Meta-Philosophy and Definition by Example in the Philosophical Investigations

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Many of the issues Wittgenstein discusses in the *Philosophical Investigations* are traditional, established topics within the philosophy of language. With regard to many of these we can give satisfactory answers to the question: "Where does Wittgenstein stand on this issue?" For instance, Wittgenstein claims that names need not have fixed meanings, and proposes family-resemblance concepts as alternatives to classical necessary and sufficient condition analyses. These positions and claims are generally well charted in the literature,[1] and when Wittgenstein's impact and influence becomes visible in contemporary philosophy it is typically these aspects of his thought that surface. However, the positions he takes on specific issues within philosophy of language, while interesting, are only first-order—the deepest-reaching and most radical claims he makes are at the second-order, meta-philosophical level. These positions are also well-known and frequently responded to, but typically not taken as seriously. Contemporary philosophers are willing to give serious consideration to the possibility that, for example, "game" may be a family-resemblance concept not analysable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (and this does seem quite plausible). However, claims such as "If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them"[2] or "Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces

anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain" (§126) are not often thought to be plausible.

Only those philosophers who have devoted themselves to the task of Wittgenstein exegesis have grappled with a deeply important question for anyone who wishes to understand what of merit there is in Wittgenstein's writings: what is the relationship between the grand-strategic- and tactical-level arguments and claims that Wittgenstein makes? This is the question I wish to address in this paper, but it is by no means a simple one. At first glance, he seems to fall into the same paradox of the *Tractatus*: his meta-philosophical claims seem to contradict the worth, or even undermine the meaningfulness, of the first-order philosophical claims he makes. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein once again seems in some sense to deny the possibility of giving a traditional answer to many philosophical questions, but nonetheless seemingly proceeds to respond to some of these questions in a way that he has declared impossible. What are we to make of this?

Baker and Hacker, in their classic *Analytical Commentaries*, argue that no contradiction exists: properly construed, Wittgenstein's meta-philosophical doctrines and his first-order claims never in fact run afoul of each other.[3] His analyses of traditional philosophical topics might seem to produce theses and claims that do more than merely describe and explain, but with closer reading we can see that all of his conclusions really are something like mere reminders of how language works. They give thorough arguments to this end, but ultimately a feeling of dissatisfaction remains. For Wittgenstein most certainly intended there to be a tension between his first- and second-order philosophical claims (more on this below). Furthermore, if Wittgenstein's first-order arguments somehow can be made to fall within the bounds of proper philosophizing as prescribed by his meta-philosophical claims (taken at face value) then his meta-

philosophy loses much of its bite and its radical, destructive nature – a nature of which Wittgenstein was very much conscious (see e.g. §118). For if Wittgenstein's first-order arguments are compatible with his radical second-order claims, then too much of traditional philosophy is also compatible, and his meta-philosophy is thus far less radical than almost every interpreter agrees that it is.

Stern provides a subtler approach. On the one hand, he sketches a simple method of reconciliation: taking seriously the meta-philosophical claims, we label any first-order argument which runs afoul of them as a mere object of comparison, not to be taken as the considered views of the author.[4] As part of this method, he stresses the multiplicity of voices within the *Investigations*, particularly distinguishing between the actual authorial voice, which is heard only rarely, and the "voice of correctness," which propounds better, more Wittgensteinian ways of looking at the problems the interlocutor poses, but ultimately falls into the same traps as the interlocutor himself. On the other hand, he also points out that Wittgenstein is deeply interested not only in philosophical questions and their answers, but also in the process of philosophizing and the (perhaps merely psychological) urges and impulses that guide the philosopher's thought processes.[5] Part of the aim of the *Investigations* is to chart the unnoticed tendencies and inclinations that push us down certain trails of thought again and again, and to suggest alternative ways to approach and view the subject, without necessarily siding with either approach unconditionally. Stern's approach to the *Investigations* is insightful, but unsatisfying for opposite reasons to Baker and Hacker. Stern does not give appropriate weight to the first-order claims and arguments. Wittgenstein seems to give far too much weight and time to his first-order claims about language for them to be mere objects of comparison or examples of

psychological impulses. The impression is inescapable that Wittgenstein did actually think that his answers and ways of approaching traditional philosophical questions were better than his opponents', and that he was still doing philosophy.

Thus the interpretive terrain surrounding the *Investigations* is similar to that surrounding the *Tractatus*. On the one hand, Baker, Hacker, and their allies defend the view that the first-order philosophical arguments that make up the vast majority of each work should be taken as seriously intended claims to which Wittgenstein was committed. On the other hand, another camp (originally inspired by Cora Diamond's influential *Throwing Away the Ladder*) feels dissatisfaction with this insufficiently radical reading, and thus defends the primacy of his meta-philosophical theses and dismisses the first-order claims as objects of comparison or straw men. Stern takes himself to chart a middle path between these camps, but his actual position is often difficult to make out, and I believe he tends more to the second side than he realizes. In what follows, I will look closely at specific passages in which tensions and paradoxes appear to arise between meta-philosophical and first-order claims, in particular in §121, §133, and the surrounding section on meta-philosophy. In doing so I will begin to describe a way of approaching Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy that charts a middle path between the pitfalls faced by the two camps mentioned above.

§121—Second-order philosophy

§121 presents a serious interpretive challenge for anyone wishing to make coherent sense of Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy as in it he seems at first glance to deny that there is any such thing as meta-philosophy:

One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word "philosophy", there must be a second-order philosophy. But that's not the way it is; it is, rather like the case of orthography, which deals with the word "orthography" among others without then being second-order.

There is at very least a superficial tension here, though of course it can be resolved. For he outright denies the existence of second-order (meta-) philosophy, right in the center of what is commonly referred to as "the section on meta-philosophy," preceded and followed by many (in)famous statements about the nature of philosophy which we would intuitively call meta-philosophical or second-order. It is not plausible that Wittgenstein was unaware of the obvious tension produced when he states first that there is no such thing as second-order philosophy, then two paragraphs later gives us the general form of a philosophical problem, followed by declarations that philosophy must not interfere with or justify language, and that philosophy's business is not to resolve contradictions or explain or deduce anything.

So how might this tension be merely superficial? The orthographic analogy clears up the confusion. For in this example, it is clear that what is meant is not that orthography cannot deal with "orthography" as a subject, but rather that the methods by which orthography proceeds do not differ in this case. A superficial circularity is in fact not circular at all, because orthography is concerned with "orthography" merely *qua* word. Similarly, historians may investigate the history of their own discipline, and etymologists may concern themselves with the etymology of "etymology" and neither is circular or a *special case*. Rather, in each case the researchers proceed using the same standards and methods that they apply to every other subject they investigate, and in doing so no circularity, self-reference, or bootstrapping is required.

If it is just the same way with philosophy, then philosophy can in fact deal with meta-philosophical statements, but it does so exactly as it treats any other statements. What Wittgenstein means by §121 is simply that an analysis of the word "philosophy" should proceed using precisely the same methods which we use to analyze words like "sentence," "mind," "meaning," etc. Nothing more is meant by the term "meta-philosophy" than a standardly philosophical analysis of the concept of philosophy.

There is much more that can be said about this conception of meta-philosophy, and whether or not it manages to truly avoid circularity and boot-strapping, and more will be said later on.[6] However, this reading of §121 (and I don't think there are any other plausible readings of it) circumvents the specific tension I identified above. The various meta-philosophical claims of the *Investigations* do not contradict §121 if they are reached by the same methods that are used to reach first-order claims.

Unfortunately, that is not the end of the story, because Wittgenstein's meta-philosophical claims do not seem to be reached by the same methods as his first-order philosophical claims. When he investigates concepts such as "sentence," "propositions," "language," "sensation," etc., his methods typically include: inventing simple language games as objects of comparison, drawing connections between similar and dissimilar concepts, showing how the pronouncements of prior philosophers (including his younger self) are true with respect to certain limited regions of language only, and inviting us into casual exchanges which bring to the forefront assumptions and requirements we didn't realize we had been making. When he discusses meta-philosophy, none of this careful, dialogical, example-based analysis of our concepts and their ordinary usage is present. Rather, he makes bold, broad claims and generally offers no argumentative support (e.g. §128).

Furthermore, his conclusions do not seem like they could possibly come from the methods he endorses. This is another tension within the meta-philosophy section: he claims that philosophy "leaves everything as it is," (§124) and does not interfere with our existing usage. But in the sections immediately preceding and following, he seems to give an unprecedented, radical account of the nature of philosophy which is anything but intuitive (e.g. §119, §123, §126, §128, §133).

Finally, I am sure I am not the only reader left with the impression that his meta-philosophy is in some way the real heart or foundation of the book. Speaking from personal experience, I was first drawn in by his first-order claims about the nature of language, the relationship between mental and physical, the incoherency of metaphysics, etc.. But I quickly found that any attempts to understand how these claims were reached, or how the various sections of the book hang together, must be structured by an understanding of his meta-philosophical project. I think this is a problem faced by anyone who attempts to understand the *Investigations*, and I think this is intentional. Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy is the core around which the rest of the book revolves. In fact, the circularity mentioned above (footnote 7) begins to present a real problem when we ask why he has chosen such unusual methods of approaching traditional philosophical problems. For it seems the answer must involve his meta-philosophy, which, if we are to avoid contradicting §121, must be produced and justified by the same methods as justify his answers to the traditional first-order problems.

This, then, is the problem I wish to answer. How can we make sense of the contradiction that §121 creates within the very heart of the *Investigations?* To solve it, we must turn to another central—and more famous—passage from the meta-philosophy section: §133.

§133: Definition by example

§133 is a fascinating series of remarks and particularly relevant to our present concerns for two central reasons. Firstly, it offers a tightly condensed overview of several of the core meta-philosophical tenets of the *Investigations*. The non-revisionary relationship between philosophical analysis of language and the existing web of grammar is commented on. The goal of philosophy is identified as complete clarity. It is stated that there is no one philosophical method, and one of the few explicit mentions of philosophy as therapy appears. Secondly, the passage also contains a mention of a famous first-order claim—what I call definition by example—but uses it within a meta-philosophical context. This is important because it involves a crossing of the line between first- and second-order philosophy.

Wittgenstein makes the claim that one can define a concept or word, or give a legitimate explanation of it,[7] by merely giving a partial list of examples, in §71: "And this is just how one might explain what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way....giving examples is not an *indirect* way of explaining—in default of a better one. For a general explanation may be misunderstood too." The position he takes contrasts sharply with that taken by almost every philosopher since the illegitimacy of such a definition was first argued for by Plato.[8]

To help clarify what is at stake here, we might say initially that we want to know: "What does a legitimate answer to the question 'What is x?' look like, where x is some concept?" Socrates in Plato's *Theaetetus* is after the "what knowledge itself is,"[9] but in modern terms, we might say we want x's meaning, semantic content, Fregean sense, or simply x's definition. We might rephrase the question as "What form can a

full and complete analysis of a concept x take?" or "What knowledge is required for a full understanding of x?" More loosely, we want an explanation of x. I leave open exactly which formulation of the question is at stake first because it is clear that they all are more or less after similar objects, and that they represent variations in the history of concept-analysis, and second because I think Wittgenstein would want his conclusions to apply very generally—he has no specific formulation in mind. A set of necessary and sufficient conditions is one answer which is uncontroversially acceptable to all parties.[10] A (finite or infinite) set of all o's such that o is x is another answer, or a description of that set are other typically acceptable answers (especially given that the set itself may not be articulable in spoken language). However Plato makes the case that to be able to give a partial list of examples of x is not sufficient to know x.[11] This is intuitive to say the least, and has been very rarely contested. But Wittgenstein rejects this and suggests that a partial list of examples is not only acceptable, but the only accurate explanation we can give in at least some cases. For sometimes the concept we wish to express is one that no sharp definition could accurately capture—the sum of our knowledge of it is the list of examples we can give, and nothing more (§75-§78).

I call Wittgenstein's claim "definition by example" but this may be misleading. Really, he would most likely characterize what he is offering as an explanation, and in §71 in fact contrasts it with a "general definition," by which I take him to mean something like a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. However, I choose to use the term 'definition' because I wish to emphasize that what is offered is not a weaker, less strict, or more casual alternative to a general definition. The explanation through examples meant to take the place of a rigorous general definition, and should be held to all the same standards.

What interests me about the usage of the "definition by example" thesis in §133 can be articulated as follows. In the section containing §71, Wittgenstein is conducting an investigation into the concept of language. Here, he proceeds in typical *Investigations* fashion, and leads us to the conclusion that our rejection of definition by example is not well-founded, or at least that it only is demanded by a certain, potentially misleading picture of how language works. Definition by example is a conclusion about the nature of language, and it is argued for using observations about our actual usage of concepts and language. The passage revolves around his claim that the concept of game is not one that is bounded everywhere by precise rules. Our concept simply lacks clear boundaries and rigid criteria for application. Given this type of concept, Wittgenstein suggests that definition by example may be *the only* type of definition that is possible (e.g. §75-78). Concepts like *game* would be simply misrepresented by any more rigorous definition. In §135, for example, he claims that our concept of a proposition is of a kind with game, and that it should be defined similarly.

After §71, however, definition by example is raised from the level of a conclusion about the nature of language in certain cases to the level of method. In other words, with the conclusion of §71 taken as proved, Wittgenstein considers himself free to, whenever faced with a concept lacking sharp boundaries in same way as the concept of game, offer partial lists of examples as definitions and to assume the connection between these concepts as he proceeds with his investigations into philosophical dilemmas. For example, beginning in §138, and continuing along twists and turns until it crossfades into the section on rule-following by §200, Wittgenstein gives us an extended discussion of what we might mean when we say we understand or mean a word or sentence. His discussion touches on activities such as

interpreting diagrams via methods of projection, continuing number sequences, reading, and being guided, and in each case his arguments mostly proceed by way of introducing and considering examples of the activity in question.

However, what is most important to notice is that the conclusions he draws from the examples are not generally positive, substantive analyses of the concepts—rather, he takes his examples to show the inadequacy of various analyses which he rejects, without presenting a (more) correct alternative. Beyond demonstrating his opponent's mistakes, all Wittgenstein does is ask us to *look* at the multitude of examples he provides, and decide whether there is any common, essential element between them. The answer he expects is "no": the list of examples is analysis enough, provided we are not drawn in by our assumptions about how our answers must turn out. The list of examples can be extended indefinitely as long as our misconceptions remain, but once we have cleared them away, we will understand that nothing further is required. §172 is a particularly clear example of this: he gives five examples of being guided, then in §173-178 heads off every attempt that we might make to go beyond and identify any inner experience which is the essence of being guided. However, it is only if definition by example and the correlated claims about concepts without sharp boundaries are assumed that it is acceptable for Wittgenstein to rest his case on a list of example cases alone.

There are numerous other examples—anyone at all familiar with later Wittgenstein knows how densely his writing is packed with invented example cases, and how if they are followed by any analysis, it is not a positive analysis of the concept in question, but rather one of the ways we go wrong when we try to provide such an analysis. Definition by example is not merely a first-order conclusion about language, rather, it takes on a

methodological role, informing how Wittgenstein conducts investigations of concepts in general.

In §133, Wittgenstein is engaged in analysis of the concept of philosophy. And in §133c, he gives us a statement that demonstrates clearly that he is aware of the contradictory implications of §121: "...The [real discovery] that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.—Instead, a method is now demonstrated by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off..." Method can be demonstrated by examples, but part of his method *is* demonstration (definition) by example. As mentioned earlier, there is a vicious circularity lurking in this section—how can we give an analysis of philosophy, one which would presumably dictate what standard philosophical method should be, if we must do so using only standard philosophical method?

Here is his response to the circle: we begin by arguing that some concepts lack sharp boundaries and rules for application, and thus can only be defined by a partial list of examples. Next, we make this connection between "blurry" concepts and definition by example a part of methodology, so that we can proceed by giving examples and conclude that the concept under analysis is "blurry," and vice versa, and we can assume that the reader agrees that a list of examples might not need anything more to be a sufficient analysis. Then we do a whole bunch of philosophy—we tackle traditional philosophical questions, analyze common philosophical terms, unearth common philosophical assumptions, and shine light upon common patterns of thought amongst philosophers. At the end of this investigation we will have achieved results of two distinct kinds. Firstly, we will have made steps of progress on a wide variety of first-order philosophical topics. Secondly, each step of first-order progress will be

complemented by progress towards an ostensibly second-order question, namely, "What is Philosophy?" This question will thus be answered with the same method that we have utilized all along: by definition through example.

The various meta-philosophical proclamations of §116-133, then, do not arise *ex nihilo*. Rather, they can be seen as summaries of the findings gained by demonstrating what philosophy is by repeated example, and every first-order question dealt with in the book is itself taken to constitute an example of what philosophy is. And if we take definition by example to be a legitimate methodological principle, with a list of such examples we already have a definition of philosophy.

What has been sketched out in the preceding few paragraphs describes one central aspect of the Wittgensteinian project. It answers the questions, "What is he trying to do?" and "How is he trying to do it?" I have argued that certain apparent tensions or outright contradictions within the remarks on meta-philosophy can be resolved, and it is my hope that an understanding of this resolution provides us with a deeper understanding of what exactly he is attempting to do in the *Investigations*. But there is a further question which we must ask, and that is: "Did he succeed?" Supposing I am correct that there is in fact no circularity or inconsistency within his meta-philosophy, we might still wonder whether his meta-philosophical claims are in fact be properly justified by the series of demonstrations of philosophy in the way that I have suggested they can be. These worries are legitimate—the meta-philosophical claims between §116-133 are highly radical, broad, and revisionary, perhaps excessively or implausibly so. A definitive answer to this second question is beyond the aims of this paper, but before I conclude I would like to sketch two brief suggestions as to how these worries might be alleviated.

First of all, the importance and ubiquity of negative claims should be emphasized. One of the clearest examples of how his approach to first- and second-order philosophy coincide is how, in the *Investigations*, a concept is analyzed not by giving a positive account of its content but by showing how positive accounts go wrong. Each negative demonstration of how not to analyze or explain a concept corresponds to a negative demonstration of how not to do philosophy. Furthermore, the book is densely packed with such demonstrations, and many of the methods that Wittgenstein dismisses as misleading are at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition. As he acknowledges in §118, his investigation "...seems to destroy everything interesting: that is all that is great and important[.] (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.)." The devastation he takes himself to have inflicted upon traditional meta-philosophy makes his radical proclamations more plausible: if he has shown traditional philosophical methods to be of limited or no use, then of course any methods he endorses will be new and unfamiliar.

A second, and more controversial suggestion is that we should take very seriously the remarks on multiplicity of method in §133: "...a method is now demonstrated by example… There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods..." Given this claim, and the familiar theme of definition by example, we could even claim that the meta-philosophical claims of §116-§133 are examples of philosophical methods, not universal claims about what philosophical method must always be like. The whole point of giving examples of a concept is that no feature of any individual example must be true of the concept in its entirety. Thus statements like "A philosophical problem has the form 'I don't know my way about'" (§123) might be more like independent examples of philosophical method, not claims about the one true universal philosophical method. This approach may

discomfort those who are used to taking all of the meta-philosophical statements at face value, but it seems to me that it actually introduces a harmony between the first-order and second-order sections of the book.

I leave it to the reader, as always, to decide for themselves whether Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy is plausible. I hope merely that I have made my case that there is deeper order and coherency in the *Investigations* than it may seem at first glance, and that Wittgenstein scholarship can profit from a close investigation of the complex relationship between first- and second-order philosophy within his work.

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