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LATER WITTGENSTEIN ON THE INVENTION OF GAMES

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ABSTRACT. Wittgenstein in his later posthumous writings investigates the meanings of names as a practical activity of rule-governed language game playing. Rules for language games, as for all games in Wittgenstein's frequent analogies, are determined in turn by the "point" and "purpose" of the games. Wittgenstein also famously maintains that a game could not be invented without being played, or even having been played only once, in the absence of a cultural context embedded in a form of life in which games and the playing of games is already an established practice. This essay examines Wittgenstein's general concept of the invention of games, their dependence on rules as part of his general later remarks concerning the nature of meaning, and proposes an interpretation by which it is not only intelligible but inevitable that on his approach it should be impossible for a game to be invented that is never played or played only once in lieu of a games-playing component to a prevailing form of life. The solution to the problem of understanding Wittgenstein on this topic derives from a further application of his concept of a criterion of correctness, generally thought to belong exclusively to his so-called private language argument.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; rule; language game; invention; meaning

1. Language and Other Games

Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* is concerned to understand how a given name refers to a particular object. It is a question that Wittgenstein in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* explicitly maintains does not need to be answered in order to explain the meaning of language. Shortly after returning to philosophy in 1929, Wittgenstein repudiates the disposable *Tractatus* semantic infrastructure of logical atomism, picture theory of meaning, and general form of proposition. He appears to have decided, among a package of insights gained from the dismantling of the *Tractatus*, that, symptoms aside, the project's spectacular failure was fundamentally due to its inability to explain the naming of simple objects by simple names at the foundations

of the *Tractatus* analysis of thought, world and language in Wittgenstein's early account of the possibility conditions for expressing determinate meaning in a language.

The first sentence of *The Blue Book*, compiled from Wittgenstein's first lectures dictated to students at Cambridge University in 1930, accordingly asks: "What is the meaning of a word?"¹ In sharp contrast, only a decade previously, leaning heavily on Bertrand Russell's theory of definite descriptions in "On Denoting," Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* had argued that name-object semantic coordinations were strictly unnecessary in light of the designation of specific objects by definite descriptors:

5.526: One can describe the world completely by completely generalized propositions, *i.e.* without from the outset co-ordinating any name with a definite object.

In order then to arrive at the customary way of expression we need simply say after an expression 'there is one and only one *x*, which...:' and this *x* is *a*.²

The starting point for his later masterwork, *Philosophical Investigations*, is predicated on Wittgenstein's having rejected the three pillars of the *Tractatus*. He nevertheless remains ultimately engaged, as in the early thought, in a bold effort at turning philosophy against itself. *Philosophical Investigations* seeks another, radically different and even more revolutionary account of how language functions in the expression of thought. Wittgenstein investigates the philosophical grammar of terms and expressions extracted from their normal usage where they give rise in endlessly complicated ways to gratuitous philosophical problems. Perspicuous representations of the philosophical grammar of philosophically problematic language are detailed by the later Wittgenstein in the expectation that in another way his new pragmatic explanation of language will also undermine the traditional concept of philosophy as a search for truth in a specific field of genuinely meaningful propositions.

Wittgenstein replaces metaphysics of logical atomism, the picture theory of meaning, and the general form of proposition with a more comprehensive understanding of what language does and how it works to express meaning, involving the later philosophy's adaptable apparatus of language games, forms of life, family resemblance predications, and rule-following. There are many different language games, the later Wittgenstein believes. Language is not devoted exclusively to the single *Tractatus* function of making to ourselves true or false propositional pictures that describe existent or nonexistent logically contingent states of affairs. Tautology and contradiction are brought along for the ride in *Tractatus* as limiting cases of propositions, even though they do not meaningfully picture any of the facts (*Tatsachen*) by a structure of which a world is constituted (4.46–4.463). The early Wittgenstein also allows tautology and contradiction by courtesy to be included as propositions under

his somewhat unsatisfying technical distinction, senseless (*sinnlos*), because they do not picture facts in the world (4.462), but not nonsensical (*unsinnig*), because they are “part of the symbolism” (4.4611). Anything else falling outside the exactly drawn perimeter that is neither a logically contingent true or false picture of the constitutive facts of a world, nor a tautology or contradiction, is not a meaningful use of language in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Language serves only the interest of descriptive science, although its logic is also important for mathematics, while whatever stands outside the exact recursion established by the general form of proposition, including things of the greatest value or importance in our lives, is nondiscursive, in many instances concerning things like value and logical, pictorial and representational form transcend linguistic expression, implying that our thoughts about them are inherently ineffable.³

The later Wittgenstein in contrast is sensitive to the fact that we can do many more kinds of things in language than merely describe a choice of logically contingent facts about the world. We can, just to scratch the surface, give orders and obey them, he says, tell jokes, speculate about an event, buy five red apples at a store, make up and narrate a story, deliver a eulogy, issue instructions in an organized activity like building a structure from blocks, pillars, beams and slabs (§§2, 11, 23–27).⁴ Wittgenstein regards such practical language-related activities as among the language games our cultures have evolved and in some sense invented to serve a diverse family of particular pragmatic interests, the rules for which are determined in turn by the “point” and “purpose” of each language game’s rules (§§562–567).

Language games are invented by devising a system of rules, and they are played by following the rules (§567). We must follow the rules strategically under changing circumstances in order to play a game successfully, including simple and complicated language games, in order to win against a competitor, when that sort of winning is defined by the rules, including the lexical and philosophical grammatical rules, or to have some kind of satisfactory outcome. Wittgenstein’s specific application of family resemblance predications to the example of games alerts us to the fact that we should not expect all games to have any single nature. Some games will have a conspicuous feature where it exists at all, and other games will not (§§69–71). Comparisons of language games and board games or sports-related games can only go so far, and we cannot criticize language games because they do not share what may seem at first to be indispensable from the limited perspective offered by the particular subdomain of games that we may happen to have in mind. Language games like board games have rules, even if not all games are rule-governed activities in the sense of having their rules printed on the inside of a box cover.

The question as to what rules are, in the case of games generally and language games in particular, is therefore an indispensable part of Wittgenstein's post-*Tractatus* inquiry into the meaning of language. The question leads Wittgenstein to the more basic problem of understanding the origin and existence conditions of rule-governed games, and hence of the invention of games. Games do not grow on tendrils waiting for the hook, but are invented by thinking human subjects involved in a variety of activities instantiating a form of life (§§19, 23, 241; II pp. 174, 226). Problems about how games are invented, what it means to invent a game, and the invention of games by means of the establishment of rules, systematic and calculated, evolved, or of another description, are accordingly appropriately addressed by Wittgenstein as germane to his pragmatic theory of meaning in the later philosophy. Wittgenstein in the later as opposed to the early period believes that there can be no complete account of the conditions for meaningful expression in a of language without a searching investigation of where games including language games come from, and of what is or is not needed in order to institute the rules by which games are defined.

2. Why Once Is Not Enough

Wittgenstein considers the conditions for inventing a game in three main passages of *Philosophical Investigations*. He remarks, first:

204. As things are I can, for example, invent a game that is never played by anyone. — But would the following be possible too: mankind has never played any games; once, however, someone invented a game — which no one ever played?

When Wittgenstein says “as things are,” he refers to the extant culture in which games have a role in human social life. There exist games of different kinds, even leaving language games out of account for the moment as the principal focus of interest until we understand something more about the nature of games in general. This fact about how our form of life has been instantiated makes it possible for us to invent or to conceive of the inventing of a game that is never actually played.

Presumably, the invention of a game that is never played is accomplished by applying our understanding of what is to count as a game. We possess such understanding by virtue of having participated in existent games, and we create a new game by devising a set of rules that had previously not been instituted or imagined. The rules are fixed, at least in the game inventor's mind, but as it happens no one ever plays the game. Perhaps the world comes to an end just then, or, having invented the game by working out its rules, the game is not played because of lack of interest or other distractions. Such

a scenario Wittgenstein finds conceivable. We can project the possibility conservatively by beginning with a known game, such as chess, and then proposing a new set of rules for a game other than chess, in which, for example, the king is permitted to move three steps rather than just one step in any direction.

The fictional putative “rules” are designed and checked, and may even be written down or in another way recorded, but we are to suppose that they are never actually implemented. They are never put into action in the actual playing of precisely this game as a variant of standard chess. Such an occurrence is thinkable, Wittgenstein seems to believe, because the possibility of a new game that is never played supervenes on our understanding of the existence of games that are constituted by different sets of rules that are actually followed when those games are actually played. It is only from the perspective and with the benefit of our social involvement in a culture of games that we can imagine game inventors in the circumstances Wittgenstein describes inventing a game that is never played when its rules are never followed. Significantly, for Wittgenstein’s understanding of the philosophical grammar of “game” and “rule,” an unplayed game is conceivable for us gamers as the devising a set of rules for a game, but only because we have the relevant concepts assimilated from our own game-related practices. We know what games are. We play games, and in the course of learning to play games and familiarizing ourselves with this family of activities, we also acquire, if we have not already done so from another context, the concept of what a rule is, as we learn how a rule is followed and how it is broken or violated in playing a game. Armed with this knowledge, it is then no heroic stretch for us to imagine a game inventor in a games-playing culture who cooks up a set of rules for a brand new game, which, as fate would have it, is never actually played.

Wittgenstein rhetorically asks the philosophically more interesting question whether it would then be possible, if there had never been any games at any point in human history, in very different circumstances from those in which we find ourselves “as things are,” for someone to have invented the first and only game by formulating a set of rules for a game that is never actually played. Wittgenstein thinks there could be no such game, and we must wonder why in order to understand what Wittgenstein means by a game and by rule following in a game, including the language games that are the ultimate target of Wittgenstein’s inquiry.

Why should we not be able to combine the two scenarios Wittgenstein describes? We know that games are invented, even if they are shaped-up out of other kinds of activities, such as practicing for the hunt. If we think back to the origin of games within human culture, then there must have been a first game, even if it only involved trying to throw stones in order to see who

of several participants can strike nearest to a fixed mark. If there are games as a historical fact about our species, then there must have been a first game. It would appear, if all games are constituted by rules designed in the service of a particular point and purpose, as Wittgenstein declares, then the first game must also have had such rules. We project an imaginary state of affairs involving only some of the real facts about the occasion on which the first game in our prehistory is about to be played. After the event occurs, we can probably agree with Wittgenstein that the first game upon actually being played has actually been invented. Wittgenstein wants to deny that the game was invented when an ancestor had the first bright idea for a rule that we in our culture today and as things are would recognize as a rule for a game. The question for criticism is whether or not Wittgenstein is right. For now we further combine the second major feature of Wittgenstein's thought experiment, by supposing that just prior to the moment when the first game is about to be played for the first time something intervenes to prevent its happening. The world comes to an abrupt end, as previously proposed, or suddenly there are more pressing needs and no leisure opportunity for game-playing. So the whole idea of playing a game at least temporarily dies on the vine.

The revised thought experiment appears just as intelligible as the one Wittgenstein describes under prevailing circumstances, "as things are." Wittgenstein, however, must draw a sharp distinction between the two cases, denying that there could conceivably be a first game constituted by rules that is never actually played, when considered against a background in which games and game-playing by rule-following have not already evolved as part of any human form of life. We must nevertheless ask, given the close analogies between the two thought experiments, why for Wittgenstein it could not be the case that, just as the very first game was about to be played, circumstances intrude to prevent what would have been the first game with all its constitutive rules intact from actually being played?

Wittgenstein might answer that, in the imagined circumstances where no game has ever been played, the concept of game as we know it can have no application. If the event in question would have been the first playing of a game, a playing of the first game, then the unexecuted idea for the game is not an idea for a game, even within the confines of the thought experiment assumptions, but only something ineluctably subjunctive that would have been an idea for a game, if only there had been such a thing as a game for the idea to intend. A game as an activity is a practice, and practice means that the activity has actually been engaged in. Otherwise it is only an idea or an intending of the activity, or of the rules for a rule-governed activity, which is not yet a practice. The philosophical grammar of the word "practice" assures that we can only be talking about an activity that, to speak redundantly, has actually been put into practice. We do not chop wood merely by intending to

do so, even if we must intend to chop wood in order to chop it as an action we at least try to perform. There can accordingly be no practice of chopping wood unless someone actually chops some. By analogy, there can be no practice of game-playing unless some games have actually been played. If games, including language games, as activities are practices, then the thought experiment in which the rules for a first unplayed language game is imagined or intended by a first language game inventor is unintelligible.

The only way to break Wittgenstein's chain of reasoning as interpretively reconstructed would then be to deny that games are activities, that activities are practices, or that practices as opposed to merely imagined or intended practices must have actually been engaged in, actually put into practice. If practices by definition are actually exemplified, as it seems right to say, even independently of Wittgenstein's grasp of the philosophical grammar of these terms, if that part of Wittgenstein's remarks does not invite criticism, then we could only object to the assumption that games are practices.

Does Wittgenstein here fall victim to his own philosophical disease diagnosed in §593, a one-sided diet of examples? Could he be thinking only of actual games, and not of merely imagined or intended games? Why not say that actual games are actually played, generally more than once in order to satisfy the requirements of an actual practice, while virtual games are actually imagined or intended, but not actually played, in order to satisfy the requirements of a virtual practice? Again, Wittgenstein need only reply that he is interested in the family resemblance concept of game, rather than the concept of virtual game, in his efforts to understand the conditions for the meaningfulness of moves made in a wide variety of language games. Additionally, however, Wittgenstein argues that the phrase "virtual practice" blatantly violates the philosophical grammar of these two words by juxtaposing them incoherently. If a practice is merely virtual, it is not a practice. Wittgenstein does not consider a virtual practice to be a kind of practice, but something other than that, just as he might not consider fool's gold to be a kind of gold. A practice, if we rightly interpret Wittgenstein's perception of its philosophical grammar, is something that has actually been put into practice, just as an activity is something that has been activated. We reserve these kinds of words to mark precisely that tautology about this type of event, whereas we have another distinct and typically derivative vocabulary to refer in the abstract to something that may or may not actually be instantiated, as when we speak of a merely virtual activity or virtual practice, an idea for a merely imagined or intended activity or practice.

The mistake Wittgenstein detects in thought experiments about an unplayed merely imagined or intended first game is in trying to extend our understanding of the relevant concepts to a situation in which the idea of inventing a game merely by thinking up a set of rules could not constitute even hypo-

thetical rules for a game. Wittgenstein must nevertheless grapple, as he does, with the scope and limits of intentionality in the invention of games. If intentionality alone were sufficient to invent a game, then it could also do so in the special case of language games. If intentionality alone were sufficient to invent the rules for a game, however, then it should be able to do so in every case, including the case of the first game. This is impossible in the case of the first game, Wittgenstein argues, which reflects back on the falsehood of the assumption that intentionality alone is sufficient to invent a game. For, grammatically, there are no games in the sense of extant practices at that hypothetical stage in the thought experiment's imaginary human history for the first game inventor to intend.

Intentionality, however, by reputation is supposed to be capable of linking thought to both existent and nonexistent objects. So, what difference can it make if Wittgenstein is right to insist that there are no games until some games are actually played, and that these games must even be played more than once in order to establish game-playing rule-following as an activity and practice, if a first invented game could be intended but never played? A critic might argue that this is how human invention generally works. At one time there were no motorcars but someone had the idea for such a vehicle and channeled the necessary materials, time and energy into making one.

Such an argument appears at first to challenge Wittgenstein's conclusion, but on reflection it merely constitutes more grist for Wittgenstein's mill. Wittgenstein would also want to hold that if the inventor who first intended to make a motorcar before any motorcars actually existed or the entire culture had perished that the motorcar would not have thereby been invented. The idea for a motorcar would have been invented, in a loose sense of the word, but a motorcar would not have been invented. Alternatively, Wittgenstein could reply that since there exist vehicles and there exist engines in the actual history of the motorcar's development, so there is no violation of philosophical grammar in imagining that an inventor in a comparable thought experiment might intend to make a new kind of engine-powered vehicle that is never actually built. By analogy, the putative first game inventor in the thought experiment in which the game is never actually played has not invented the first game, but at most and in a similarly loose sense would only have invented the idea for a game.

If this is a correct explanation, at least of what Wittgenstein might need or want to say about the problem, then, with reference to the imaginary context in which the example is supposed to occur, we cannot even truthfully say that such thoughts could occur. If the game inventor must intend that a certain set of rules provide the basis for a *game*, then the inventor must already know what kind of thing a game is or what kind of thing it would be, and this is precluded by the terms of the thought experiment itself, under

which the very first game has yet to be played. Wittgenstein amplifies the thought experiment in this way:

200. It is, of course, imaginable for two people belonging to a tribe unacquainted with games should sit at a chess-board and go through the moves of a game of chess; and even with all the appropriate mental accompaniments. And if *we* were to see it we should say they were playing chess. But now imagine a game of chess translated according to certain rules into a series of actions which we do not ordinarily associate with a *game* — say into yells and stamping of feet. And now suppose those two people to yell and stamp instead of playing the form of chess that we are used to; and this in such a way that their procedure is translatable by suitable rules into a game of chess. Should we still be inclined to say they were playing a game? What right would one have to say so?

We might nevertheless wonder if approximately the same kind of limitation plagues other types of intentions for inventions. Suppose there are as yet no stone axes, and an early hominid arrives at the idea of shaping a naturally occurring stone and attaching it to a wooden haft in order to make one, but is somehow prevented from acting. Shall we also conclude in such a case that the idea was not actually an idea for an axe, since there are as yet no axes?

Doubts might be raised, because, although the putative axe inventor would not have the concept of an axe in anything like the way that we understand it, we might nevertheless reasonably suppose that the imagined inventor would still have had the idea of a stone attached to a stick that could be used to pound or cut. Arguably, that development might be close enough to our idea of a primitive axe to constitute the first hypothetically unrealized idea for or intention of making an axe, thwarted, as the thought experiment has it, before being put into practice. It seems accidental to the *concept*, after all, whether or not the idea is put into practice. And it is the *concept* of a game that Wittgenstein invokes in order to explain the conditions of meaningfulness for expression or effectiveness in many different kinds of language games.

Thus, we return to a problem that we may otherwise have seemed to put to rest, given Wittgenstein's larger project in *Philosophical Investigations*. Why we should not say the same about the thought experiment ancestor who thinks of a rule for an Ur-game that is also not actually brought to fruition by actually being played? Why is the projected event of having intended the rules for a first game that is never actually played, since we can intend both existent and nonexistent objects, since such an intending reflects possession of the relevant concept, and given that all Wittgenstein needs in order to explain the meaning of language use is the concept of a rule-governed game?

The answer has to do with the relation between games and their defining rules, and with Wittgenstein's understanding of what it means to obey a rule as an aspect of the practical activities that constitute a form of life:

199. Is what we call 'obeying a rule' something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do, and to do only *once* in his life? — This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression 'to obey a rule.'

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood, and so on. — To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions).

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.

Wittgenstein's alter ego, the interlocutor, who may be legion, who frequently questions Wittgenstein's temptations and inclinations to say one thing or another in the ongoing dialogue of remarks and counter-remarks in the text, poses a similar concern, focusing in the subsequent passage on one aspect of the real underlying subject of Wittgenstein's inquiry. The suggestion is made that the power of intentionality overrides the facts of historical anthropology:

205. "But it is just the queer thing about *intention*, about the mental process, that the existence of a custom, of a technique, is not necessary to it. That, for example, it is imaginable that two people should play chess in a world in which otherwise no games existed; and even that they should begin a game of chess — and then be interrupted."

But isn't chess defined by its rules? And how are these rules present in the mind of the person who is intending to play chess?

Looking ahead to the main direction of Wittgenstein's later thought, and to the context in which these questions about the conceptual presuppositions of games, rules for games, and game-playing belong, it is clear that Wittgenstein must deny that intention is sufficient to explain semantic phenomena, and most fundamentally to explain the conditions under which it is possible for a given name to refer to a particular object.

Do we achieve the designation of things by words simply by intending the word to represent the thing? Wittgenstein denies this most vigorously, and, again, we must struggle to follow his reasoning and understand why he should be unwilling to allow the intentionality of thought to serve as a primitive, conceptually irreducible explanation of the connection made between names and named objects at the foundations of meaningful expression in language. Returning to the case of games in general, it can only be intel-

ligible for someone outside any games playing culture to intend a set of rules for a first game, the innovator must be able to intend specifically to create a game. The objection from Wittgenstein seems to be that no one can have such an intention unless or until games as activities and game-playing as a practice are already on the scene. Wittgenstein in this suite of comments accordingly makes explicit at least a main part of the philosophical grammatical connection between rule-following and the private language argument:

202. And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately;' otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.

3. Pragmatic Origins of Games and Rules for Games

How, then, does the first game get invented? We might compare the origin of games in Wittgenstein's account with what Spinoza says about the origin of tools in his (1677) *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (*On the Improvement of the Understanding: Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding and on the Way in Which It May Be Directed Toward a True Knowledge of Things*).

Spinoza asks how the invention of tools can possibly get started, when it appears that one must already have a tool in order to make one. His pragmatic down-to-earth answer is that there have been naturally occurring tools, stone, bone, tree bark, grasses, branches of wood, and the like. These objects can be used just as they are for certain purposes, and then turned upon one another in order eventually to make more modern implements. Spinoza explains the problem and its commonsense solution:

The matter stands on the same footing as the making of material tools, which might be argued about in a similar way [as the apparent circularity in efforts to gain knowledge]. For, in order to work iron, a hammer is needed, and the hammer cannot be forthcoming unless it has been made; but, in order to make it, there was need of another hammer and other tools, and so on to infinity. We might thus vainly endeavor to prove that men have no power of working iron. But as men at first made use of the instruments provided by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labor and greater perfection; and so gradually mounted from the simplest operations to the making of tools, and from the making of tools to the making of more complex tools, and fresh feats of workmanship, till they arrived at making, with small expenditure of labor, the vast number of complicated mechanisms which they now possess.⁵

We find a stone, which after all in many places are literally thick on the ground, and through trial and error we work it with another stone into what experience teaches might be a desired shape. The process leading toward the creation of the most sophisticated kinds of tools is thereby underway with no magic required. The fact that we can often not point to a specific moment at which a first tool and the concept of a tool enters a culture, the exact event when a naturally occurring object along the continuum becomes a tool, or, by analogy, when a naturally occurring activity becomes a first invented game, only highlights the fact that games and rules for games, including language games, cannot be essentialistically defined, but are family-resemblance related, grading off imperceptibly from a background of originating activities that are only distantly related to the practice of game-playing.

Invoking Spinoza in this connection is not farfetched, because we know that Wittgenstein read and was influenced by Spinoza in his early period. The impact is seen in the *Tractatus* 6.45 references to Spinoza's concept of the world seen *sub specie aeterni*. A further conspicuous point of contact is Wittgenstein's frequent mention of tools and using tools, of the different words in a language as like the different tools in a tool kit with different purposes. These examples may also relate to Wittgenstein's engineering experience and perhaps to his practical efforts to communicate concepts to schoolchildren during the years between the *Tractatus* and *The Blue and Brown Books*. The point that Wittgenstein would probably want to emphasize is that the making of tools is a process that begins without intending as such to make a tool. The early hominid cannot intend to make a tool until naturally occurring objects that can be used as tools are incrementally modified for specific purposes and a cultural institution of tool making and using is set in place.

What, then, if anything, do the first tool-makers intend? They may intend to shape a stone, or to use a stone or piece of wood to accomplish some purpose without thinking of it being a tool, and without intending to make a first tool, but rather as a natural rather than artifact utilizing activity, just as some birds use thorns to extract grubs from under tree bark presumably with no tool-related intentions. Or the first tool-makers and users might intend simply to crack open a coconut and pick up a stone to do the work, without intending that the stone thereby become anything in particular. We act experimentally, so to speak, in many such instances. Only later do we understand what has worked and what has not worked, and as a consequence we are capable only afterward of intending to repeat a successful type of action in order to make or invent something new of like kind. We can intend to split apart a coconut, and we can intend to do so with a stone. The stone that we use for the job may thereby become the first *de facto* tool. Once we have things that we use regularly as tools, when we have acquired the concept of a

tool and are familiar with at least some of its instances, then we can also intend to repeat our successful actions by inventing and making more tools. If Wittgenstein is right, however, then we cannot intend to make a tool before there are any tools. For our intention could be about or directed toward no specific existent or nonexistent object, and there could be no answer to the question as to what we were intending that involved tools generally or a particular kind of tool as intended object. Since intending without intending any definite object is conceptually incoherent, we are confused if we believe that such intentions are conceivable.⁶

Can we not rather say, then, that the inventor of the first game may have merely intended to pass the time in a structured way, that the structure for such a time-passing activity is what we now call a system of rules, and that such rules define what we now call a game? If Wittgenstein's objection to the first merely intended invention of an unrealized game is not to amount to a mere lexical quibble, then there must still be something more fundamental underwriting his observation that it would not be possible for intending alone to create a first system of rules for a first game that is never actually played, and hence for a first language game.

4. Philosophical Grammar in the Invention of Games

Later in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein provocatively writes:

492. To invent a language could mean to invent an instrument for a particular purpose on the basis of the laws of nature (or consistently with them); but it also has the other sense, analogous to that in which we speak of the invention of a game.

Here I am stating something about the grammar of the word 'language,' by connecting it with the grammar of the word 'invent.'

Undoubtedly Wittgenstein is saying something about the grammar of the word "language," and undoubtedly he is somehow connecting it to the grammar of the word "invent." What, however, is he exactly saying? The problem of explaining the grammatical connections that Wittgenstein finds obvious, let alone tracing out his reasons for supposing that such grammatical linkages exist, is among the most rewarding interpretive problems presented by Wittgenstein's difficult text.⁷

We may easily find ourselves echoing Wittgenstein's question borne of impatience and frustration at the problems of understanding these deeply interwoven relations within language, and the practical activities with which language games are integrated, when Wittgenstein demands, in §37 previously quoted: "What is the relation between name and thing named? — Well, what *is* it?" What indeed? The later Wittgenstein, in stark contrast to the semantic

transcendentalism of the *Tractatus*, seems to think that, since “everything lies open to view” and “what is hidden...is of no interest to us” (§126), we need only “look” at instances of naming and the teaching of names in order to “see” how names name things in specific correlation. The effort is nevertheless no easier for Wittgenstein than it is for us in trying to understand the conclusions at which he finally arrives.⁸

Wittgenstein does not like to take us by the hand from A to B, or even to C. Instead he pounces, leapfrogging over what he takes to be obvious fine points, from A to K. He does so perhaps because he already knows where he thinks he is going. We as readers, on the other hand, must then try to figure out how he thinks he gets there by piecing together the most likely or reasonable intervening steps. Wittgenstein says, perhaps tongue in cheek, in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, vi: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking.” Certainly the book on the whole has not done that. With so many things left open, with tantalizing dangles on every page, Wittgenstein’s remarks have been preordained to inspire multiple conflicting interpretations of his ideas, as has frequently occurred.

An exercise for another occasion would be to line up and compare competing readings of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, about what he is trying to do in the book, of the aim and structure of the so-called private language argument, and all the other content of the text, to argue for some interpretations as more faithful to the writings than others. Instead, for the moment, we propose, develop and defend an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* remarks on the invention of games that explains why, despite appearances, it is actually unintelligible, in the sense of being philosophically ungrammatical, to imagine that a game as we are to understand this kind of activity is not invented merely by intending a set of rules, and hence why intention alone is inadequate to explain the rules for language games whereby specific objects are named by particular names.

A merely intended set of rules for a first game in a world where rule-governed game playing does not exist and where no game has ever actually been played does not make sense for Wittgenstein, because it stands in violation of the word’s philosophical grammar. A game is something we do, an activity, rather than an idea for engaging in an activity or an abstract construction of rules for an activity. If I play a game, then I must intend to do so; but I do not play a game merely by intending to do so. Where language games are concerned in the naming of things and calling for them by their names or shopping for five red apples in the market, or the like, Wittgenstein emphasizes that the rules for naming and using other linguistic instruments from the tool box in corresponding language games cannot merely be intended, but must instead be part of an established practice. If mere intending were enough for the invention of an activity such as a game,

including any pragmatically explicable language game, then there would be a straightforward “spiritual” answer to the question of how it is that names and named objects get paired-up. We simply intend that this name refer to this object, and the work is done. This Wittgenstein staunchly denies. We have in part already seen why. But further, regardless of Wittgenstein’s own rationale, to whatever extent it might be recovered from his reflections, what good reasons can possibly support the conclusion that new games cannot be invented merely by intending a new system of game-defining rules?

The previously missing step in this interpretation of Wittgenstein’s line of reasoning now explains why Wittgenstein should want to hold that games cannot simply be invented “in the head” by invoking the criteria for correctness that in similar application are supposed to disallow the possibility of a private sensation language. The explanation is complex, but we explode it into a series of distinct steps, as though in an argument, and we include brief discussion of what seems to be the exact motivation for Wittgenstein’s discussion of the invention of games, as we understand it, to fit the interpretation being advanced.

(1) Wittgenstein introduces the topic of the invention of games in order to refute the “spiritual” (*geistlicher*) suggestion that the naming of objects can be accomplished psychologically by inner rather than external behavioral ostension, as a first move in a language game undertaken entirely by intention or intentionality, merely by intending that a certain name should name a certain object.

(2) Wittgenstein maintains, as a principle of philosophical grammar with immediate implications for philosophical anthropology, that the invention of a very first game (of any kind, language games included and of particular interest) could not be accomplished entirely by intention or intentionality, merely intending that a certain rule should be followed.

(3) Criteria of correctness are needed to name objects, as illustrated by Wittgenstein’s invoking their absence in “going through the motions” of trying to name an individual sensation as *S* in a private sensation diary. Satisfying criteria of correctness in this sense means being able in principle to ascertain that the same object designated by the same name is encountered on multiple occasions. This, Wittgenstein maintains, cannot be done in the case of putative private sensations like recurring pains at different times and places. We cannot answer the question whether a pain in the right forefinger experienced yesterday is the same individual object, identically the same pain, or a different numerically distinct pain albeit with phenomenologically indistinguishable properties from yesterday’s sensation, or even the same pain that has moved from one place in the subject’s body to another, and so we cannot name private mental events in the way that we can name a child, a

dog, a goldfish, building, cruise ship, or the like, for which the use of names has a pragmatic point and purpose.

(4) Wittgenstein offers this restriction on naming as part of the philosophical grammar of naming. To name something is to establish a one-one relation between a name and an object, and, in the case of private mental events such as pains purport to be, we cannot even in principle determine whether or not we have access to the same mental event from one occasion to the next. Since we cannot name them, private mental events, including acts of intending, equally cannot serve as naming relations, as mental psychological names or namings or intendings to name that can connect the private mental event of intending in the act of naming to a specific object. The object outside of thought, the child or hamster or goldfish that we propose to name, cannot be named Augustine-fashion by pointing at the object and uttering its name, because of the referential underdetermination of pure behavior ostension. Something more is required. Nor can the object be named merely by intending that the name should refer to precisely this object, however the object is practically individuated.

(5) The instructive reason seems to be that pure intending or a pure act of intention as a private mental event is itself incapable even in principle of being practically individuated as a single nameable thing, as we learn from the private language argument which precedes the discussion of inventing games in Wittgenstein's text, and the unavailability of criteria of correctness for the naming of private sensations such as purported pain sensation *S* as an individual nameable object. If the pure intending or pure act of intention were not private, then we should have to handle it as §36 carves things up in roughly Cartesian style, as a bodily or *körperliche* rather than spiritual or *geistliche* answer to the riddle of how names name. Wittgenstein's distinction is thus construed as a variation on the deep and perennial philosophical divide between externalism and internalism in the philosophy of mind reflected immediately in the only viable philosophical semantics.

(6) If private mental events, including pure intendings or pure internal acts of intention considered in isolation from any accompanying external actions, are not capable even in principle of being practically individuated, then they cannot serve as they would need to do if intention were sufficient in and of itself to invent a first game. If pure intention is inadequate to invent a first game, then it is inadequate to explain the origin of games in general, including those most basic language games in which objects are named. To conceive of such a possibility, we would need to correlate a particular imagined act of intending a particular rule for a first unplayed game with the unplayed game itself, and this we cannot do if we lack identity conditions for particular intendings in the form of criteria of correctness.

(7) Not only are there no individual instances of unfollowed and unbroken or unviolated rules for a first ever unplayed game to be invoked, but equally there are no acts of intention, construed as private mental events and as such incapable of being named as individuals, by which the rules for an unfol-
lowed and unbroken or unviolated set of rules for a first ever unplayed game. We would need to correlate such particular intendings with particular uninstantiated rules, satisfying criteria of correctness to provide identity conditions on both sides, in order to make sense of such a hypothesis. Wittgenstein concludes on the contrary that outside of our actual cultural development, in the rarefied extra-pragmatic extra-practical-activity atmosphere in which the *geistliche* intentional solution is imagined to take place, we lack any such identity criteria for particular intendings or acts of intention. If the imagined act of intending cannot be named because it does not satisfy Wittgenstein's grammatical criteria of correctness requirement, then no such correlation is conceivable, because there is no individually nameable psychological event to be correlated with what we may otherwise want to think of as the first unplayed game.

(8) Hence, games generally are not invented purely by intending a corresponding new system of rules. They must be rules for a game, and if games are practices, then the very fact that everything comes unglued if the game is never actually played is testimony to Wittgenstein's conclusion that intention alone is never sufficient to invent a game, or, therefore, to name an object by an intentional act of inner ostension. We cannot understand the naming relation purely as a correlation between name and named object, if the correlation is supposed to be accomplished entirely in the abstract in each case by a particular intention or intending act.

5. Rules for Games in a Form of Life

The Augustinian "bodily" or *körperliche* account of naming is roundly defeated by the referential underdetermination of pure behavioral ostension. The (Brentanian? Husserlian?) "spiritual" or *geistliche* solution is equally defeated via the private language argument by undermining the essential particularity requirement for correlating the intention to use a particular name to refer to a specific object as mediating between the named object and its name.

When both body and spirit are exhausted, we have no "pure" possibilities remaining, neither pure behavioral ostension nor pure intending. Philosophical semantics, as informal and unsystematic as it appears in Wittgenstein's later writings, must combine movement and intention in a concept of action pragmatically understood, in which language use is one among many tools for accomplishing a wide variety of purposes, in language games with rules

whose point and purpose are fixed by practical circumstantial needs, and with its own distinctive natural history.

If we (speech) act, then in some sense we must intend to verbally behave. We decide, however automatically much of the mechanism functions, to move our vocal cords, tongue, lips, etc. But we do not (speech) act merely by intending to do these things. Thus, we cannot adequately explain the relation between a name and the object it names by referring exclusively either to our bodily movements or to our private intendings in the intentionality of our thoughts as we name something or think about or try to teach its name to another language user. If the purity of the body and spirit approaches fail, then we must get dirty instead in the actual world of what it is we do and try to do with language as a powerful tool.

We must look instead to the impure mixture of body and spirit in the actions by which we communicate, beginning with the acts of naming that Wittgenstein compares to the setting out of pieces on a chess board as something we do first as a preparation for play. When we understand why neither pure behavioral ostension nor pure intentionality can adequately explain the naming of objects as the most fundamental first step in engaging in even the most primitive of our pragmatically rooted language games, then we may come to appreciate that another kind of explanation for rule-governed game-playing generally and language game-playing in particular is required. Wittgenstein sketches the landscapes afforded by such actual language games as though in a travel notebook, voyeuristically encountering what it is that people do when they engage in linguistic exchange. He reflects finally on the implications of pragmatically grounded activities for the nonexistence of philosophical language games, of philosophy as a meaningful practice, previously declared in *Tractatus* 4.111 on very different grounds as standing “above or below, but not beside the natural sciences.” From a very different perspective than that afforded by the early philosophy, Wittgenstein in the later writings is thereby positioned to pronounce all putative philosophical concepts, questions, answers, principles, and propositions, as meaningless, deeply and often almost inscrutably in violation of the pragmatically originating and justifying philosophical grammar of terms and phrases in the toolkits of genuine language games.⁹

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”*, edited by Rush Rhees, 2nd edition (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 1.

2. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, edited by C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 5.526 (all parenthetical references to and translation from this edition).

3. On ineffability in the *Tractatus*, see, among numerous other recommended sources, P.M.S. Hacker, “When the Whistling Had to Stop,” in *Wittgensteinian Themes: Essays in Honour of David Pears*, edited by David Charles and William Child (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 13–48. A.W. Moore and Peter Sullivan, “Ineffability and Nonsense,” *Supplement to the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 77, 2003, pp. 169–193 (Part I, Moore); pp. 195–223 (Part II, Sullivan). All the literature surrounding the work of the “New Wittgensteinians,” efforts to deploy the saying-showing distinction to make sense of the semantic role of aspects of meaning conventionally understood that are excluded by Wittgenstein’s general form of proposition, and the controversies involving “resolute” versus “irresolute” readings especially *Tractatus* 6.54 and 7 in context are relevant to the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s text as involving the ineffability of at least some of what Wittgenstein declares to be literal nonsense, including all the sentences of the *Tractatus* itself.

4. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edition, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, edited by Anscombe and Rhees (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1968) (all parenthetical references to and translations from this edition).

5. Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding* in Spinoza, *Ethics, Preceded by On the Improvement of the Understanding*, translated and edited with an introduction by James Gutmann and interpretive essay by Frederick J.E. Woodbridge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1949), p. 11.

6. It is sometimes said that intentional states need not be directed toward a specific object, as in cases where we fear something, but nothing in particular. The general case is made for intentionality as the direction of thought upon a specific object if we include as intended objects such states of affairs as “That something unwanted might occur.” This object is unambiguous enough to make the argument for the specificity of intention, without in this application supposing that the intending subject necessarily knows what specific unwanted occurrence might transpire. It is a distinct intended object, in the sense that it is phenomenologically different from other general objects of thought, such as the state of affairs as “That something pleasant or satisfying might occur.” Specificity at such a level of intended states of affairs is all that the present argument requires.

7. Wittgenstein further argues against the adequacy of Augustinian pure behavioral ostension as a method of naming and communicating the meanings of names, in a section of text that is not often discussed. He maintains in §28: “Now one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, the name of a point of the compass and so on. The definition of the number two, ‘That is called ‘two’ — pointing to two nuts — is perfectly exact. — But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know what one wants to call ‘two’; he will suppose that ‘two’ is the name given to *this* group of nuts! — He *may* suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake; when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might understand it as a numeral. And he might equally well take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition, as that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say: an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case.” If there are such individual entities as numbers that we can name but not point

to, then pure behavioral ostension will obviously not serve to explain all naming, teaching and designations of names. Wittgenstein does not pursue the argument in any depth, perhaps because of perennial realism-nominalism controversies and the questionable ontic status of abstract entities. See also §§29–35. In §33, Wittgenstein observes: “— And what does ‘pointing to the shape,’ ‘pointing to the colour’ consist in? Point to a piece of paper. — And now point to its shape — now to its colour — now to its number (that sounds queer). — How did you do it? —.”

8. Wittgenstein suggests in several places that pretheoretical observation of language game-playing ought to be sufficient to reveal the workings of language generally and naming in particular. He writes in §66 that we should not assume that all games have something in common, but rather “*look and see* whether there is anything common to all.” In §654, Wittgenstein writes: “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a ‘proto-phenomenon’. That is, where we ought to have said: *this language-game is played.*” See also §§144, 340.

9. I am grateful to an anonymous journal referee for useful comments and suggestions leading to an improved version of this essay. I thank my recent Wittgenstein seminar students at Bern in Spring semester 2014, for providing a sounding board and offering their reflections on this aspect of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.