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Author(s): Anthony Ellis

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Kenny and the Continuity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy

ANTHONY ELLIS

1. Once upon a time philosophers believed that there were two Wittgensteins. There was the man who wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and then, thinking that he had solved all of his philosophical problems, gave up philosophy. Then there was a man who, some years later, started doing something that had nothing to do with what had been done in the *Tractatus*, something that some people did not even recognise as philosophy; it issued in *Philosophical Investigations*.

I do not know if anyone really believed this tale (though Russell *seems* to have done; and there are certainly some who think that there is nothing recognisably *philosophical* in the *Investigations*); but if they did they were obviously wrong. We can now see Wittgenstein wrestling with problems left over from the *Tractatus* in such works as *The Blue and Brown Books* and *Philosophische Bemerkungen*. And even if we had nothing but the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* the tale would still look like a fairy tale. Human beings are just not like that.

The point is taken; Wittgenstein's thought was very much a continuous progression. But to say this is not to imply that the end was not very far from the beginning, that the thought of the *Investigations* is not *radically* opposed to that of the *Tractatus*. A few years ago this remark would not have been contentious. Now it does seem to be.

2. Clearly, some views that Wittgenstein held in the *Tractatus* he still held in the *Investigations*, and in itself this is neither surprising nor even interesting. What *is* surprising is to be told, as we are by Kenny,¹ that the picture theory of the proposition still survives in the *Investigations*. He claims that Wittgenstein's view, in the *Blue and Brown Books*, *Philosophical Grammar* and *Philosophical Investigations*, is that

the picture theory needs supplementing, rather than that it is false; that the theory of meaning as use is a complement rather than a rival to the picture theory (ibid. p. 226).

What evidence does Kenny quote for this? Well, as far as *The Blue Book* is concerned there is not too much difficulty. Wittgenstein does speak here as if he thought the notion of picturing had some useful work to do (though how central this work would be is not altogether clear). As for the other two books, Kenny mentions a passage from *Philosophical Grammar* in which Wittgenstein points to the significance of the fact that a picture can be employed in various ways, and then remarks that 'this too was a point which he took up in the *Investigations*'; he then quotes the following passage:

1 *Wittgenstein*, by Anthony Kenny (Allen Lane, 1973).

Imagine a picture representing a boxer in a particular stance. Now this picture can be used to tell someone how he should stand, should hold himself; or how he should not hold himself; or how a particular man did stand in such and such a place; and so on. One might (using the language of chemistry) call this picture a proposition-radical. (PI I, p. 11) (ibid. p. 225)

The picture theory needs supplementing by the notion of use; without that pictures, all signs, are dead.

Let me make a general point about this. Kenny seems to see no danger in quoting passages from works separated by ten or fifteen years of developing thought as if a surface similarity guaranteed a profound one. And in this he is falling prey (not by himself) to a vice that Wittgenstein's mode of writing makes very tempting, that of picking out passages and quoting them with no reference to their context.

More detailed comments about these passages will bear out this general point. The passage from page 11 of *Philosophical Investigations* that Kenny quotes has a further sentence that he does *not* quote: 'This will be how Frege thought of the assumption'. In other words, Wittgenstein is not here presenting his own view, but expounding Frege's. The two are not mutually exclusive of course, but reference to the context of the remark will show, I think, how little Wittgenstein is subscribing to the view that Kenny attributes to him.

The remark is one of those free-floating ones that Wittgenstein cut from other writings and inserted at a particular page with no further indications of where exactly they were supposed to come. But clearly, it is an explanatory note to §22, perhaps to the first sentence. And that paragraph is an attempt to show the emptiness of Frege's belief that every assertion contains an assumption. To say this has as much point, Wittgenstein suggests, as saying that every assertion contains a question just because we can rewrite it as 'p? Yes!'. This leads to the reminder, in §23, of the multiplicity of language-games, and the remark, in §24, that one can, for instance, rewrite questions in the form of orders to tell me something, or assertions about my state of mind '—but this does not bring the language-games any closer together'. The whole passage is an argument to the futility of trying to assimilate one language-game to another. It is hard to see it as evidence that Wittgenstein still held the view that the proposition is essentially a picture.

I said earlier that it is surprising to be told that Wittgenstein held a picture theory of language in *Philosophical Investigations*. And the reason why it is surprising is (obviously) to be found in §65. To the challenge that he is letting himself off the difficult job of saying what is the general form of propositions, he replies

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways.

If Wittgenstein did not think that language has an essence, how could

he still hold anything properly called a picture theory of language? That theory just is a theory as to the essence of language.

Kenny has not, of course, simply overlooked this. He says

Though he did not cease to investigate the essence of language, he came to think that he had been mistaken in looking for the essence as a common structure running through all propositions. General terms such as 'game', 'language', 'proposition' were applied not on the basis of recognition of common features, but on the basis of family likeness. None the less, the concept of family likeness leaves room for the notion of convergence on, and divergence from, a paradigm, in the way that natural numbers are the paradigm for the family-likeness concept of 'number' (PG 113: PI I, 67). I believe that the paradigm on which the notion of proposition converges—the paradigm from which divergences are painstakingly noted—is the proposition conceived according to the logical parts of the picture theory (ibid. p. 224).

It is possible that Wittgenstein held that in some cases there might be paradigm examples for a family resemblance concept. But the passages Kenny mentions do not bear this out. The point made in §67 of the *Investigations* is that there need be no one feature running through all the instances of a term in virtue of which we say that they are all instances of the same thing. He goes on to say that 'perhaps' we call something a number

because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name.

He then goes on to liken this to a thread, which has no one fibre running through it but gains its strength from the overlapping of many fibres. There is no hint here that natural numbers will be a 'paradigm' for our concept of number. All that is said is that the concept has (perhaps) extended from this starting point; but there is no suggestion that in the concept as it now exists this starting point will be a 'paradigm'. And, of course, the image of the thread tells in precisely the opposite way; in a finished thread no special importance resides in the fibre with which it was started.

There is even less reason to talk as Kenny does of the passage in *Philosophical Grammar*. The point made here is that 'the concept of number' is not 'a rigorously circumscribed concept'. We may, if we wish, refuse to use the word 'number' of anything but cardinals, rationals, irrationals, and complex numbers; or we may call other things numbers because of their likenesses with these. It is up to us. There is no suggestion whatever that *natural* numbers are 'paradigmatic'. And to say that these others, with all their differences, are paradigmatic would be completely empty. It would be like saying that the paradigm for the concept of a game is made up of football, chess, patience, ring a ring o' roses, tag, . . . That would be to say no more than that any new candidate for the appellation 'game' (or 'number') has to be judged by reference to its likenesses with

(some of) those things that we already unhesitatingly call games (or numbers). And these things are, of course, the vast majority of the things that we call games (or numbers). And it would certainly be very different from suggesting that one sort of proposition is the paradigm for all propositions.

But even if Wittgenstein had held that there might be paradigm examples for a family resemblance concept, is there any evidence that he thought the paradigm for the notion of a proposition was 'the proposition conceived according to the logical parts of the picture theory'? I do not think that there is; and there is positive reason to think that he did not.¹

A comparison between *The Blue Book* and *Philosophical Investigations* is instructive here. It is noticeable that in *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein insists less on the *multiplicity* of language-games than he came to later. (The nearest thing to the list given in *Philosophical Investigations*, §23, is in a parenthesis on p. 63 f.) The essential point made about language-games here is that they are *primitive* ways of using signs, and it is helpful to study them if we wish to study

the problem of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption and question (*Blue and Brown Books*, p. 17).

It is indeed plausible to suggest that here Wittgenstein is thinking of the assertion as the central form of propositions. But when the notion of language-games is introduced in *Philosophical Investigations* the emphasis is on their *unassimilable multiplicity*. This is, indeed, a major element in the first twenty or thirty paragraphs as a whole, the tenor of which is precisely against the notion that some one sort of proposition should be considered as a paradigmatic for the notion of language.

A further reason for thinking that Wittgenstein would not consider this idea helpful is that he clearly thought that the things we call fact-stating propositions are not at all of the same kind. Note, for example, how many of the 'multiplicity of language games' in §23 would properly be called fact-stating. And indeed, one of the few other passages that Kenny quotes from *Philosophical Investigations* (§291) in this connection is part of a passage making just this point about the notion of describing. It is not, as Kenny says, a remark 'explicitly about the proposition as a picture', for it is not a remark about 'the proposition' at all. (It looks like it in Kenny's quotation because 'description' in the original has been misquoted as 'proposition'.) The remark is, of course, part of the discussion of what saying 'I am in pain', and the like, can amount to, and its point is precisely that we should not think that describing is always the same sort of thing. There is no 'essence' of description any more than there is an 'essence' of language. The first sentence of the next paragraph reads

Don't always think that you read off what you say from the facts; that you portray these in words according to rules.

1 Leaving aside the point that where he might have been expected to say something like this had he believed it (§108, for instance) he does not do so.

It is hard to see this as evidence that Wittgenstein still thought that the picture theory had central work to do.

3. We are confronted, by no means for the first time, by a paradox. It is interesting and important to trace the development of Wittgenstein's thought from the *Notebooks* onwards; it is also now fashionable. And when it becomes the fashion to trace the development of someone's thought it speedily becomes the fashion to try to find, as a form of this, precisely the lack of it. The two things are hardly distinguished; and the word 'continuity' is useful here.

I do not say this in order to set the historical record straight about someone's intellectual development. The cost of minimising the *development* of Wittgenstein's thought is the failure to see what was radically new and important in his later works. By the time he wrote the *Investigations* Wittgenstein did not hold a picture theory of language, because he thought that there could be no coherent question to which it would be an answer. And this thought went along with the notion of language-games, a notion both radically new and completely central to any understanding of Wittgenstein's notion of *use*.

Hidé Ishiguro fails to see this, I think, in her article 'Use and Reference of Names'.¹ She says that

the main difference between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is not the presence or absence of the 'use' concept, but that the *Tractatus* concept of 'use' is much less comprehensive than in the *Investigations*. That is to say, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is interested in the role expressions play in a language, which he considers only in relation to the truth-stating purpose of language. He is not concerned with the various other things people may do by using such expressions—such as beseeching, promising, and so on.

Anyone reading this and then turning to the *Investigations* for the first time might well be forgiven their surprise at the fact that there is virtually nothing in that book about beseeching or promising; virtually nothing, indeed, about any other sorts of language than those that we should call fact-stating. There is no sense whatever that here the main work had been done, and now it remained to deal with beseeching, promising, praying, cursing, greeting . . . That is because Wittgenstein was working out a *new* concept of use, far removed from the notion of a 'fixed role in logical syntax' (Miss Ishiguro's gloss on the *Tractatus* sense of 'use').²

Kenny says (p. 224) that Wittgenstein 'did not cease to investigate the essence of language', and implies that the task undertaken in the *Investigations* is that of noting painstakingly where uses of language diverge from a paradigm of language use. I do not know where Wittgenstein can be said to be doing this. His interest in the *Tractatus* was in the nature of language in itself. The important passage in the *Investigations* stretching from §89 to §137 shows how different his later interests were. 'Investiga-

1 In *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, ed. Peter Winch; I quote from p. 21.

2 Ibid. p. 26.

ting the essence of language' is now a matter of reordering what we already, in one sense, know, getting an overview of what is already open to view, describing, in fact, how we do use the words that we use. And this is not done for its own sake; the activity has its point through the genesis of particular philosophical problems in 'the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (§109).

You can say, if you like, that Wittgenstein is still investigating the essence of language, but this strikes me as being no better than a bad pun. The whole direction of inquiry has in fact shifted; philosophy has shifted.

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