

Truth, Nonsense, and the Meaningfulness of Ostensive Gestures

A central idea that *seemingly* runs through much of Wittgenstein's later writings, e.g., the *Big Typescript*, the *Blue and Brown Books*, and *Philosophical Investigations [PI]*, is the following:

L: Public language is a logical prerequisite for an ostensive gesture to be meaningful. Public language is a *logical* prerequisite in the sense that it is not merely a contingent, causal prerequisite.¹ I use *meaningful* in L in a purposely ambiguous way. It may mean successful in conveying the meaning of a word, establishing the meaning of a new word, or successful in concentrating one's attention on a particular aspect of something, e.g., the shape of an object versus its size, color, number, etc. The different senses of *meaningful* are important since what will be at issue for us is not the giving of an ostensive definition/explanation² to another person, or even the act of naming, but simply the concentration of one's attention on a particular aspect of an object. In what follows, we will consider the reasons found in *PI* supporting that reading of L. To that end, we will examine whether, given those reasons, the negation of L is best seen as false or nonsense. This presents the problem that if the negation of L is nonsense, then presumably L is nonsense as well.

¹ However, as we will see shortly, the sense in which it is a prerequisite is complicated by the question of whether the negation L is best thought of as being false or, instead, nonsense.

² From here out I will use "ostensive definition," but we should note that one of the many problems with Anscombe's translation of *PI*, is her translation of both "hinweisende Erklärung" and "hinweisende Definition" as "ostensive definition," where the former is more literally read as "ostensive explanation" and the latter as "ostensive definition." See, e.g., §§27 and 28, Wittgenstein, L. (1998) *Philosophical Investigations*. Anscombe, G.E.M. (trans.). Reissued German-English Edition. Blackwell Publishers. And as one can see from Wittgenstein's discussion, there are times when he uses "hinweisende Erklärung" to mean "ostensive explanation" as opposed to actually ostensively defining a word, e.g., §31. And sometimes he uses them together almost interchangeably, e.g., the last two lines of §28. It is perhaps only important as an explanation is more open than definition in a somewhat similar way as the German word for "game," "das Spiel," is more open than the English word, since "das Spiel" can also mean the more open concept of playing.

Before going any further here, I want to note that when writing about Wittgenstein, and particularly *PI*, it is important to be clear about one's interpretative strategy. I generally plan to follow David G. Stern's reading of *PI*.³ A key part of Stern's reading is to treat *PI* as a dialogue of multiple voices, not just two, in which Wittgenstein, as author, is someone struggling to see what is wrong with certain philosophical pictures, while being tempted to offer alternative pictures, all the while trying to remind himself, and us, of the difficulties that result from doing just that. In the process, Wittgenstein seeks to understand the ways we are tempted to produce robust, philosophical theses.⁴ A central aim of this paper is to highlight some of the ways in which we are tempted to offer robust philosophical theses such as L, and the problems that thereby ensue.⁵

While one of the concerns of the early sections of *PI* is the role of ostensive definition and naming, the reasoning there also applies to the idea of concentrating one's attention on a particular aspect of an object, i.e., a kind of ostensive gesture without pointing. Such an "inner" ostensive gesture might be thought of as a kind of first move toward naming. The question regarding L that we will address is whether a person without a public language could concentrate her attention on a particular aspect of an object, e.g., its color instead of its shape, not in order to name it, but just so. I will refer to the ability to speak a public language as a person's belonging to a linguistic context.⁶

³ That I am reading Wittgenstein along Sternian lines will not become apparent until the last part of the paper.

⁴ See, e.g., Stern, D.G. (2004) *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: an introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., particularly pp21-55, and Stern, D.G. (2006) "How Many Wittgensteins?" in Pichler, A. and S. Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, pp. 205–229, Frankfurt a.M.: ontos verlag 2006.

⁵ There are, of course, a number of complex, difficult interpretive issues here that cannot be addressed due to space, nor can my interpretive strategy be defended here.

⁶ We will focus solely on the visual modality, but I take it that the conclusions we come to for this modality will apply to the others, including "inner" sensations such as pain, itching, etc.

The importance of L surfaces in what may at first be a surprising number of places in not only Wittgenstein's work but philosophy more generally. We find it in Wittgenstein's discussion of names and the idea that linguistic meaning is solely a matter of reference. It appears in Wittgenstein's discussion of a necessarily private language—on some interpretations it is the central reason that the private ostensive definition in PI §258 fails.⁷ L plays a central role in Wittgenstein's discussion of the arbitrariness of grammar, also called the autonomy of language, a central theme of which is that language, as a kind of conceptual scheme, is not accountable to reality in regard to its correctness. The autonomy of language has implications for, *inter alia*, natural kinds and the idea that essences are discoverable by science, and theories of meaning that ground meaning in something non-linguistic.

Aspects of L play a role in the work of Quine and Putnam, particularly in Quine's discussion of ontological relativity and radical translation, and Putnam's model-theoretic argument and his arguments for conceptual relativity.⁸ Lastly, L is central to discussions

⁷ See, e.g., Stern 2004, and Candlish, S. and G. Wrisley. (2008) "Private Language," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. E. N. Zalta(ed). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/private-language/>.

⁸ Concerning ontological relativity, the reference of a statement, e.g., "Gavagai!" cannot be determined absolutely, since the behavior of the speakers is consistent with any number of manuals of translation. The ontology, the correct translation, is relative to a translation manual: "To say that 'gavagai' denotes rabbits is to opt for a manual of translation in which 'gavagai' is translated as 'rabbit', instead of opting for any of the alternative manuals" (Quine, W. V. O. (1990) "Three Indeterminacies." In *Perspectives on Quine*. R.B. Barrett and R.F. Gibson (eds). Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, Inc. 1-16. P6). Concerning radical translation, when translating one language into another—whether Native into English, or French into English—alternative, inconsistent translation manuals are consistent with all of the behavioral (including verbal) dispositions of speakers. Therefore, according to Quine, there is no determinate fact of the matter concerning sentence meaning. With both ontological relativity and radical translation, it is the ambiguity of the behavior and its consistency with alternative determinations of reference and translations that is central—the same kind of ambiguity at issue in L and Wittgenstein's discussion of ostensive definitions. With Quine, of course, there is the further step that even with a language in place, and thus the satisfaction of L, reference and meaning are not determined absolutely. Though Wittgenstein would not agree with much of Quine's work, the importance of context for meaning and reference is certainly a central theme in Wittgenstein's work as well.

We can also see the central idea of L playing a central role in Putnam's discussion of what he calls the model-theoretic argument(s). The idea is that the terms of a theory/language can be mapped onto the world in indefinitely many ways—similar to the way that "rabbit" in Quine's example can refer to a rabbit or the universe minus a rabbit—and remain true, even when the theory satisfies all observational and theoretical constraints. Importantly, where Quine takes the moral to be that there is no absolute fact of the matter about reference, Putnam

involving the possibility and nature of the given, especially the possibility of its role in providing noninferential justification.⁹

L and its implications are clearly of great philosophical importance. So let's now look at the reasons given in *PI* in support of the understanding of L with which we are concerned. The key remarks are §§28-37. The issue is taken up in the private language sections; however, those sections depend on what has already taken place in the earlier sections.¹⁰ So, what do §§28-37 have to say in support of L?

Our answer to this question will depend on whether Wittgenstein is trying to show that a certain possibility isn't realized or realizable, i.e., the negation of L is *false*, or whether we take him to be showing *not that it is false, but rather nonsense*. In order to determine whether the negation of L is false or nonsense we will proceed by keeping in mind the ways in which something can be nonsense. We will then reconstruct the reasons given in favor of L and against the negation of L in *PI*—in doing so we will see if they indicate that the negation of L is false or nonsense. Though there is an important and growing literature on Wittgenstein and the nature of

takes the moral to be that metaphysical realism, the idea that the world consists of a fix-totality of mind-independent objects such that there is only one true and complete description of the world, must be rejected.

Putnam has long taken the existence of conceptual relativity to be problematic for metaphysical realism with its notion of truth as correspondence. One of Putnam's key, purported examples of conceptual relativity concerns the legitimacy of counting three individuals, x, y, z as either three objects or as seven, if we countenance mereological sums, i.e., the idea that the sum of any two objects is itself an object. Outside a linguistic context, there is no determinate answer regarding the number of objects (See, e.g., Putnam, H. [2004] *Ethics without Ontology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press). Similarly, the implication of L that will concern us is the determinacy of an ostensive gesture outside a linguistic context.

⁹ On one view, we get “noninferential justification when one is directly acquainted with a certain thought, the fact that makes it true, and the fact that is the thought corresponding to the fact. Through direct acquaintance, justification begins” (Fumerton, R. [1985] *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception*. University of Nebraska Press, p57). On this view that with which one is directly acquainted, whether it is the world or experience, is parts and properties of objects independent of language. For direct acquaintance with those parts and properties is logically separate from the direct acquaintance of a thought/proposition and correspondence between the two. If L is correct, then such direct acquaintance is problematic (But see Fales, E. [1996] *A Defense of the Given*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., for a good discussion of the nature of the given and the possibility of the “conceptual nakedness” of the given).

¹⁰ Again, see, e.g., Stern 2004, and Candlish and Wrisley 2008.

nonsense, I am going to leave it untouched here. We will be able to proceed without entering into it.¹¹

§§28-32 of *PI* contain the very dense initial moves in Wittgenstein's consideration of the nature of ostensive definitions. At the end of §28, we get the explicit statement of a key point, namely, "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case."¹² §§28-32 explore the way ostensive definitions ordinarily function. One of the main points is that they don't function independently of a linguistic context, and they thus would fail as the foundation of language and the connection between language and world. In §33 there comes the objection that a linguistic context is not necessary for understanding an ostensive definition—one just needs "to know or guess" whether the person giving the definition is pointing to the shape, size, color, etc. of the object. The immediate response is to question what such pointing consists in. If the answer is that one simply concentrates one's attention, then the counter response is to ask how such concentration is done. To begin addressing this question, Wittgenstein gives two concrete cases, the pointing and remarking about the color of a vase at one time and the pointing and remarking about its shape another. This is followed by the admission that indeed something different is done in each case. However, we are asked to consider whether when concentrating our attention on a color we always do the same thing. Here Wittgenstein gives us a number of concrete cases, two of which are, "It's turning fine, you can already see blue sky again" and

¹¹ A fuller version of this paper enters into the debate. But see, e.g., Crary, A. & R. Read. (2000) *The New Wittgenstein*, Routledge, New York.; Diamond, C. (1991) *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, particularly chapter 3; Glock, H.J. (2004) "All kinds of nonsense." In Ammereller, E. and E. Fischer (eds). *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Routledge, 221-245; Mulhall, S. (2007) *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense, and Imagination in Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 243–315, Oxford: Clarendon Press..

¹² Wittgenstein 1998, §28.

“Look what different effects these two blues have.” We do different things when looking at colors in different contexts—the same goes for looking at shapes, etc.

You attend to the shape, sometimes by tracing it, sometimes by screwing up your eyes so as not to see the colour clearly, and in many other ways. I want to say: This is the sort of thing that happens *while* one ‘directs one’s attention to this or that’. But it isn’t these things by themselves that make us say someone is attending to the shape, the colour, and so on. Just as a move in chess doesn’t consist simply in moving a piece in such-and-such a way on the board—nor yet in one’s thoughts and feelings as one makes the move: but in the circumstances that we call “playing a game of chess”, “solving a chess problem”, and so on.¹³

Let us take two of the above examples, “It’s turning fine, you can already see blue sky again.” and “Look what different effects these two blues have.” We could be doing or thinking any number of things in either case, but whatever we are doing or thinking, it won’t be sufficient to make it the case that we are concentrating our attention on the color. What does make it the case that we concentrate on the color and not the shape is the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Hence, the lines at end of §33 about the circumstances, the context, required for a move in chess to be a move in chess—it’s not what you’re thinking or feeling but the normative context of the game. If we imagined the same movement of the piece in a much different normative context, then the move might count quite differently or not be a move at all.

In §§34 and 35 the importance of context and what happens before and after the concentration of attention is reiterated, but this time in the face of the claim that the same thing always occurs when concentrating on a particular aspect of an object. Even if the same thing were to occur in each instance of concentrating on, e.g., a color, it would not be sufficient to determine that it was indeed the color that was concentrated upon. Again, it is what happens

¹³ Wittgenstein 1998, §33.

before and after the concentrating and the broader context that determines what is concentrated upon.¹⁴

Let's now consider the following case of Sara, a woman outside a linguistic context. Sara is at a river and notices a brilliantly blue rock. Can she concentrate on the color instead of the shape, etc.? Her gaze is in the direction of the rock; so we assume she has the rock in her visual field. But what is she looking at? Perhaps her subsequent, non-linguistic actions will tell us. Say Sara takes the blue rock home and puts it in a container with similarly colored objects of various sizes, textures, shapes, and materials. Can we say that it is the color that she is interested in and thus the color that she concentrates her attention on when looking over the various objects in the container. The problem, of course, is that her behavior is consistent with other interpretations. We want to say that she sees the blue, i.e., there is blue in her visual field—that *seems* undeniable. But why should we think that she is concentrating on the blue in contrast to the shape and not just on the blue object as a blue object in contrast to the non-blue surroundings? Anything that Sara does is multiply interpretable. Something that would determine it would be her *saying* that it is one or the other.¹⁵ But she has no language; so can she concentrate on the color instead of the shape?

The question is not whether we can say so from the third-person perspective, but whether there is a determinate object of her attention at all. We can see the difficulty even clearer if we consider the following. As speakers of English, we want to say that she is surrounded by various

¹⁴ There is an important question here about how such remarks should be construed. That is, it is tempting to read Wittgenstein as trying to tell us what the true necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning, reference, etc., are. The difficulty is trying to read such remarks in a philosophically “deflated” way or only as moves in a dialogue meant to draw us in and get us to recognize where we are going wrong in our temptations to philosophize.

¹⁵ Or at least her dispositionally being able to say which. And those words would then mean what they do because of the broader context, since they are also multiply interpretable. This leads straightaway into Wittgenstein's discussion of rule following.

properties such as color, shape, size, weight, etc. So we take it as a matter of course that if she notices any properties it will be these properties. But we should be careful about how we formulate such assumptions. There is a passage in *Remarks on Colour* where Wittgenstein considers the possibility of people who have color-shape concepts instead of separate color and shape concepts.¹⁶ The interpretation of those remarks isn't unproblematic; however, the relevant point for us is simply that it reminds us that the question at hand as to whether Sara is concentrating on the color instead of the size, shape, etc., could also be framed in terms of color-shape, color-size, shape-size, etc. And these latter concepts, while unfamiliar, are possible ways of concentrating one's attention on an object.

Given the above considerations, we could *perhaps* formulate a reductio argument in support of L by assuming that outside of a linguistic context, a person *can* concentrate her attention on a *determinate* aspect of an object instead of other aspects or in contrast to other objects as objects or as objects possessing or lacking similar properties.¹⁷ We could then achieve a contradiction by arguing for the claim that it is not the case that the concentration of her attention is determinate outside of a linguist context. Though such a reductio is not found explicitly in §§28-37, it may seem that we could extract it from the text. If that is correct, would it show that the negation of L is false or nonsense? Is the sentence, "Sara is able to focus her attention on the color instead of the shape of the rock outside a linguistic context," call this sentence "S," false or nonsense?

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, L. (1977) *Remarks on Color*. Anscombe, G.E.M. (ed.). McAlister, L.L. and M. Schättle (trans.). University of California Press, III §130. While we should be careful when dipping into the different parts of Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* when we are considering *PI*, in the present context, I do not think our appeal to *Remarks on Colour* is problematic, since the remark can be taken to illustrate a general point about language and ostensive gestures that is made in *PI*.

¹⁷ I take it that this assumption is more or less equivalent to the negation of L on the reading of L that we are considering.

We might be reminded here of the case found in §348:

“These deaf-mutes have learned only a gesture-language, but each of them talks to himself inwardly in a vocal language.”—Now, don’t you understand that?—But how do I know whether I understand it?!—What can I do with this information (if it is such)? The whole idea of understanding smells fishy here. I do not know whether I am to say I understand it or don’t understand it. I might answer “It’s an English sentence; *apparently* quite in order—that is, until one wants to do something with it; it has a connexion with other sentences which makes it difficult for us to say that nobody really knows what it tells us; but everyone who has not become calloused by doing philosophy notices that there is something wrong here.”¹⁸

It’s true that there isn’t the exact initial jar produced by, “Sara is able to focus her attention on the color instead of the shape of the rock outside a linguistic context,” as there is with, “These deaf-mutes have learned only a gesture-language, but each of them talks to himself inwardly in a vocal language.” The latter is jarring because of the incongruity of imagining the deaf-mutes knowing *only* a gesture-language but at the same time being able to speak inwardly to themselves in a vocal language. There certainly seems to be a contradiction lurking just below the surface there. I take it that part of the point is that while the sentence is not outright nonsense in the way that the babbling of a child is, there is clearly something wrong with it once we start exploring its use and its connection to other sentences.

There isn’t such an obvious contradiction lying just under the surface of S. However, just as with the deaf-mute example, so too with S: we can say that it is an English sentence; apparently quite in order. But what about when we try to do something with it? Well, according to the line of thinking expressed in our *reductio*, once we start to do something with S, we run into problems, i.e., a contradiction.

Once we see that contradiction, *one* response would be to say that though S has the appearance of sense, given its implications, we can’t really imagine the situation described by S,

¹⁸ Wittgenstein 1998, §348.

we don't really understand what S means. Hans-Johann Glock makes an explicit connection between "linguistic nonsense on the one hand, [and] explanation and understanding on the other. After all, linguistic nonsense must, strictly speaking, defy both, at least ultimately."¹⁹ One way explanation and understanding can fail concerns understanding a sentence's implications. This kind of failure is the result of the holistic nature of language and understanding; understanding a sentence requires understanding all/most/a great many of its "logical and conceptual implications."²⁰ Importantly, according to Glock, "One of the features that sets latent nonsense apart is that we fail to appreciate their patently nonsensical or absurd implications."²¹ By "latent nonsense," Glock is, of course, referring to such remarks as, "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."²² And:

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery.²³

On one reading of such passages, Wittgenstein is interested in, *inter alia*, getting us to see for ourselves the patent nonsense that is often disguised by the appearance of sense. It is the appearance of sense that we see in the deaf-mute example as well as in S and the negation of L.

With the *reductio* in support of L, the implications were that S is contradicted by a number of statements concerning the ambiguity of ostensive gestures. Those contradictions can possibly be seen as resulting in the failure of our understanding S, and thus S's being ultimately

¹⁹ Glock 2004, 238.

²⁰ Glock 2004, 238. Glock thinks that if Wittgenstein thought that one must understand all of the implications of a sentence in order to understand the sentence, then he exaggerated the truth. We needn't decide this here; the important thing is that fully understanding a sentence is tied to understanding at least a good number of its implications.

²¹ Glock 2004, 238.

²² Wittgenstein 1998, §464.

²³ Wittgenstein 1998, §119.

nonsense. However, there is an immediate problem if we say that the contradiction there *alone* implies that S is nonsense. For that would imply that reductios standardly demonstrate the nonsensicality of the statement assumed for the reductio. Given the use of reductios in mathematics and other contexts, it would be a strange view indeed to claim that reductios standardly result in nonsense.²⁴

Furthermore, if “A person absent a linguistic context *can* concentrate her attention on a determinate aspect of an object” is nonsense instead of false, then “*It is not the case that* a person absent a linguistic context can concentrate her attention on a determinate aspect of an object” should be nonsense as well. We can’t change nonsensical sentence P into one with sense by attaching an “It is not the case that...” to it. So, perhaps, we should not read Wittgenstein as showing that S, or the negation of L, is nonsense, but rather simply false. This, however, results in a problem if we read Wittgenstein in *PI* as not wanting to present philosophical theses, which L would surely be, but rather as wanting to understand and attempt to remove the temptation to offer such a thesis as L.

Let us shift tack. Attributing the above reductio to Wittgenstein assumes that his aim is to muster an argument against a certain possibility. Though the context is different, let’s bring §374 to bear on our current discussion:

The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn’t* do. As if there really were an object, from which I derive its description, but I were unable to shew it to anyone.—And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the *application* of the picture goes.²⁵

Whether the negation of L is nonsense or not, we might think along Wittgensteinian lines that L

²⁴ Glock is certainly aware of the difficulties here concerning Wittgenstein’s views and the use of contradiction in reductios. Glock discusses the problem briefly without defending a solution at the very end of Glock 2004.

²⁵ Wittgenstein 1998, §374.

is problematic because it tries to specify something that we cannot do, where that which purportedly cannot be done is not something that cannot be done but could be imagined anyway, e.g., holding one's breath for two hours. Rather, though this is slipping into a dangerous way of speaking, we might say that due to the nature of language and the relationship between language and reality, language and experience, it is *empty* to claim, e.g., that a person can concentrate her attention on a determinate aspect of something absent a linguistic context. And we can see that when, *inter alia*, we recognize the inherent ambiguity of any ostensive gesture.

Part of the problem we may have here as philosophers is that we recognize that a linguistic context allows for the disambiguation of an ostensive gesture, *and nothing else seems to*. We are thus tempted to say that language is a logical prerequisite for an ostensive gesture to be meaningful. Such a move of reasoning seems legitimate. And we are perhaps tempted then to claim that it is false that one can concentrate one's attention determinately absent a linguistic context. It is such temptations with which Wittgenstein struggled, and with which he wants us to struggle and to come to terms.

Along those therapeutic lines, we should perhaps bring in Wittgenstein's discussion of the possibility of a private language. In a remark that is particularly helpful in our current predicament, Wittgenstein writes:

“But in a fairy tale the pot too can see and hear!” (Certainly; but it *can* also talk.)

“But the fairy tale only invents what is not the case: it does not talk *nonsense*.”—
It is not as simple as that. Is it false or nonsensical to say that a pot talks? Have we a clear picture of the circumstances in which we should say of a pot that it talked? (Even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babbling of a child.)²⁶

We have been asking whether or not the negation of L is false or nonsense. But we should consider that it may not be as “simple” as that. Do we really have a clear picture of what it

²⁶ Wittgenstein 1998, §282.

would be like for the negation of L to be the case? Here we are trying, so to speak, to peak into a situation concerning a person outside of a linguistic context from within our own linguistic context. Is this perhaps not like a man blind from birth saying, “I can’t imagine two colors in the same place at the same time—just as I can’t imagine feeling a cube and a pyramid in the same place at the same time.” Is it clear that the blind man is correct in claiming to understand the idea of two colors not being in the same place in the way that he understands that a cube and a pyramid cannot be in the same place? Or is the blind man speaking nonsense? He is unable to imagine colors in the way that a person with sight can. But surely there is some similarity between one shape’s excluding another shape from its location and one color’s excluding another color from its location. So perhaps the blind man is not entirely wrong. However, the blind man is claiming not to be able to imagine something that he couldn’t imagine even if it were possible for colors to be in the same place. Again, is the blind man speaking falsely or is he talking nonsense? I want to suggest that it is not so clear.

Similarly, and in conclusion, the best way to understand how Wittgenstein would treat our reading of L and its possible negation, is that we don’t have a clear picture at all of the situation described in the negation of L or in S. And because of that a strong, metaphysical reading of L is going to be problematic if we take ourselves to be ruling out a real possibility. It is one thing to point out the ambiguity of ostensive gestures; it is something else to formulate a robust philosophical argument against a possibility that is not clearly false, nor yet clearly nonsense.