Primitive Words and Philosophical Confusions in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy

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1. Introduction

As is well known, Wittgenstein conceives philosophical problems as just a byproduct of misunderstanding of language. According to him, philosophical problems are "not empirical problems; but they are solved through an insight into the workings of our language" (PI §109). A philosophical problem is "a muddle felt as a problem" (BB 6), resulting from "the mystifying use of our language" (ibid.). This is why Wittgenstein says we have to investigate the workings of our language in order to dissolve philosophical problems. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein calls this kind of investigation "a grammatical one" (PI §90).

During the course of his considerations in the *Investigations*, he describes the grammar of a variety of kinds of words such as "name", "meaning", "understanding", "pain", and so on, all of which seem more or less primitive. What I mean by "primitive" will be made clearer in section 3, but for the moment, we can understand this term in a rough sense: primitive words are ones of which even children can master the use. As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein often appeals to the situations where children learn words or concepts[1]. Is it just a coincidence that these words seem primitive in this sense? My contention of this paper is that there is a legitimate reason for the selection of some of the words whose grammar he describes in the *Investigations*. In my interpretation, Wittgenstein thinks it is, above all, the primitive words that throw us into philosophical confusions, and therefore he focuses his grammatical investigations on describing the grammar of those words.

This paper is organized as follows. First of all, I am going to briefly discuss what Wittgenstein's grammatical enquiry is like (section 2). Then, I will clarify what I mean by "primitive words" in this paper. I will argue that Wittgenstein selectively picks out such words because they are the kind of words that are likely to cause philosophical confusions (section 3). Subsequently, we will be looking with a specific example at how philosophical muddles typically arise (section 4).

2. Grammatical Investigations

As is mentioned in the previous section, Wittgenstein regards philosophical problems as muddles felt as problems. According to him, philosophy is “a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language” (PI §109). As Marie McGinn states, however, for Wittgenstein, language is “both the source of philosophical problems and the means to overcome them” (1997, p. 12). In this section, we have a brief look at how Wittgenstein unfolds his unique method of grammatical investigations to dissolve the philosophical problems.

In PI §122, Wittgenstein remarks:

> A main source of our failure to understand is that we don’t have *an overview* of the use of our words. — Our grammar is deficient in surveyability [*Übersichtlichkeit*].

Among other things[2], Wittgenstein attributes a main source of our confusions to the deficiency of surveyability. Although Wittgenstein himself does not explicitly state what exactly he means when he says that our grammar lacks surveyability, Peter Hacker (1996, 107), referring to the distinction between “surface grammar” and “deep grammars” (PI §664), provides the following summary:

> The grammar of our language is lacking in surveyability, inasmuch as expressions with very different uses have similar surface grammars. ‘I meant’ has a similar surface grammar to ‘I pointed’; ‘I have a pain’ looks like ‘I have a pin’; ‘He is thinking’ resembles ‘He is talking’; ‘to have a mind’ has the same grammatical form as ‘to have a brain’, and so forth (cf. PI §664).

These superficial similarities, for example, beguile us into conceiving “of meaning something as a mental act or activity whereby we attach words to the world” (ibid.). In this way, the lack of surveyability of our grammar prevents us from surveying the diversity of the purposes and functions of our words. Therefore, Wittgenstein argues that “one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home?” (PI §116) In order to extricate ourselves from the philosophical quandaries, we have to conjure up how we actually operate with our words under mundane circumstances. Thus, Wittgenstein’s grammatical investigations consist in describing how our language is actually used (PI §124).

Certain words have such complicated grammars that we cannot overview their whole use. But not all of our words have such complicated grammars. When it comes to such words, the uses are quite straightforward and specific, and therefore we can overview the

whole use of them. In the next section, I will argue about this distinction.

3. Primitive Words

We have seen that Wittgenstein identifies one of the sources of our confusions with the lack of surveyability of the grammar of our words. Because some of the words in our language have such complicated grammars that we cannot survey their entire use, we have to describe the actual uses of those words in order to see properly the diversity of our linguistic practices (cf. PI §11). Otherwise, we would be tempted to conflate the uses of exteriorly similar words, so that we end up in philosophical confusions. As I noted earlier, however, not all of our words mystify us in this manner. That is, we may say that certain words whose grammar is surveyable are, *ceteris paribus*[3], unlikely to lead us to the philosophical confusion. In this section, I explain about this distinction.

We might say that we have two types of words: primitive and non-primitive. We call some words primitive if they are deeply connected to and penetrate into every corner of our lives. We acquire primitive words under various practices as we learn to speak. Unlike more sophisticated ones such as "the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus" (PI §18), we learn primitive words hands-on. They are acquired through such daily practices, and therefore, they are inseparable from the contexts in which they are actually used. Every day, we play language-games with such words as "tomorrow" and "pain". We promise to go out with a friend tomorrow or make a to-do list for tomorrow before we go to bed. We go to hospital and tell the doctor where we feel pain. If we could no longer play these language-games, our lives would be transformed into completely different ones. On the other hand, there are many people in the world who live their whole lives without knowing the infinitesimal calculus. In fact, before Newton and Leibniz, people lived their whole lives without knowing it. Of course, it is a matter of degree whether a given concept is primitive or not, and hence, it is impossible to draw a clear boundary between them. But no one would deny that "tomorrow" and "pain" are more primitive in this sense than "the differential calculus". To use the metaphor in the *Investigations*, which compares language to an "ancient city", "tomorrow" and "pain" are located at the heart of an "ancient city", while "the notation of the infinitesimal calculus" belongs to "a multitude of new suburbs" that surround it (PI §18). Wittgenstein states:

> As children we learn concepts and what one does with them simultaneously.
> Sometimes it happens that we later introduce a new concept that is more practical for us. — But that will only happen in very definite and small areas, and it presupposes

that most concepts remain unaltered. (LW2 43)

We learn primitive words when we learn to talk (cf. PI §384). The important thing is that we learn those primitive words through training, not through definitions. When we learn a primitive concept, we also learn what people do with it. Therefore, unlike concepts that are explained and acquired through definitions, primitive concepts are inextricably entrenched in our linguistic practices. They permeate the whole of our lives. And the concepts that we make up afterwards to suit certain purposes are, as it were, the new suburbs, and do not affect the central structure of the ancient city. We construct new buildings on the periphery of the ancient city[4].

Now, we can understand why Wittgenstein deals with those concepts or words that can be said to be primitive. As we have observed so far, the aim of Wittgenstein's grammatical inquiry is the elimination of philosophical confusions. And since a main source of them is our lack of overview on the grammar of our words, his target is naturally limited to ones with complex grammars. However, it does not immediately follow from the fact that primitive words have complex grammars that we are unable to survey the whole of their use. If it were the case, Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations would be of no use at all. Some philosophical confusions arise because we are not aware of the complexity of the grammar of our words.

Note also that it is true that Wittgenstein admits that misunderstandings "may arise out of words not ordinary and everyday—technical mathematical terms" (LFM 14), but, at the same time, he proclaims that he is not interested in those misunderstandings, for "[t]hey are not so tenacious, or difficult to get rid of" (LFM 15). It would be necessary to discuss in future work whether the same is true for other non-primitive terms as well as for "technical mathematical terms". Namely, without further consideration, it is impossible to dismiss the possibility of "tenacious" confusions emerging out of non-primitive concepts in general. At any rate, the contention of this paper is that one of the main causes of philosophical confusions is primitive words[5].

Up to this point we have proceeded somewhat abstractly in our discussion. In the next section, we will look at an example of how primitive concepts create philosophical confusions. We also argue that philosophical problems do not arise in the same way in the case of concepts that are not primitive.

4. The Augustinian Picture of Language and "What is X?"

The *Investigations* begins with a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*. In that quote,

Augustine presents a certain fascinating picture of language, according to which, every word refers to an object, and the object referred to by a word is the meaning of the word. We should not underestimate the significance of this quotation as it appears at the very beginning of the *Investigations*. In the preface to the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein states as follows:

> Four years ago, I had occasion to reread my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas. Then it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old ideas and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my older way of thinking.

As Wittgenstein himself admits (PG 56), it is this book, the *Tractatus*, that was written in the Augustinian spirit in the main[6]. We must therefore appreciate the importance of this Augustinian picture, which dominated Wittgenstein at the time of the writing of the *Tractatus*, in order to see the grammatical inquiry carried out in the *Investigations* "in the right light".

According to Wittgenstein, when Augustine presents such a picture of language, what he primarily has in mind is nouns[7].

> Augustine does not mention any difference between kinds of word. Someone who describes the learning of language in this way is, I believe, thinking primarily of nouns like "table", "chair", "bread", and of people's names, and only secondarily of the names of certain actions and properties; and of the remaining kinds of word as something that will take care of itself. (PI §1)

In other words, the picture Augustine presents is an "over-simple" one that applies only to a part of our language, not to the whole of our language (PI §§3, 4). Now we shall see one consequence of it. When asked about something around us that corresponds to a typical noun, such as "chair", we can point to an object and say in reply that "That is a chair". In this way, this conception of language "takes the form of explanation "That is …" as fundamental" (BT 25; see also Baker & Hacker 2005b, pp. 53, 54). Captured by the Augustinian picture, however, we blindly assume that this form of explanation can be applied to the entire domain of our language. As we are obsessed with the idea which is associated with the Augustinian conception of language that the meaning of a word is the object for which the word stands, therefore, in order to know whatever is unknown to us

in some way, we are prone to ask the question “What is X?”, without fully considering whether it is really a valid question. Given the ubiquity of such a form of questions in philosophy, we can see how deeply rooted the Augustinian picture of language is in our philosophical inquiries[8]. Of course, such a form of questions is not in itself detrimental. The problem arises when we forget that questions of that form are valid only in some areas of our language and give in to the temptation to substitute any word we like for “X”. Philosophers have been asking over and over again “What is good?”, “What is beauty?”, and “What is truth?”, and the list could go on and on. They have regarded these questions as answerable and tried to give answers to them. But we must now pause to consider whether those questions actually make sense, for it is one thing for a question to be statable and another for that question to be answerable[9]. It is true that we can answer the question “What is a chair?”, but it doesn’t mean that we can answer any question of the form “What is X?”.

We have proceeded on the premise that the question about what a chair is makes sense, but a qualification must be added in this regard. For some might argue that they are asking what the essence or definition of a chair is, not what belongs to the concept of chair. This distinction corresponds to the one between the question of what beauty is and what is beautiful, or between the question of what truth is and what is true. The former kind of question asks for a definition or essence, while the latter kind of question asks what belongs to a concept. It is plain to see that it is the former that is philosophically problematic, for, faced with such a question, we would be at a loss for an answer.

But not all questions that ask for definitions or essences lead us to be perplexed in this way. For example, the question “What is hydrogen?” apparently asks for a definition, but we do not feel baffled with the question unless we have never heard of it. We could say in reply to it that it is such and such an element. If someone cannot answer that question, it is because they just don’t know. What, then, is the difference between questions that cause philosophical puzzlement and those that do not? The difference lies in whether what goes into “X” is a primitive concept or not. As we have seen in the previous section, primitive concepts are acquired through training and are therefore deeply connected to our lives and practices. When we are at a loss for an answer to a question about the definition or essence, it is not because the question is so esoteric that it cannot be answered easily, but because we have not learned the primitive concepts through definitions in the first place (cf. PI §69).

> The questions “What is length?”, “What is meaning?”, “What is the number one?”, etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can’t point to anything in reply

> to them and yet ought to point to something. (BB 1)

Just as we can point to something beautiful, but cannot point to the beauty itself, so we can point to an object with a certain length, but cannot point to the length itself. The concept of length is mastered in the context of, for example, the practice of measuring length, and therefore it is not something that can be pointed to, nor is it something that can be given a definition. The same can be said about the question of beauty: We have learned to say that something is beautiful under certain circumstances. "The word "beauty" is used for a thousand different things. Beauty of a face is different from that of flowers and animals" (AWL 35f.).

The question "What is X?" takes the words that go into "X" away from their original contexts. Regarding which, Wittgenstein says:

> What is the everyday use of this expression in ordinary language? For you learned it from this use. If you now use it contrary to its original use, and think you are still playing the old game with it, that is as if you were to play draughts with chess-pieces and imagine that your game had kept something of the spirit of chess. (Z §448)

> I want to say: the question "What is …" doesn't refer to a particular — practical — case, but we ask it sitting at our desks. (PO 173)

The question "What is X?" removes a word from its home, and in doing so leads us astray. Thus, "a philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about"" (PI §123). As for non-primitive words, on the other hand, the question "What is X?", we may say, is their home. For we are initiated into those concepts through definitions, which can be regarded as straightforward answers to the question "What is X?". The purposes and uses of the concepts thus introduced are quite lucid, and we can overview the grammar of those words. That is to say, we know our way about there.

It should be noted, however, that not all primitive words cause philosophical confusions. For example, "daddy" and "mommy" would be among the most primitive words, but it is unlikely that they would raise philosophical questions[10]. One possible reason would be that those words are babbling. Babbling is used by young children, who do not yet have good command of language, and, therefore, its uses and functions are quite restrictive and specific. It is also fairly easy to envisage these words in use and hence we are unlikely to be enticed to pull them out of such situations. We may therefore say that for the primitive words to cause philosophical perplexity in us, they must be such that they are used on a

wide range of occasions. In other words, a primitive word would have to be general to produce confusion in us, as with the beauty and the truth. Here we may see the relation between philosophical confusion and "our craving for generality" (BB 17ff.), but to examine it would require another study.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have shown that some words that plunge us into philosophical confusions are primitive in the sense that we acquire them through training when we are children. Unlike, for instance, scientific terminologies, which are expected to retain the same meaning across various contexts, primitive words have a variety of meanings under various contexts. The primitive words have their original contexts as they are acquired through training rather than through definition. We are deceived by certain pictures of language and certain analogies in language into ripping the primitive words out of their original contexts.

The paper may make some contribution to solving the methodological difficulties of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. That is, it needs to be proved that there is no inconsistency between Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations that aims to clarify the grammar of certain natural languages and the universality of philosophical problems. If one can connect the primitivity of philosophically problematic words/concepts with the universality of philosophical problems, this seeming friction can be partially alleviated. The task of examining this possible connection is reserved for future work.

Lastly, it has to be noted that the conclusion of this paper reveals only one aspect of the issue. As I noted earlier, Wittgenstein points out other sources of philosophical confusions, which are not discussed here for want of space. Therefore, there might be room left for philosophical problems about other concepts that can hardly be described as primitive, as I mentioned in section 3. Moreover, philosophical problems might not necessarily arise with respect to individual words or expressions. To sum up, the interplay of those other sources remains to be examined in future work.

Notes

1. The significance of a child's learning in the *Philosophical Investigations* is pointed out most notably by Meredith Williams (1994). See also Winch (2018).
2. The other roots of philosophical confusion are composed of our "craving for generality" (BB 18), overstretching analogies, misleading pictures, and so on, all of

which, of course, overlap one another and hence cannot be demarcated (cf. Glock 1996 “overview”).

3. As I mentioned earlier, there are other sources of philosophical confusions that need investigating, so this qualification is required.
4. Of course, it might seem that philosophical problems about the infinitesimal can arise, but they would actually be about “infinity” or “magnitude” and not about the differential calculus in itself. cf. LFM 255.
5. The fact that mathematics is full of newly invented words/concepts, combined with the fact that Wittgenstein devoted himself to the philosophy of mathematics even in the later period, might seem at odds with the interpretation presented in this paper. However, this is not true, for Wittgenstein explicitly maintains that he “will only deal with puzzles which arise from the words of our ordinary everyday language, such as “proof”, “number”, “series”, “order”, etc.” (LFM 14). Even though mathematics is full of sophisticated words/concepts, he does not deal with them.
6. For the details, see Baker & Hacker (2005a) ch. 1.
7. Note that this is, at least, “Wittgenstein’s picture of his Augustine’s picture of language”. See Burnyeat (1987).
8. I only mention it here for want of space, but the fact that philosophy has typically dealt with such questions seems to me to indicate the following: that philosophical questions can only arise in that way. We play language-games every day with primitive words. As long as such practices are carried out without delay, they do not trouble us. But as soon as we begin to reflect on the words we use and pose those questions, they bewilder us. “For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*” (PI §38).
9. In my view, the famous discussions about “family resemblance” have to be understood against the backdrop of the persistent appeal of this form of questions (cf. PI §§65–67 and *passim*). Hence, the questions of the form “What is X?” can be considered at least of equal significance in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to “family resemblance”.
10. Natural kind terms need to be considered in this connection as well, but they cannot be treated in this paper.

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