some thesis), and (2) as an *indirect* method of 'proof' -- proof by *reduction ad absurdum*. This essay will be devoted to clarifying (2) by forging an analogy with surrealism in art.

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The notion of a '**language game**' plays a pivotal role in Wittgenstein's philosophy. Like the notion of a 'conceptual framework', 'discourse', or 'practice', it is a loose concept, having 'no precise definition or decisive and non-arbitrary criterion of individuation'.<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein uses it to refer not only to *actual* uses of language -- which might involve very basic 'moves', as in teaching language to children, or more sophisticated/complex 'moves', as we find in everyday discourse -- but also to *hypothetical* or *invented* uses of language, which may again be basic or complex.

I shall in the future again and again draw your attention to what I shall call *language-games*. These are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language. *Language-games* are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of *language-games* is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages.... When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. [BB p. 17]

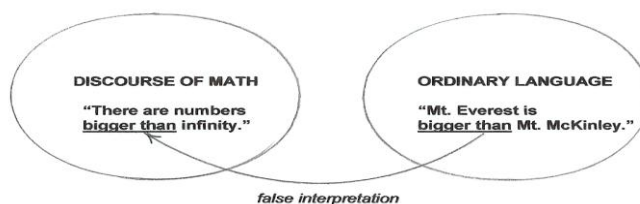
Hypothetical language-games involve imaginary uses of language that are meant to be *compared* to actual language-games. They involve constructing 'objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way of similarities and dissimilarities'. [PI §130] A hypothetical language-game is a method of instruction, and an indispensable one at that.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett's expression [1990 p. 49].

Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones. [CV p. 74]

Constructing ‘fictitious concepts’ involves assigning *new* roles to them, *rearranging* the phenomena of language, so to speak, and exploiting the dissimilarity between their roles in the invented use-contexts and their roles in their actual use-contexts to bring out a new angle on them, or see them in a clearer light. This is a subtler way of deconstructing pseudo-problems than the method of describing *actual* uses of language because it operates in an *indirect* manner. Hypothetical language games involve abstracting concepts from their normal circumstances of application.



‘It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in such imagined uses of language’, Wittgenstein remarks, ‘for here we can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of words’. [PI §5] Rearranging facts and assimilating pictures ‘[alter our way] of looking at things’ [PI §144]; they help put things into view.

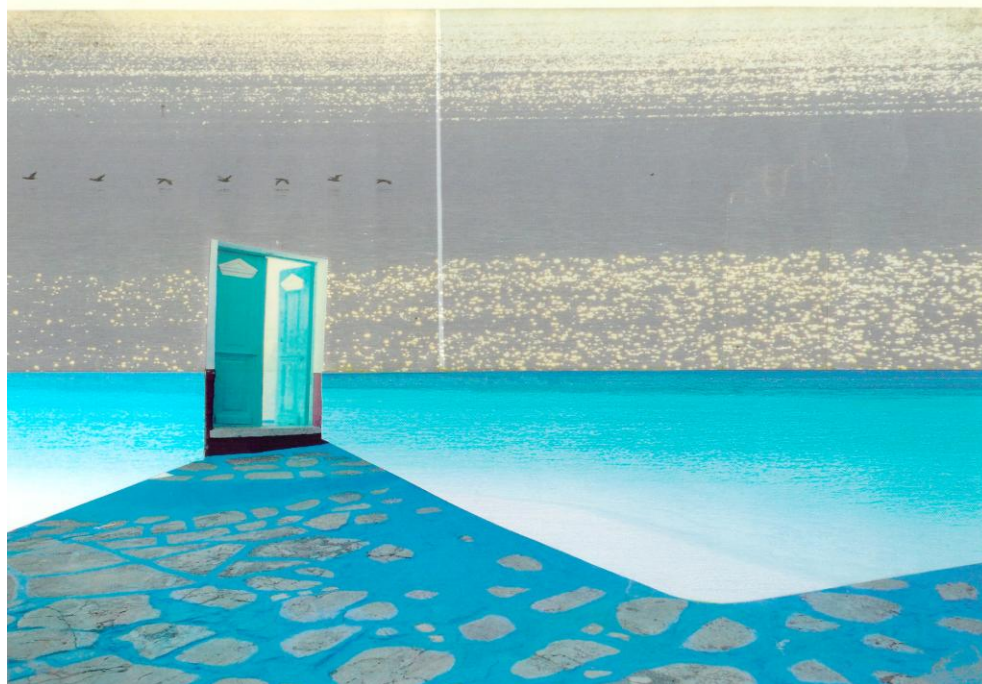
One of the most important methods I use is to imagine a historical development for our ideas different from what actually occurred. If we do this we see the problem from a completely new angle. [CV p. 37]

But how does it ‘disperse the fog’ to take such departures from reality? How do language-games help us see things from a ‘completely new angle’?

In answering this, I find it useful to draw an analogy with surrealism in art. **Surrealism** originated in Paris in the late 1910s / early 20s as a literary and artistic movement that aimed to revolutionize human experience in its personal, cultural, social, and political aspects. It grew principally out of the earlier Dada movement, which, prior to World War I, produced works of ‘anti-art’ that deliberately defied reason and tradition. Early exponents of the movement were influenced by the psychological theories and dream studies of Sigmund Freud, and the political ideas of Karl Marx. According to the major spokesman of the movement, the poet and critic André Breton, surrealism was a means of releasing the unbridled imagination of the subconscious realm, and reuniting it with the conscious realm. Breton embraced idiosyncrasy, while rejecting the idea of an underlying madness. Indeed, he defined genius in terms of accessibility to the normally untapped unconscious realm, which, he believed, could be attained by poets and painters alike. From the 1920s onward, the movement spread over many countries around the globe, affecting all aspects of their cultural landscape – visual arts, music, film, as well as political and social thought. It reached its heyday during World War II, with artists like Dalí and Magritte, who created the most widely recognized images of the movement. Surrealists

admired the artwork of the ‘insane’ for its freedom of expression, as well as artworks created by children. Freud’s work on dream analysis and the unconscious was of utmost importance to the Surrealists in developing methods to liberate the imagination. They drew heavily on the psychoanalytic practice of ‘free association’ to tap into the private world of the mind -- traditionally restricted by reason and social customs/structures -- and allow the workings of the unconscious uninhibited mind (the wellspring of the imagination and creative ideas) to reveal itself. The images that sprung into existence through their methods were akin to automatism in poetry, surprising and unexpected, strange and grotesque, twisted and confusing, as startling as the fantastic, irrational, and whimsical images of a dream.

An important function of art is to provide a *new* interpretation of our surrounding world, to uncover its *hidden* truths. The critical underlying philosophy of surrealism was that by *rearranging* familiar objects -- moving them from their familiar/unique contexts into unfamiliar/alien contexts; typically ones that form a *contrast* with their original home -- we may come to see them in a new light, with an altered meaning and significance. The contrast in question might involve a shift from darkness to light, old to new, noise to silence, past to present, etc. For example, a surrealist work might involve moving a monastery from a craggy hill to the edge of the sea, or into a lively city, or some element of the lively city (say, the street with its pedestrians) onto a deserted island, etc. In this way the artist *draws our attention* to an object -- one we might have *overlooked* had it been in its familiar setting -- and thereby sharpens our focus on it. This technique helps bring out ‘hidden’ aspects of the world -- ‘hidden’ because they are so *familiar* that we overlook them; we take them for granted. They become insignificant from their familiarity. By *rearranging* phenomena, the artist makes the insignificant significant. An example to illustrate.<sup>2</sup>



Surrealists believed that one could combine, inside the same ‘frame’, elements not normally found together to produce illogical and startling effects.

<sup>2</sup> By Chryssoula Gitsoulis ©



Wittgenstein's method of constructing hypothetical language-games can be viewed as employing a similar *technique*, only in a different medium: language. By taking us on journeys into 'imaginary landscapes' (imaginary uses of language), where words/sentences have a function that differs from their actual function, Wittgenstein helps draw our attention to what we have overlooked: their actual function. For it is forgetting this, for Wittgenstein, that gives rise to philosophical puzzlement. Wittgenstein's method, as with surrealism, does not involve building a *new* construction out of new material, but only 'rearranging what we have always known' [PI §109], like the 'rearrangement of books in a library'. [BB p. 44]<sup>3</sup>



Unlike many surrealist works, however, Wittgenstein's re-arrangements of language are not arbitrary, spontaneous, chaotic, or a product of 'free association', but *strategically chosen*, as we find in the surrealist collages of Odysseus Elytis (above), whose poetry and paintings/collages contain extraordinary juxtapositions of ordinary objects, that breathe new life into them. In the

<sup>3</sup> Or the rearrangement of furniture in a room. According to Moore, Wittgenstein 'compared his method to the tidying of a room where you have to move the same object several times before you can get the room really tidy'. [Moore 1955 p. 27]

beginning of the 20th century, Surrealist artists made extensive use of collage (the term derives from the French ‘colle’ meaning ‘glue’). In Elytis’ collages, we find ‘method in the madness’. Familiar objects are not re-arranged in a purely arbitrary manner, involving a free play of the imagination, but instead are *strategically positioned* in unusual contexts, that give them a new meaning. The strange worlds that he creates form a kind of ritual in their capacity to liberate the mind and heart. Witness how, e.g., in the image above (right), the rearrangement of an object as simple and ordinary as a mussel shell can turn it into something extraordinary – the wings of angel! Or how marble statues (in the neighboring collages), through a simple rearrangement, suddenly come to life; they almost seem to be communicating with human beings. ‘Sail well’, we hear the maiden cry out to a loved one, ‘and don’t forget your poor girl!’ Not only does Elytis succeed in drawing our attention to familiar objects, but helps us see them in a light that casts new meaning and value on them. The world, we discover, is a magical place indeed when arrangements of familiar objects are open to the imagination!

Wittgenstein’s hypothetical language games also involve rearrangements of familiar elements of our world. For Wittgenstein, pseudo-philosophical problems are generated by overstressing the ‘limits of language’: interpreting the sense and function of words/sentences in one use-context/‘language-game’ in terms of their sense/function in another use-context/‘language-game’. It is in this respect that we overstretch the ‘limits of language’, and generate false interpretations of language that lead to pseudo-philosophical problems.<sup>4</sup> In a hypothetical language-game we are invited to imagine a world where the false interpretation *is* correct. What else would have to be true if it is correct? A hypothetical language-game fills in the details. Hence, although an alien context is created in a language-game, it is not one which is created in an arbitrary or chaotic fashion. The idea is that by accumulating enough of these details, we might at last come to see that we are in the grip of a false interpretation. This is why hypothetical language-games function like *reductio* arguments. It is also why this aspect of Wittgenstein’s method is more subtle than that of describing *actual* uses of language: it is an indirect method of ‘proof’ -- of getting us to recognize our false interpretations.

An example to illustrate. In the note to PI §151, Wittgenstein tries to clarify the grammar of our concept of understanding. Can it be correct to think of understanding as a ‘mental state’? Well, suppose, for the sake of argument, that it *is* correct. What else would have to be true? To answer this, we need to consider how we *actually* employ the concept of a ‘mental state’. We apply it to experiences such as depression, excitement, and pain, among others. And what is true about how we apply these terms? We say, e.g., as Wittgenstein notes:

Actual use-contexts

‘He was depressed the whole day.’

‘He was in great excitement the whole day.’

‘He has been in continuous pain since yesterday.’

‘When did your pains get less?’

But can the notion of ‘understanding’ be used in these ways? To answer this, we need to construct imaginary use-contexts where it *is* used in these ways. Again, using Wittgenstein’s examples:

Imaginary use-contexts

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<sup>4</sup> This chain of mistakes is discussed at greater length in Gitsoulis (2007).

‘Since yesterday, I have understood this word.’ ‘Continuously’ though?  
 ‘When did you stop understanding the word?’

As we can see, it is ‘ungrammatical’ to apply *temporal* concepts to ‘understanding’ in the way we do to mental states: we speak of being in continuous pain, or of a pain being interrupted for several minutes, or of suddenly ceasing to feel pain, but it is grammatically jarring to regard understanding as ‘clockable’<sup>5</sup> in this way. Moreover, it is grammatically jarring to apply concepts of *intensity* to understanding in the way we do to mental states: we describe a pain as intense, or an emotion as strong, but it is ‘ungrammatical’ to describe understanding in these terms.<sup>6</sup> One might, but then he would be using the term in a nonstandard or conventionally unacceptable way, just as one would be using a kitchen table in a conventionally unacceptable way were he to use it as a TV stand. To bring this out to someone who decides to use it in this way, you might try placing kitchen chairs around the table, and a napkin holder next to the TV (you would be creating an imaginary language-game!). If this provokes laughter, you have made your point, though *indirectly* of course. It is similar with words. Laughter might be the appropriate response to someone who uses words in the manner of the imaginary use-context above (‘I stopped understanding the word’, ‘My understanding was continuous since yesterday’, etc.). Laughter is a *sign* that an interpretation is out of place, as in the joke:

Patient: I broke my arm in two places.  
 Doctor: Don’t go to those places.<sup>7</sup>

This is why Wittgenstein makes use of jokes to illuminate concepts. They are supposed to help us recognize that we are in the grip of a false interpretation.

Wittgenstein’s obsessive attention to seemingly irrelevant features of how language functions makes his works stand apart not only methodologically but also *stylistically* from other philosophical works. A striking aspect of his style of writing is the feeling of *eeriness* or *spookiness* it is bound to arouse in anyone who first encounters it. (I myself have a vivid recollection of this feeling upon first browsing through *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*). The analogy with surrealism can also be used to explain this *effect* of his writing on the reader. Many of us have experienced an eerie, spooky feeling, while staring at surrealist art-works, a bit like the feeling we have as tourists traveling to unfamiliar lands (witness, e.g., the feeling created by the long shadows, strange figures, deep receding spaces, mysterious lighting, and ominous settings of de Chirico paintings). These feelings are stirred up by the rearrangement of familiar facts. We are spooked by the lack of fit, the paradoxical nature, of the world we behold, which is at once familiar and alien. Wittgenstein’s writing generates a similar feeling in the reader, and can be traced to the same root. Witness, for example, the following language-games.

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked ‘five red apples’. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked ‘apples’; then he looks up the word ‘red’ in a table and finds a color sample

<sup>5</sup> McGinn’s expression [1984 p. 5].

<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein’s so-called ‘private language argument’ can also be seen as taking the form of a reduction, as I try to show in a forthcoming paper on this topic.

<sup>7</sup> This joke is from Richard Gilmore [1999, p. 96].

opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers – I assume that he knows them by heart – up to the word ‘five’ and for each number he takes an apple of the same color as the sample out of the drawer. – It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. ... [PI §1]

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words ‘block’, ‘pillar’, ‘slab’, ‘beam’. A calls them out; -- B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such and such a call. – Conceive this as a complete primitive language.

The eerie feeling that these language-games generate in the reader stems from using *familiar* words/sentences in *unfamiliar* ways, just as in surrealism it arises from rearranging elements of familiar visual landscapes. The shopping expedition would not, *in real life*, be conducted in the manner portrayed in PI §1. No grocer keeps apples in drawers labeled ‘apples’ or consults color charts. We do not live in such ludicrous, mechanical worlds. The point is that we are supposed to *contrast* that imaginary language-game with our actual linguistic practices. This might help us see (the contrast might help bring to light) that communication does not demand that every word have something for which it stands -- that something being its meaning -- as the *Augustinian picture* (a pseudo-picture) assumes. This is the psychological truth that the language games seek to expose.

Through a ‘juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities’, Surrealists, in the words of the poet Pierre Reverdy, sought to produce an ‘[image with greater] emotional power and poetic reality.’ They believed that there was an element of truth which is revealed by our subconscious minds which *supercedes* the reality of our everyday consciousness. The term ‘surreal’, which was used to describe their artistic landscape, literally means ‘above reality’. Wittgenstein’s language-games also contain a message or moral (witness the games above), a secret truth which the reader must uncover for himself. For we hardly ever find Wittgenstein drawing out morals for us; conventional methods of guiding the reader are aborted. There are reasons for this. One is that Wittgenstein sought to transform the reader, to force him into a kind of conversion which involved *unlearning* certain bad habits, so as to *demystify* pseudo-philosophical problems. This is why he says: ‘Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On one’s own way of seeing things.’ [CV p. 16] And why, in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, he says ‘I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking, but to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own’. Wittgenstein demanded *active participation* from his reader: the reader must work certain things out for himself, he felt, if his work is to have a *therapeutic* effect on him.

Another reason stems from the fact that Wittgenstein felt that drawing out morals for the reader was *not necessary* for achieving his desired effect: demystification through the deconstruction of pseudo-problems. Wittgenstein allows the truth of what makes his philosophical method effective to speak for itself. Just as a work of literature (a novel) can produce moral effects not by *preaching*, but simply by *being*, so too, Wittgenstein felt, that he could achieve his aim – disintegration of pseudo-problems – by presenting a rich battery of

examples, vividly described, of language-in-action, without having to *explicitly* draw any morals for us.

If only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – contained in what has been uttered.<sup>8</sup>

The moral potency of literature attests to this. In order for a work of literature to have moral effects, it is not necessary that it present a theory of morality.<sup>9</sup> Nor is it necessary that it portray morally idealized subjects following rigid rules. Indeed, its moral potency is likely to be greater when it portrays *morally mixed* characters, much like the average viewer (as you find in ancient tragedies), and vividly described crises and struggles through which they pass, *leaving us to draw the moral for ourselves*. As Aristotle masterfully recognized in the *Poetics*, the *idealized* subject, free of common faults, loses his/her ability to engage our attention, and in turn our sympathy; the one who is like us, who we can relate to emotionally, and hence sympathize with, is the *best* agent for imparting a moral message. In like manner, I imagine Wittgenstein too recognized that the roughness and inexactness of commonplace speech, with all its imperfections, set before us in numerous actual and imaginary language games, and not a neat philosophical theory, still more one couched in an idealized language, could serve as the *best* agent for producing the therapeutic (and arguably moral) effects that he sought to achieve in the reader. And, for those effects to be produced, he felt, no morals needed to be explicitly drawn. This contributes to the oracular, poetic quality of his work.

What we have overlooked, what we have forgotten, for Wittgenstein, is often what is right before us: how language *actually* functions. It is to this world (for Wittgenstein both the source of and final court of appeal for philosophical disputes) that Wittgenstein was constantly drawing our attention (either directly or indirectly), by making the insignificant *significant*, the ordinary *extraordinary*. It is perhaps in this respect more than any other – in recognizing the elementary sources of confusion that lie at the root of many of our seemingly most ‘profound’ philosophical problems -- that his work was revolutionary; and therein, I believe, lays his most valuable contribution to philosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> In a letter from Wittgenstein to Paul Engelmann dated 9/4/1917. See Engelmann [1967].

<sup>9</sup> This point has been defended at length by Martha Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), and *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1990).



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