

Introduction

The Therapeutic Conception of Philosophy

1. Introduction

Each essay in this dissertation will rely on what I refer to as “Wittgenstein’s therapeutic conception of philosophy”. It is well known that Wittgenstein in his later years thought of philosophy (as he practiced it) as a kind of therapy. But there is little agreement on what exactly is meant by this or how “therapy” as Wittgenstein understood it should be conducted.¹

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to give a brief and general summary of Wittgenstein’s later, therapeutic conception of philosophy as I understand it. My aim won’t be to argue for a definitive stance on this matter, but instead to make my assumptions as clear as possible for the purposes of framing the essays that follow. To the extent that there is an argument for my general reading of Wittgenstein on philosophical therapy, it is in the fruitfulness of applying this general understanding to his remarks on the variety of topics that follow.² There is much more to say about Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy than I can include here, so I will restrict myself to the details that are most essential to his engagement with the topics of mathematical reality, determination, and infinity.³

¹ See Stern (2004) and Floyd (2006: 116-18) for surveys of competing interpretations.

² Further, to the extent that my general reading makes Wittgenstein’s approaches to these topics persuasive or at least philosophically valuable, perhaps it will go some way toward addressing the generally negative response that Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of mathematics has seen. A paradigmatic instance of this comes from Dummett (1978): “Many of the thoughts [in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*] are expressed in a manner which the author recognized as inaccurate or obscure; some passages contradict others; some are quite inconclusive; [...] other passages again [...] are of poor quality or contain definite errors” (Dummett, 1978: 166). See Floyd (1991, 2006), Monk (2007), and Moore (2016) for discussion of the reception of Wittgenstein’s later remarks on mathematics.

2. Philosophy as “Therapy”: Initial Clarifications

What, then, is Wittgenstein’s therapeutic conception of philosophy? That is, what is his conception of how philosophy is to be done, by contrast with more traditional ways of doing philosophy (which by and large aim at ‘theory’ rather than ‘therapy’)?⁴

Perhaps the most fundamental component of Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy is the following: “The philosopher [i.e., Wittgenstein] treats a question like an illness” (PI 255). That is to say, according to the therapeutic conception, traditional philosophical questions themselves are an object of suspicion and require investigation; something to be treated as a problem, rather than to be answered directly with a theory, hypothesis, account, or definition (PI 109).⁵ More specifically, philosophical questions are submitted to diagnosis (“where did this question come from? why is it being asked?”) and therapy (“how might I counteract the hold it has over me?”). Both of these procedures are complicated and subject to variation: “There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were” (PI 133). Despite my attempt here to schematize his conception of philosophy, Wittgenstein makes clear that his way of dealing with

³ By putting Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy front and center in my reading of his remarks on mathematics, my approach throughout these essays can be seen as a “left-wing interpretation” in Chihara’s (1982) sense: “Left-wing interpretations emphasize Wittgenstein’s radical views about the nature of philosophy; they stress the ideas that philosophical problems arise from misconceptions about grammar and meaning and that these problems should be resolved by a kind of therapy in which the therapist puts forward no theses, explanations, or theories of any kind. Right-wing interpretations emphasize Wittgensteinian *doctrines*” (Chihara, 1982: 105). Right-wing interpretations include those offered by Dummett (1978) and Wright (1980). See Monk (2007) for further discussion of so-called “left-” and “right-wing” interpretations.

⁴ So, to be clear, by “Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy”, I mean his own conception of how philosophy should be done, rather than a description or explanation of the massive variety of things we might call “philosophy”. Wittgenstein was quite aware that his conception of philosophy is a radical departure from philosophy as it has standardly been practiced throughout (Western) history – indeed, his conception is largely aimed at undermining that tradition (PI 116, 118). One must be careful to distinguish Wittgenstein’s uses of “philosophy” or “philosophers”, which sometimes are used to target the activity or people he is challenging (PI 11, 38, 52, 81, 116, 131), while at other times are used to articulate his radical new approach and the people who follow it (PI 108, 109, 119, 121, 123-128, 133). In each case, context makes clear which Wittgenstein has in mind.

⁵ Compare Floyd (1991: 144): “The profundity and impressiveness of philosophy retreats from purported answers to the nature and character of the questions themselves.”

problems is, “demonstrated by examples” (*ibid*), and thus is most adequately displayed by working through a variety of cases. (Not unlike how one might learn the meaning of a word by being shown examples of its application, rather than a strict general definition or rule (PI 71).) Let us bear this in mind as I proceed with a broad outline of his conception of philosophy – in the end it will need to be clarified and substantiated with examples. In other words, this outline is at best a heuristic; the real proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Thus far we have a metaphorical description of Wittgenstein's later, therapeutic conception of philosophy. But what is meant here by “therapy” or “diagnosis”? In what sense is a philosophical question “like an illness”? Indeed, these metaphorical characterizations deserve unpacking. It is worth emphasizing that, on my reading, Wittgenstein's characterization of his philosophy as “therapeutic” is best seen as an *analogy* or *metaphor*, which is not by any means intended to undermine its importance. (C.f., CV 1: “A good simile refreshes the intellect.”) According to Wittgenstein, “The philosopher treats a question *like* an illness” (PI 255, emphasis added); “there are indeed methods, different therapies, *as it were*” (PI 133, emphasis added). Given that this is an analogy, one should not haphazardly import features of ‘illness’ or ‘therapy’ in, say, the medical sense into Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. (It's a truism about analogy that when ‘A is *like* B’, it does not follow that *all features of B are also features of A* – reading is like riding a bike (once you learn, it's easy to pick back up), but reading doesn't thereby require pedaling, wearing a helmet, or shifting gears).

What follows is my own unpacking of what exactly is intended by ‘therapy’ and ‘illness’ in the context of the PI and Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a whole. Differences between Wittgenstein's philosophical methods and medical practices should be clear enough throughout the discussion. The most crucial analogy is simply this: just as a doctor aims to study the sources of the pain in your leg in order to relieve it, likewise Wittgenstein studies the sources of philosophical questions in order to relieve them and make them go away. A crucial disanalogy is this: whereas a

doctor may require some 'theory' or other in order to properly diagnose the pain in your leg or administer physical therapy, Wittgenstein intends to proceed by example alone – and thus (by his own lights) does not depend on some theory or other (say, a theory of 'meaning' or of 'language').

That said: both a doctor and Wittgenstein might rely on standard heuristics, techniques, and a general sense of how certain kinds of problems arise – not to mention a sensitivity to the particular facts about the relevant “patient” or participant in therapy. Below I explain some of Wittgenstein's heuristics, techniques, and his general sense of how *philosophical* problems arise, which, again, will very clearly differ from those relied on in standard medical practice (e.g., doctors don't look to details about *language* to find the sources of leg-pain).

3. Diagnostics

It will help to begin by attending to diagnostics, which will reveal in broad outline the problematic nature of philosophical questions (akin to illnesses) and the methods one might use to counteract them (akin to therapies).⁶ According to Wittgenstein, the major source of philosophical questions

⁶ The distinction here, though not a sharp one, is easily overlooked and leads to a common misconception about Wittgenstein's understanding of “therapy”. For instance, Maddy (2014) characterizes Wittgenstein's response to confusion about rule-following as follows: “the troubled philosopher is confused about rule-following because he insists on the priority of sense; he's cured when attention to our ordinary rule-following practices reveals that they adequately support attributions of correctness and incorrectness entirely on their own [...] This would be the end of the story; the troubled philosopher is free of his perplexities” (Maddy, 2014: 108). This makes it seem as if a philosophical problem is answered *merely* by insisting on the adequacy of our ordinary practices (roughly: “You *think* the ordinary descriptions are not enough to answer the question – but they are!”). On my reading, one first needs to diagnose the source of the problem in order to know what sorts of descriptions will serve as the relevant “therapy” (e.g., what in the first place made the so-called “priority of sense” seem like a requirement for rule-following? – though we will find in Chapter 2 that Wittgenstein's own diagnosis of his interlocutor in the PI is more nuanced). The importance of diagnosis (“present [a problem] as it arises with most power”) is beautifully expressed by Wittgenstein in AWL: “You must not try to avoid a philosophical problem by appealing to common sense; instead, present it as it arises with most power. You must allow yourself to be dragged into the mire, and get out of it. Philosophy can be said to consist of three activities: to see the commonsense answer, to get yourself so deeply into the problem that the commonsense answer is unbearable, and to get from that situation back to the commonsense answer. But the commonsense answer in itself is no solution; everyone knows it. One must not in philosophy attempt to short-circuit problems” (AWL 108-9). Maddy, in other words, characterizes philosophical therapy as an attempt to “short-circuit” problems about rule-following, that is, by shifting immediately to descriptions of rule-following practices (as “commonsense answers”) without proper attention to the sources of the problems themselves.

and problems is to be found in misunderstandings about the uses of words, “problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language” (PI 111). The main source of such misunderstandings is that we lack a proper overview (*übersicht*) of the use of our words.

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* (*nicht übersehen*) of the use of our words. – Our grammar is deficient in surveyability (*Übersichtlichkeit*). A surveyable representation (*Die übersichtlichkeit Darstellung*) produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links. (PI 122)

Language itself is thus partly responsible for a variety of these misunderstandings (“Our grammar is deficient in surveyability”). The problems, “are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language” (PI 111), stemming from “superstition[s] produced by grammatical illusions” (PI 110). Such misunderstandings or superstitions are often expressed by pre-philosophical “pictures” taking hold of us.

A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably. (PI 115)

Indeed, the most central picture of language and meaning critically addressed in the PI is the so-called “Augustinian picture” – that the meaning of a word is the object for which it stands (PI 1).⁷ It is important to note that Augustine's quote was selected by Wittgenstein to open the PI for at least two reasons: (1) if someone as brilliant as Augustine was gripped by such a picture of language, that picture must be quite powerful, seductive, and important,⁸ and (2) since Augustine comes from a different historical epoch, this reveals the perennial significance of such a picture, which rears its head wherever we find language, rather than resting completely on some particular individual's

⁷ The importance of Wittgenstein's discussion of “the Augustinian picture” for the philosophy of mathematics is highlighted by Gerrard (1991).

⁸ See Monk (1990: 478): “[H]e told Malcolm that he used the quotation from Augustine to begin the *Investigations* because: ‘the conception must be important if so great a mind held it.’”

contingent thoughts about language.⁹ This latter point, about the perennial significance and sources of the problems Wittgenstein grapples with, is made explicit in a passage from CV:

People say again and again that philosophy doesn't really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But the people who say this don't understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions. As long as there continues to be a verb 'to be' that looks as if it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink', as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible', as long as we continue to talk of a river of time, of an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep stumbling over the same puzzling difficulties and find themselves staring at something which no explanation seems capable of clearing up.
(CV 15)

(This also makes clear that Wittgenstein isn't pinning philosophical problems on, say, German, Greek, Latin, or English, but on language quite generally.) In short then, and in broad strokes, misunderstandings about language and the seductive pictures leading to them are the major sources of philosophical problems. A proper diagnostic procedure (or, investigation, we might say) will have to attend to some particular question or problem and see which misunderstandings of language have led to it.

But what is it in language that leads to the problems of philosophy? So far, the answer is that the uses of our words and the rules for such usage (which Wittgenstein sometimes calls "grammar" as a term of art¹⁰) are not easily surveyable. Putting philosophy aside for a moment, we can grant Wittgenstein this much at least: there is no point in life at which one's language is simply and definitively grasped; it requires constant work and exploration, not to mention regular updating as language changes and expands (c.f., PI 18, 79, & 354).¹¹ Further, it is a commonplace that questions

⁹ See Baker & Hacker (2005: 49-50): "For, as he remarked [...], this conception (*Auffassung*) is significant for us precisely because it belongs to a naturally clear-thinking person, temporarily far removed from us, who does not belong to our cultural milieu."

¹⁰ See especially PI 496-7.

¹¹ Notwithstanding technical senses of "grasping a language" on which, say, a language is grasped when the basic principles of grammar have been sufficiently internalized. The sense intended here is the sense according to which, e.g., Virginia Woolf had a more profound grasp of the English language than, say, George W. Bush.

(outside philosophy) do sometimes arise from confusions about the meanings of words. To slightly modify an example offered by Wittgenstein, a child might ask in great astonishment, “How can you possibly *sew* a dress?”. The source of the child’s question is a confused picture: the child is supposing that “a dress [is] produced by sewing alone, by sewing one thread on to another” (PI 195). Their astonishment is diminished by showing them that this is not how “sewing a dress” is to be understood – fabrics are produced via weaving or other means and then used as material for sewing with needle and thread. The child might still like to see how one sews a dress, but their curiosity would then lack the sense of mystery and astonishment that it previously had; the sense that sewing a dress amounted to doing something either spectacular or impossible.¹²

Astonishment at how one can possibly name an object, or a sensation, or attend to the shape of a color, or *mean* something with their words is, for Wittgenstein, not unlike the astonishment of the child in this example – astonishment which is dissolved by careful attention to the actual uses of our words, e.g., ‘name’ (PI 27ff), ‘sensation’ (PI 244ff), ‘attend’ (PI 33ff), ‘saying and *meaning* something’ (PI 507ff), and so on. That is, “here as in countless similar cases, we must look at what really happens *in detail*, as it were from close up” (PI 51). The point is nicely summarized in Wittgenstein’s rich metaphor of PI 52: “If I am inclined to suppose that a mouse comes into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, it’s a good idea to examine those rags very closely to see how a mouse could have hidden in them, how it could have got there, and so on.” Perplexity is thus resolved via careful examination of details, not (as is often thought by philosophers) via a general theory of the relevant concepts: “[W]hat it is in philosophy that resists such an examination of details, we have yet to come to understand” (*ibid*).

¹² Compare also Wittgenstein’s example of the boy, “who racked his brains over the question whether the verb “to sleep” ... meant something active or passive”, when having to, “say whether the verbs in certain sentences were in the active or passive voice” (PI 47). These analogies will be especially relevant to my discussion of mathematical determination in Chapter 2.

Consider another analogy from Wittgenstein, which illustrates a further sense in which language itself can cause misunderstandings. Someone might be shown a picture of a line sitting next to a circle (e.g., / O) and told, “This line cuts the circle at imaginary points”. Wittgenstein is reported to have said that this example, “has a certain charm, now only for schoolboys and not for those whose whole work is mathematical” (LFM 16). The sense of mystery or perplexity (the “charm”) is dissolved when one points out that the use of “cut” here departs from a common usage of “cut”: it is a matter of applying the equation of the circle over the domain of complex numbers, not a matter of the line “going through” the circle in the visual sense of cutting. The charm (or perplexity or astonishment) is a result of mixing these uses together, an example of what Wittgenstein refers to as “a crossing of different pictures” (PI 191). In the LFM, he provides the following diagnosis, noting that this is a “kind of misunderstanding” (albeit not of a particularly important or threatening sort):

“Cut” has the ordinary meaning: \emptyset [by contrast with / O]. But we prove that a line always cuts a circle – even when it doesn’t. Here we use the word “cut” in a way it was not used before. We call both “cutting” – and add a certain clause: “cutting in imaginary points, as well as real points”. Such a clause *stresses a likeness*. – This is an example of the assimilation to each other of two expressions.

(LFM 16)

In the PI, we see that Wittgenstein took this sort of phenomenon – viz., confusions stemming from the assimilation of two apparently uniform expressions – to be one of the general sources of philosophical confusion.

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them in speech, or see them written or in print. For their *use* is not that obvious. Especially when we are doing philosophy. (PI 11)

Our inquiry is therefore a grammatical one. And this inquiry sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, brought about, among other things, by certain analogies between forms of expression in different regions of our language. (PI 90)

A simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance which disquiets us. (PI 112)¹³

So, a regular source of confusion in philosophy stems from the uniform appearances of certain words and expressions which nonetheless have importantly different uses (e.g., the different uses of 'cutting' mixed together lead to perplexity). Despite differences in usage, the uniform appearance of words encourages us to assimilate expressions in a way which leads to misbegotten pictures, problems, and questions (e.g., "how can one possibly *sew* a dress?"; "how can *this line* really be cutting *this circle*? → [/ O]"). Although this is just one respect in which language can encourage the confused questions of philosophers, we will find later that this sort of diagnosis is fundamental to Wittgenstein's engagement with philosophical ideas regarding mathematical reality, determination, and infinity.¹⁴ More generally speaking, philosophical problems arise from a lack of clarity about, and departure from, the ordinary uses of words: "philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*" (PI 38).

4. Therapy

With some of the major sources of philosophical confusion to hand, it is not difficult to understand Wittgenstein's proposed antidote: the careful and persistent description of the uses of words.¹⁵ If

¹³ Likewise, in a section of BT titled, "Philosophy Points Out the Misleading Analogies in the Use of our Language", Wittgenstein is also quite explicit that philosophical mistakes arise from taking up an analogy without recognizing that one has done so: "If I rectify a philosophical mistake and say that this is the way it has always been conceived, but this is not the way it is, I must always point out an analogy according to which one had been thinking, but which one did not recognize as an analogy. [...] The effect of a false analogy accepted into language: it means a constant battle and uneasiness (a constant irritant, as it were). [...] What the other person acknowledges is the analogy I'm presenting to him as the source of his thought" (BT 302-303).

¹⁴ In Chapter 2, we will find that G.H. Hardy incautiously assimilates mathematical to empirical propositions, in Chapter 3 that Wittgenstein's interlocutor assimilates mathematical and empirical senses of 'determination', and in Chapter 4 that seductive pictures of 'infinity' arise from crossing the uses of words (e.g., 'big', 'series', 'collection', etc.) across mathematical and non-mathematical contexts.

¹⁵ Pears (1988) likewise emphasizes the importance of description, by contrast with theory, in Wittgenstein's later conception of philosophy: "There is really no need to settle precisely how far Wittgenstein pushes his new conception of philosophy. The important thing is that he is moving it away from theorizing and towards plain description of the phenomenon of language. The description is intended to make us see how our own linguistic devices work, simply by

philosophical questions and problems largely arise from unnoticed features of language, many of which come from assimilating expressions with significantly different uses, then we can undermine questions arising from such hasty assimilations by attending to the uses of words and describing their differences in detail. No wonder then that we find such recommendations again and again throughout the PI. The list below is hardly exhaustive.

It disperses the fog if we study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of use in which one can clearly survey the purpose and functioning of the words. (PI 5)

Now what do the words of this language *signify*? – How is what they signify supposed to come out other than in the kind of use they have? (PI 10)

This odd conception springs from a tendency to sublimate the logic of our language – as one might put it. The proper answer to it is: we call *very different* things “names”; the word “name” serves to characterize many different variously related kinds of use of a word – but the kind of use that the word “this” has is not among them. (PI 38)

It is important to note that it is a solecism to use the word “meaning” to signify the thing that ‘corresponds’ to the word. (PI 40)

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning” – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (PI 43)

The question “Is what you see composite?” makes good sense if it is already established what kind of compositeness – that is, which particular use of this word – is in question. (PI 47)

[I]f the words “language”, “experience”, “world” have a use it must be as humble a one as that of the words “table”, “lamp”, “door”. (PI 97)

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition/sentence”, “name” – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? – What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (PI 116)

Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. (PI 124)

putting them in their place in our lives without using any technical terms. If we object, that nothing so familiar or banal can possibly yield philosophical understanding, he will reply that, on the contrary, it gives us all the insight that we need, and that the attempt to go beyond it and theorize can only produce misunderstanding. We think that we need nourishment when what we really need is clear water” (Pears, 1988: 218-19).

However, it is extremely important to understand that by describing use and making the workings of language surveyable, Wittgenstein is not proposing that we offer a general theory or a technical apparatus in hopes of revealing the hidden essence of language once and for all (PI 91-2). This is one of many mistakes he attributes to his earlier self in the TLP, connected with the attempt found there to reveal, once and for all, the general form of the proposition (see, e.g., TLP 4.5 & 6; by contrast with PI 23, 97, 108, 114, & 134-7). Instead, in order to counteract philosophical questions and problems, we are to *describe* (rather than theorize) the generally accepted uses of words – not a newfound technical apparatus designed by philosophers in hopes of displaying the (hidden) workings of language once and for all.

But now it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our linguistic expressions, and so a single completely analyzed form of every expression. That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, still unanalyzed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. As if, when this is done, the expression is completely clarified and our task accomplished.

It may also be put like this: we eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were aiming at a particular state, a state of complete exactness, and as if this were the real goal of our investigation. (PI 91)

Here it is difficult to keep our heads above water, as it were, to see that we must stick to matters of everyday thought, and not to get on the wrong track where it seems that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which again we are quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal. We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers. (PI 106)

Wittgenstein's insistence on sticking to "matters of everyday thought" or speaking "the language of every day" (PI 120) is thus not a mere stylistic choice: it is directly connected with his diagnosis of the major pitfalls in philosophy. For instance, an attempt to uncover the general form of the proposition (via mathematical logic or other technical means) is to do the very thing he thought was a major source of confusion, namely, to assimilate a wide range of uses of the word 'proposition' and thereby overlook their fundamental differences, treating them as if they had the very same

function, purpose, or general significance wherever they are to be found (PI 136). One must counteract the impulse to assimilate by articulating different uses of the word ‘proposition’, however much the uniform appearance of the word might tempt us to do otherwise. (We will return to this point about ‘propositions’ in Chapter 2, Section 4.)

The general lesson here is most famously illustrated in Wittgenstein’s discussion of “games”, the major upshot of which is that uses of the word ‘game’ reveal, “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and the small” (PI 66), which Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances” (PI 67) – *not* a rigidly bounded essence that is the same, always and everywhere, in all the things we call “games” (PI 68).¹⁶ We undermine the inclination to think otherwise by enumerating and describing these myriad uses in detail – as is beautifully, albeit partially, done in PI 66. Though, to be clear, Wittgenstein was never aiming at *complete* descriptions of language-use for their own sake (PPF 202; Z 452 & 465) – but only to describe things in enough detail so that certain philosophical problems go away. How much detail will suffice is not something that can be decided in advance, as it crucially depends on the relevant question, the complexity of language surrounding it, as well as the subject of (i.e., participant in) therapy. This is in part why Wittgenstein expresses hope in the Preface of the PI that his work will, “stimulate someone to thoughts of his own”: the method he articulates via examples would have to be applied by the reader in various ways depending on the questions, problems, or pictures that grip them. Hence, if the reader happens to be gripped by a question, problem, or picture which is *not* addressed by Wittgenstein, this is not *ipso facto* an objection to his work, but something to be taken up by that reader.

¹⁶ As Floyd (2021) puts it, ““Family resemblance” characterizes the generality of certain concepts. A single property, a fixed-for-all-cases criterion, an explicit set of grammatical rules – these are not required. A concept may hold together – like a family – with a variegated, evolving series of properties” (Floyd, 2021: 51).

There is one major caveat to Wittgenstein's insistence on describing the uses of ordinary language. Throughout his investigations, he makes regular use of what he famously calls "language-games", an expression which sometimes refers to (i) parts of actual language, sometimes to (ii) the whole of language as it is actually used, sometimes quite literally to (iii) "games" used, say, to teach someone the uses of words, but at other times to (iv) highly simplified fictional uses of language that can be easily described (PI 7).¹⁷ It is this last sense, (iv), of "language game" that needs to be squared up with his insistence on the careful description of *actual* ordinary language. If we are concerned with actual language, why the turn to fiction? Wittgenstein makes clear that his highly simplified language-games are to be understood (especially when they are fictional) as objects of comparison, aimed at revealing aspects of *actual* use that might otherwise be overlooked.

Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language – as it were, first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. Rather, the language-games stand there as *objects of comparison* which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language. (PI 130)

For instance, the example of the shopkeeper (PI 1) displays a highly simplified use of words in which their functioning is crystal clear. Despite the fact that *our* use of the words 'five', 'red', and 'apples' will be more complicated than what we see in this simplified and artificial example,¹⁸ it nonetheless highlights the fact that, however much more complicated some of our uses might be,

¹⁷ Given Wittgenstein's various uses of "language game", I find the following remark by Floyd (1991) somewhat misleading: "structure is to be exhibited and elicited by "comparing" our uses of language to games with fixed rules (the simplified "language games" of, e.g., *Philosophical Investigations*). But this indicates that for Wittgenstein our language is not itself a game with fixed rules; that is, our language is not itself a "language game"" (Floyd 1991: 147).

¹⁸ For instance, in such circumstances one does not ordinarily, "look[] up the word "red" in a chart and find[] a color sample next to it" (PI 1). Wittgenstein acknowledges this in PI 53: "We don't usually carry out the order "Bring me a red flower" by looking up the color red in a color chart and then bringing a flower of the color that we find in the chart". But he had good reasons to include this detail, as it sets up for discussions about understanding the meaning of color-words (and their relation to memory, mental images, samples, tools, and charts) later on (e.g., PI 51ff). Those discussions in turn set up for various considerations about what it means to follow a rule (see especially PI 54).

we will best understand them by seeing how their use plays out in the relevant context.¹⁹ Likewise, with Wittgenstein's slab-game (PI 2). There are no deep mysteries about meaning when we display the activity of the builders. However much more complicated our uses of 'slab' or 'brick' might be, those complications and the differences with the simple game offered in PI 2 are to be displayed in the uses of the relevant terms and in their relevant contexts. Thus, by drawing out similarities and differences with the simplified, fictional language-games Wittgenstein offers us, we become more sensitive to the uses of our words – allowing us to see connections and contrasts where they might have otherwise been overlooked (PI 122 & 144). It is thus quite apt to consider the simple games as therapeutic devices, helping attune us to the nitty gritty details of use as it is displayed in our life's practices; counteracting one's natural impulses to do otherwise.

There is a somewhat deeper point, however, which is revealed by the simple language-games that Wittgenstein offers up as objects of comparison. These are situations in which traditional puzzles about meaning do not arise – notwithstanding philosophers who are especially resistant, and thus whose questions are addressed in turn (PI 2-38ff) (more on this in a moment). There is no question – “But what is the meaning of the word “five”?” – in the shopkeeper example, because we can see completely how the word “five” is being used.²⁰ (Regarding the specific question, “What

¹⁹ This is at the heart of the long and detailed series of language-games offered in the BrB – which, much like in the PI, are successively augmented, leaving us to wonder at what point some grand, hidden magic is supposed to take place that creates problems regarding the essence of meaning. As I will say in the next paragraph, if descriptions of the workings of language (i.e., its myriad language-games) dissolve the alleged problems in simpler cases, then this shows what we should aspire to in more complicated cases (see again PI 122). This is quite at odds with the philosophical tradition of clarifying problems by offering general theories, definitions, or accounts of “meaning” (PI 118). Wittgenstein aims to dissolve philosophical perplexity by *describing* language, not by *theorizing* it.

²⁰ “No such thing was in question here, only how the word “five” is used” (PI 1). Kripke aptly notes the relevance of PI 1 to the philosophy of mathematics: “Many philosophers of mathematics – in agreement with the Augustinian conception of ‘object and name’ – ask such questions as, “What entities (‘numbers’) are denoted by numerals? What relations among these entities (‘facts’) correspond to numerical statements?” [...] As against such a ‘Platonist’ conception of the problem, Wittgenstein asks that we discard any *a priori* conceptions and *look* (“Don’t think, look!”) at the circumstances under which numerical assertions are actually uttered, and at what roles such assertions play in our lives” (Kripke, 1982: 75). For this reason, among others, I find Baker & Hacker’s (2005) remark on the PI’s Preface somewhat misleading: “Of the subjects W. mentions here, it is noteworthy that the foundations of mathematics is *not* discussed” (Baker & Hacker, 2005: 33). Especially, if, as Maddy (2014) emphasizes, “the material on logic [in the RFM], like the

does 'five' signify?"), compare PI 10: "Now what do the words of this language *signify*? – How is what they signify supposed to come out other than in the kind of use they have?"). There is no question of how the builder knows that 'slab' refers to *this*, since his knowledge of meaning is adequately displayed in the activity of building as it is described in the example: "Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain" (PI 126). If puzzles arise regarding the meanings of words in more complicated regions of our actual language, then the simple games show us what we lack, namely, "*an overview* of the use of our words" (PI 122), and thus what is needed to counteract such puzzles. We can only improve the surveyability of language by describing its actual workings, drawing comparisons between different regions of discourse (as well as any fictional constructions that might aid in illustration), with careful attention to the crucial differences that might otherwise be overlooked due to the uniform appearance of certain words. Such an activity is "therapeutic" to the extent that it counteracts the force of philosophical perplexity: "Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem" (PI 133). It does not aim at concocting a theory of 'meaning' or 'language', since it relies only on ordinary descriptions of word-usage, whether actual or fictional (PI 69, 75, 109).

This, I take it, is Wittgenstein's intention at least. I am not assuming that such an upshot is self-evident from the simple language-games taken on their own, especially on one's first reading of these particular texts or before reading the entire book. If one feels resistance to the therapeutic trajectory of Wittgenstein's language-games (which is not uncommon), this is something to be further explored. Further exploration will likely require careful attention to a range of relevant examples, not to mention a more direct engagement with the questions, problems, or pictures that grip the reader his or herself. As I mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein insists that his method is

private language argument, is intended to grow out of the rule-following discussion" (Maddy, 2014: 74). Though perhaps this is just a matter of what Baker & Hacker mean by "the foundations of mathematics".

demonstrated by examples, which will need to be worked through in detail (PI 133). How much detail? That will, again, largely depend upon the reader herself.²¹

(The open-ended character of Wittgenstein's therapeutic methods creates a special problem for exegesis: the reader might feel disappointed by the specific examples presented, or feel that the problems for them have not gone away as promised. *I do not promise to make the problems go away for you* – my aim is only to explain Wittgenstein's own application of his therapeutic methods to a selection of topics in the philosophy of mathematics. In other words, I only intend to *present* and *clarify* the workings of Wittgenstein's methods in certain particular cases; I am not thereby *performing* philosophical therapy on the reader – which is something they would have to do on their own time. As Wittgenstein puts it in CV, “Working in philosophy ... is really more a working on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them.)” (CV 16). It will be helpful to keep in mind the personal and open-ended character of Wittgenstein's later conception of philosophy throughout the remaining essays.)

5. Did Wittgenstein give up on “serious philosophy”?

There is no doubt that Wittgenstein's therapeutic conception is quite antithetical to certain widespread and traditional ways of doing philosophy – which typically involve either treating some perennial philosophical question as innocent and answering it directly by way of an account, definition, or theory, or as guilty (e.g., unanswerable or confused) and showing that this is so via

²¹ Compare, “The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. ... [A] method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off” (PI 133). At what point the examples can be broken off is presumably not decidable *a priori*, but in response to the reader's own specific needs throughout their own investigations. (Again, the analogy with medical therapy is apt in this respect: a doctor likewise requires sensitivity to details about their patient when administering treatments or therapies.)

some general theory of language or cognition (and their necessary limits).²² In his own words, “it seems only to destroy everything interesting”, to which he famously retorts, “But what we are destroying are only houses of cards, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stood” (PI 118). However, we ought not to conclude with Russell that

The later Wittgenstein [...] seems to have grown tired of serious thinking and to have invented a doctrine which would make such an activity unnecessary.
(Russell, 1959: 216-217)

On the contrary: Wittgenstein has offered up a radically new way of doing philosophy which requires a tireless and endless struggle against confusions stemming from the misinterpretation of language.²³ If “serious thinking” is simply equated with “engaging in the traditional game of proposing philosophical accounts, refuting them with counterexamples, offering new accounts to get around said counterexamples, and so on”, then indeed Wittgenstein grew tired of this and proposed a new way of doing things which would make it unnecessary. But that is obviously a narrow conception of “serious thinking”.²⁴ Likewise, we should be careful with the common sentiment that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is completely “negative”, that there is nothing “positive” in his new approach to things. Indeed, it is largely aimed at clearing, counteracting, and taking down

²² A paradigm of the former approach is Socrates; a paradigm of the latter Kant – though the latter tradition (broadly construed) would also include early Wittgenstein of the TLP as well as, e.g., A.J. Ayer’s (1952) *Language, Truth & Logic*. That Wittgenstein’s invocation of language-games and forms of life is not intended to be the forefront of a new branch of theory is emphasized in Stern’s (2004) characterization of the “quietist” position: “Wittgenstein’s invocation of forms of life is not the beginning of a positive theory of practice [...] but rather is meant to help his readers get over their addiction to theorizing about mind and world, language and reality” (Stern, 2004: 169).

²³ As McDowell (2009) nicely puts it (though I will personally refrain from using the label ‘quietism’, in part because of the misleading connotations and associations that McDowell himself notes): “Wittgensteinian quietism is absolutely not a recommendation of a kind of idleness, a practice of leaving necessary tasks to others, out of some distaste [...] for the sorts of activity that go into performing them. Quietism does indeed urge us not to engage in certain supposed tasks, but precisely because it requires us to work at showing that they are not necessary. And it is indeed work” (McDowell, 2009: 371-2). The “radical” nature of Wittgenstein’s later conception of philosophy (especially as it contrasts with more common practices in the philosophy of mathematics) is similarly emphasized by Chihara (1982: 105) and Monk (2007: 274).

²⁴ Compare Monk (1990: 308): “Wittgenstein’s abandonment of theory was not, as Russell thought, a rejection of serious thinking, of the attempt to understand, but the adoption of a different notion of what it is to understand.”

confused forms of thought. But it is not without insights, e.g., into the sources of philosophical perplexity, or into the actual workings of our language (PI 109). If by “positive” we mean “revealing some general theory about a phenomenon of interest”, then this is just as narrow a conception of “positive” as Russell’s conception of “serious thinking” above. It would be unfair to measure the seriousness or value of Wittgenstein’s new conception by the standards of the very intellectual traditions he is persistently acting against and thereby putting into question.²⁵

However, a related suspicion about Wittgenstein’s therapeutic conception is perfectly natural and worth holding onto. Namely: “Is this (as Russell describes it) really just a *doctrine* – a dogmatic insistence on a largely destructive way of doing philosophy?”. If one reads Wittgenstein’s remarks about his new methods and swallows them down uncritically, then this is certainly cause for suspicion. One should instead *take up* the method Wittgenstein offers, as it is repeatedly articulated with his rich series of examples, and adjudicate its value accordingly. The issue here thus cannot be decided *a priori* – we need to apply Wittgenstein’s methods and see where they take us, whether with their help, “Problems are [really] solved” (PI 133).²⁶ Enough, then, with this schematic picture of Wittgenstein’s later thought. Let’s see what fruit it might bear in understanding Wittgenstein’s remarks on mathematical reality, determination, and infinity.²⁷

²⁵ Those who were personally acquainted with Wittgenstein have emphasized this fact about his later work, against those who wish (often with charitable intentions, e.g., to save it from Russell’s objection) to assimilate it with said traditions. See for instance Maurice Drury’s remark about “well-meaning commentators” who “make it appear that his writings were now easily assimilable into the very intellectual milieu they were largely a warning against” (Rhees, 1984: 101). See also Monk (2007: 270).

²⁶ I thus recommend we approach Wittgenstein’s therapeutic methods in the spirit of Aristotle’s wonderful remark at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*: “But while these sorts of considerations also carry a certain conviction, the truth in practical matters must be discerned from the facts of our life [...] if it clashes, we should suppose it mere words” (Aristotle 2014: X, 7). Likewise, Wittgenstein’s methods should neither be accepted nor discarded *a priori*.

²⁷ As I mentioned earlier, there is much more to say about Wittgenstein’s therapeutic conception of philosophy than can be offered here. A more comprehensive discussion would include the following topics (among others): (i) Wittgenstein’s insistence that philosophical problems are not to be addressed with empirical considerations or mathematical discoveries, (ii) his emphasis that his examples and explorations are aimed at changing our ways of *seeing* things, (iii) that, according to him, he relies only on details that we would all concede to, (iv) that his remarks are really just “reminders” of things with which we’ve long been familiar, or (v) the connection, noted by scholars, between Wittgenstein’s