I WANT YOU TO BRING ME A SLAB:
REMARKS ON THE OPENING SECTIONS OF THE
PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS*

The first few pages of the *Philosophical Investigations* are often seen as relatively unproblematic. To many this portion of the text has appeared reasonably clear in intent and operation, and, in the end, easily digestible. The source of such complacency is not hard to find. Many of Wittgenstein's remarks throughout his treatment of language and meaning seem to be directed against a naive mentalism, a view to the effect that meaning and allied notions are grounded in or constituted by occurrent mental phenomena, perhaps even mental images. Wittgenstein constantly urges us to look and see whether there are phenomena of the appropriate sorts "going on inside" when we assert a sentence, issue a command, point to a thing, attend to a property, and so on. Wittgenstein's presumed point is that when we find no such phenomena, the case is won.

So far this is easily digestible; but to take Wittgenstein's primary object to be naive mentalism is to take him to be attacking a straw man. It is difficult to find any significant philosopher whose doctrines could be so easily defeated. Indeed, such naive mentalism is most foreign to just those philosophers with whose views on language Wittgenstein is most concerned, viz., Frege and the author of the *Tractatus*. After all, the keynote of early analytic philosophy is "always to separate the logical from the psychological";¹ Frege and the early Wittgenstein are insistent on the irrelevance of the passing mental show to any questions of meaning. Their order of priority is clear: only *given* the structures they see as underlying objective communication can sense be made of psychological notions.

Of course, it could be claimed that, despite their protestations, the early analytic philosophers were in some straightforward way mentalists in disguise. Various commentators, led on, I believe, by their complacent construal of the *Investigations' early sections, have read mentalism back into Frege and the early Wittgenstein. These readings are, to my mind, simply unsupported by the texts. Moreover, they render it impossible to understand what the aims of early analytic philosophy were and how it could have effected the dramatic change it did.²

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My question, then, is how Wittgenstein’s seemingly naive remarks, and the passages in which they are embedded, could be meant to cut more deeply, i.e., to go beyond an attack on some rather unsophisticated theories of meaning. This question has a specifically exegetical form, for it is the question of the nature of Wittgenstein’s interlocutor in the opening sections. What stance does he represent, and why does Wittgenstein set up the particular oppositions that he does? The beginnings of an answer can come only from a close scrutiny of how these interactions unfold. In this, moreover, attention has to be paid to the ways Wittgenstein’s rejoinders and proposals may be meant to engage and provoke the reader, not merely to elicit acquiescence.

To take these questions seriously is to recognize a curious and pervasive feature of Wittgenstein’s method. Wittgenstein does not ordinarily set up as his opponent one who expresses anything recognizable as a philosophical theory of naming, meaning, mind, or what have you. The interlocutor does not voice developed philosophical positions; he is not a sophisticated Fregean or Tractarian, who puts forward some tenet not of his system to which Wittgenstein counters “not p”. This feature is sometimes characterized as Wittgenstein’s interest in “unmasking temptations”. Talk of temptations has its good points. It indicates that Wittgenstein seeks not so much to propose an alternative to such and such a philosophical theory, but to pull the rug out from under the theory. Moreover, it hints that to be successful Wittgenstein’s remarks must exact an acknowledgement that what he has pointed out is what might have led one on. Obtaining such an acknowledgement may require portraying the sources of a philosophical position rather than refuting the position: it may well be more a matter of depiction than of argument.

“Unmasking temptations”, however, is a slogan. Like all Wittgensteinian metaphilosophical slogans, if it is not supported by a detailed account of what is going on in the sections where the work is being done, it can mean anything. Indeed, the slogan can mislead in suggesting that there are specific theses which play the role of unnoticed premises (in, e.g., Frege’s arguments), which are beguiling, but which can be recognized as incorrect or misguided as soon as they are made explicit.

Rather, what Wittgenstein wishes to bring to light operates at a more basic level. For in these sections Wittgenstein is examining what it is to begin looking for a philosophical account of language and meaning. The