

**Philosophy 308**  
***The Language Revolution***  
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**Fall 2015**

Class #19  
Introduction to Wittgenstein's  
Private Language Argument

# Where We Are: Meaning

- Frege took meanings (propositions, concepts) to be objective, third-realm entities.
- The logical empiricists, preferring parsimony, thought of meaning as method of verification.
  - Methodologically behavioristic
  - Reductive, atomistic
- Quine argues that meaning is the property of larger swaths of language.
  - Still methodologically behavioristic
  - But: holism and the web of belief
  - Meaningfulness without meanings
- Wittgenstein can be interpreted as denying even the doctrine of meaningfulness.
  - Meanings skepticism

# Augustine on Language

- "When they (my elder's) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something. I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires" (*Philosophical Investigations* 1).
- Notice the view of language as the representation of inner states: intentions, seeking, avoiding, desiring.

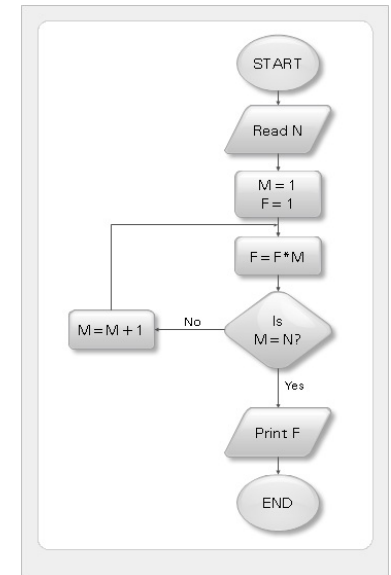
# Locke on Communication



- Locke argued that our words refer to our sensations.  
Otherwise, we would not know what we are communicating.
- This picture of language takes communication to be like playing catch.
  - B1. I hold the ball in my hands.
  - B2. Then, I toss the ball.
  - B3. Lastly, you catch and hold the ball
- Analogously, when we communicate:
  - C1. I have a sensation, which I label with a word: apple, ball, cat.
  - C2. Then, I speak: The cat ate an apple.
  - C3. Lastly, you associate my words with some inner sensations of your own.
- Frege's claim that sense determines reference is an heir.
- Wittgenstein's private language argument (PLA) is a direct response.

# What is the PLA?

- *Philosophical Investigations*.
  - Traditional interpretations locate the argument between §243 and §315 or so, with some further remarks later on.
  - Saul Kripke, in his 1982 *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, locates the argument significantly earlier in the text.
- On the traditional interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of mental states.
- On Kripke's interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of rules and rule-following.
  - Especially rules for uses of language
- Kripke sees the discussion of mental states as an example of a more general claim.
- Today, we look at the traditional version.
- Then, we'll look at the Kripkenstein version.



# Not a Something Not a Nothing

“But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behavior accompanied by pain and pain-behavior without any pain?” - Admit it? What greater difference could there be? - “And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.” - Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said (*Philosophical Investigations* §304).

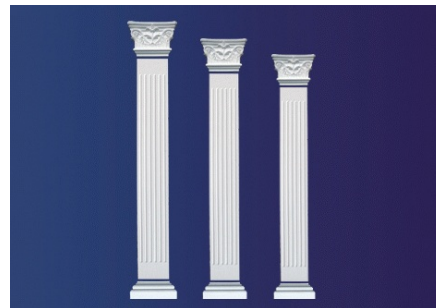
# Starting with Language

- Wittgenstein says that sensations are neither a something nor a nothing.
  - ▶ pain
  - ▶ your impression of a color, or an odor or taste
  - ▶ beliefs about how to continue in a number series
- Locke started his analysis of language with the presumption of the existence of sensations and our direct awareness of them.
  - ▶ Empiricism: sensations are the basis on which all of our knowledge is built.
  - ▶ We construct a language which refers to them.
  - ▶ Embracing Frege's context principle and even abandoning atomism and doesn't give up the empiricist's starting points.
  - ▶ Quine: the boundary conditions on our theory construction are our sense experiences.
- Wittgenstein works in the other direction.
  - ▶ Let's start by looking at language and working backwards to its grounds.
  - ▶ We begin to doubt the sensations which Locke and the rest took for granted.
    - Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak And "think" would here mean something like "talk to itself"....(*Philosophical Investigations* §32).

# Meaning and Use

## *Investigations §1-§7*

- While 'apple' works the way Augustine and Locke say it does, 'five' and 'red' seem different.
  - ▶ They do not represent objects.
  - ▶ They provide instructions for action.
  - ▶ We might, as Plato did, reify redness or the number five.
  - ▶ Nevertheless, the uses of those terms are different from the uses of 'apple'.
- When we use a word, we follow conventional guidelines.
  - ▶ The grocer compares the term 'red' with a patch of red, and counts.
  - ▶ Such terms require instructions for how to use them.
- A language of mere representation is unfamiliar (§2).
  - ▶ Language has many other functions.





# Language Games

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? - There are *countless kinds*: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten... Here the term “language-*game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (*Philosophical Investigations* §23).

# Same Objects, Different Labels

- The same object, under different instructions, may have a different label.
- Consider the way a child's stick can be a rocket, or a sword, or a pony.
  - ▶ §6: A brake and lever can be anything or nothing.
- Terms of language have no meaning apart from their use in a larger theory.
  - ▶ Compare to Quine's semantic holism.
- Meanings of the terms 'brake' and 'lever' depend on the uses we make of those objects.



# The Community

- Number terms (for example) are directions for how to proceed.
  - Counting apples, for example
  - There are also directions for how to proceed using the number terms alone.
  - If we want to understand the number terms, then we have to analyze how these terms function.
  - We have to determine how we learn the rules for counting.
- As far as we agree on the rules for using language, we have some common language, we can communicate.
- If we were to disagree on the rules, we would not understand each other.
- “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (*Investigations*, p 223).

