

WITTGENSTEIN, AUSTIN, AND THE ORIGINS OF SPEECH-ACT THEORY

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I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein,
1945 Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*

Let's see what Wittgenstein has to say about that.

—J. L. Austin,
1955, as recounted by George Pitcher (1973, 24)



PART ONE
INTRODUCTION

WITTGENSTEIN

Return
to Cambridge
1929

Dictates
Blue Book
1933

Death
1951

Philosophical
Investigations
1953

1935
Elected fellow of
Magdalen College

1955
William James
Lectures

1960
Death

1933

Graduates
from Balliol College

1962
How to do
Things with
Words

AUSTIN

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Did Wittgenstein influence Austin's philosophy of language?

If so, how and when?

TWO POPULAR ANSWERS

1. **PROPTER HOCISM**

Yes of course, obviously!

2. **OXONIAN DENIALISM**

Nothing could be further from the truth!

PROPTER HOCISM

Wittgenstein's new ideas, combined with Moore's common-sense philosophy, had a profound impact on a movement which emerged around the turn of the 1930s and dominated British philosophy until the 1960s. Its opponents called it 'ordinary language' or 'Oxford philosophy', since its most eminent proponents—Ryle, Austin and Strawson—were based there.

—Glock, *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (2008: 42)

Problems with **PROPTER HOCISM**:

- Nobody ever gives any evidence of the influence.
- Some people *strongly* disagree.

OXONIAN DENIALISM

I often read how much Austin was influenced by Wittgenstein. Nothing could be further from the truth. Austin had no sympathy whatever for **Wittgenstein**, and I think he was incapable of learning from someone whose style was so “loose.” He typically referred to Wittgenstein in the style of English schoolboy slang of the time as, “Witters,” pronounced “Vitters.” He thought there were no original ideas in Wittgenstein.

—Searle, ‘J. L. Austin’ (2001: 227)

OXONIAN DENIALISM

[Austin] did not join at any time in the general deference to Wittgenstein. The personal atmosphere surrounding Wittgenstein's work strongly repelled him; and it is of course crucial also that Wittgenstein rejected, deliberately and on principle, exactly that ideal of finality, of definite, clearly and fully stated solutions, which Austin regarded as alone worth seriously striving for. **That Wittgenstein influenced his views has been sometimes suggested, but is certainly untrue.**

—G. J. Warnock, 'John Langshaw Austin, A Biographical Sketch' (1969: 11)

The **OXONIAN DENIALIST** argument

1. Austin found Wittgenstein's conclusions and methodology to be irresponsible and "loose".
 2. Austin found Wittgenstein's work and personality to be distasteful.
-
3. Therefore, Austin was not influenced by Wittgenstein.

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ENTHYMEMATIC PREMISE

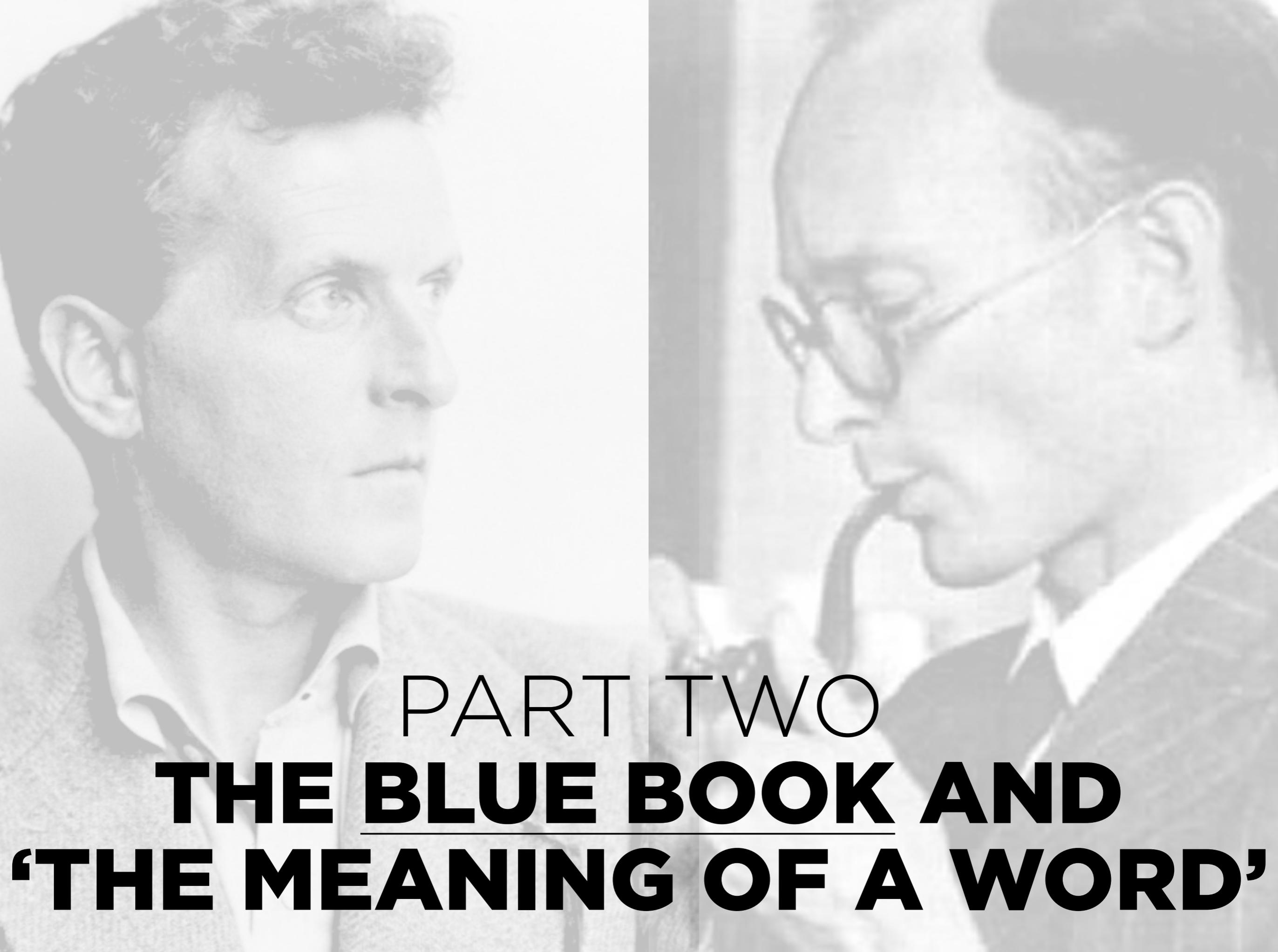
To influence = To gather disciples

ANOTHER KIND OF INFLUENCE

Younger Philosopher reacts to Older Philosopher's work by:

- Recognizing the importance of OP's questions.
- Coming to believe that they can give better answers to those questions by means of better methods.

E.g. Hume → Kant, Carnap → Quine, Quine → Lewis,
Dummett → Williamson, Sellars → Millikan,
Rawls → Anderson, ...



PART TWO

**THE BLUE BOOK AND
'THE MEANING OF A WORD'**

‘THE MEANING OF A WORD’

- Moral Sciences Club, February 1940.
- Was Wittgenstein in the audience?
- The Blue Book started circulating in Oxford in 1936/37.
- Austin expected Wittgenstein or his students to be present, this is clear from a close reading.

THE BLUE BOOK

- I. I. WHAT is the meaning of a word?
- I. II. Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation
- I. 2I. of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look
- I. 2II like?
- I. 22. The way this question helps us is analogous to the way the question
- 2. I. "how do we measure a length?" helps us to understand the problem
- "what is length?"
- 2. II. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) 'What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) "x"?'?

SPECIMENS OF NONSENSE

- I. I. What-is-the-meaning-of a word?
- I. II. What-is-the-meaning-of any word?
- I. I2. What-is-the-meaning-of a word in general?
- I. 2I. What is the-meaning-of-a-word?
- I. 2II. What is the-meaning-of-(the-word)-'rat'?
- I. 22. What is the 'meaning' of a word?
- I. 22I. What is the 'meaning' of (the word) 'rat'?
- 2. I. What-is-the-meaning-of (the phrase) 'the-meaning-of-a word'?
- 2. II. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) 'What is the-meaning-of-(the-word)-"x"?'?
- 2. I2. What-is-the-meaning-of (the sentence) 'What is the "meaning" of "the word" "x"?'?

I

I begin, then, with some remarks about 'the meaning of a word'. I think many persons now see all or part of what I shall say: but not all do, and there is a tendency to forget it, or to get it slightly wrong. In so far as I am merely flogging the converted, I apologize to them.

Who are 'the converted' and what caused their conversion?

(1) MEANING AS USE

- a) Wittgenstein: verbal/ostensive.
Austin: syntactic/semantic.

WHAT is the meaning of a word?

Let us attack this question by asking, first, what is an explanation of the meaning of a word; what does the explanation of a word look like?

Suppose that in ordinary life I am asked: 'What is the meaning of the word *racy*?' There are two sorts of thing I may do in response: I may reply *in words*, trying to describe what raciness is and what it is not, to give examples of sentences in which one might use the word *racy*, and of others in which one should not. Let us call this *sort* of thing 'explaining the syntactics' of the word 'racy' in the English language. On the other hand, I might do what we may call 'demonstrating the semantics' of the word, by getting the questioner to *imagine*, or even actually to *experience*, situations which we should describe correctly by means of sentences containing the words 'racy' 'raciness', &c., and again other situations where we should *not* use these words. This is, of course, a simple case: but

(1) MEANING AS USE

b) Explanations of 'meaningless' sentences.

Austin: "x is extended but has no shape."

"In ordinary life we never get into a situation where we learn to say that anything is extended but not shaped nor conversely. We have all **learned to use**, and **have used**, the words only in cases where it is correct to use both' (p. 68).

(1) MEANING AS USE

Wittgenstein:

“**Feeling** that the water is three feet deep.”

[...] we must examine the relation of the process of *learning to estimate* with the act of estimating. The importance of this examination lies in this, that it applies to the relation between learning the meaning of a word and making use of the word. (1960, 11, italics in original)

(1) MEANING AS USE

c) As a challenge to the analytic/synthetic distinction.

But this is the point: *if* 'explaining the meaning of a word' is really the complicated sort of affair that we have seen it to be, and *if* there is really nothing to call 'the meaning of a word'—*then* phrases like 'part of the meaning of the word x ' are completely undefined; it is left hanging in the air, we do not know what it means at all.

What seems to be true is that *using the word 'this'* (not: the word 'this') *gives it to be understood that* the sensum referred to 'exists'.

(2) 'AUGUSTINIAN' CONCEPTION

Wittgenstein: "... studying the grammar of the expression 'explanation of meaning' ... will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some **object** which you might call 'the meaning'" (p. 1).

"...we are looking at words as though they all were proper names, and we then confuse the bearer of a name with the meaning of the name". (p. 18)

(2) 'AUGUSTINIAN' CONCEPTION

Why are we tempted to slip back in this way? Perhaps there are two main reasons. First, there is the curious belief that all words are *names*, i.e. in effect *proper* names, and therefore stand for something or designate it in the way that a proper name does.

(3) THE BEWITCHMENT OF WORDS

Wittgenstein: "Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us" (p. 27).

Austin: our "powers of imagination" are "enslaved by words" (p. 67).

"... ordinary language blinkers the already feeble imagination" (p. 68).

(4) CRAVING FOR GENERALITY

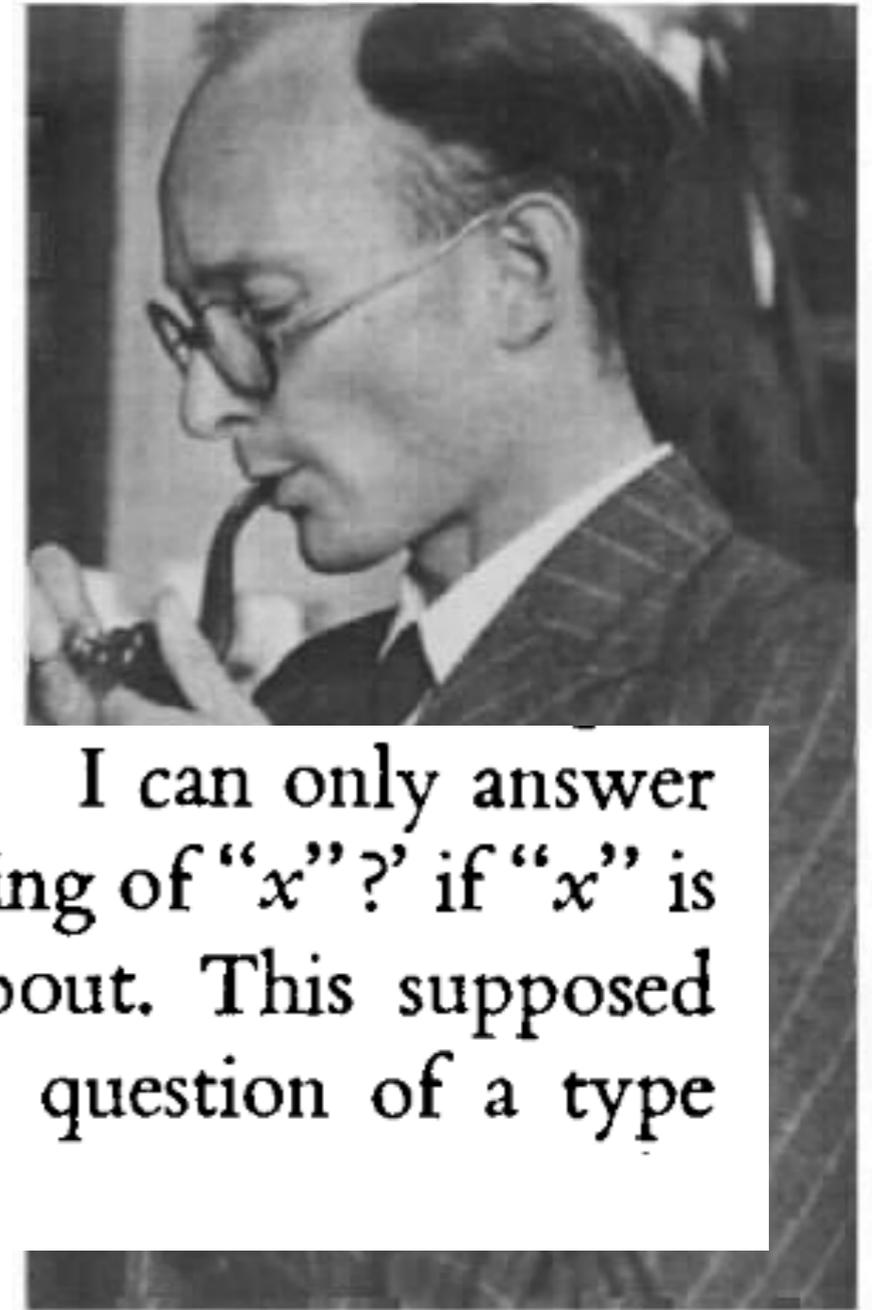
W: "What is the meaning of a word?" (p. 1)

Instead of asking general questions we ought to "look closely at particular cases" (p. 16)

Philosophers have a misplaced desire to emulate the method of science (p. 17-18)

(4) CRAVING FOR GENERALITY

Austin sees the inconsistency.

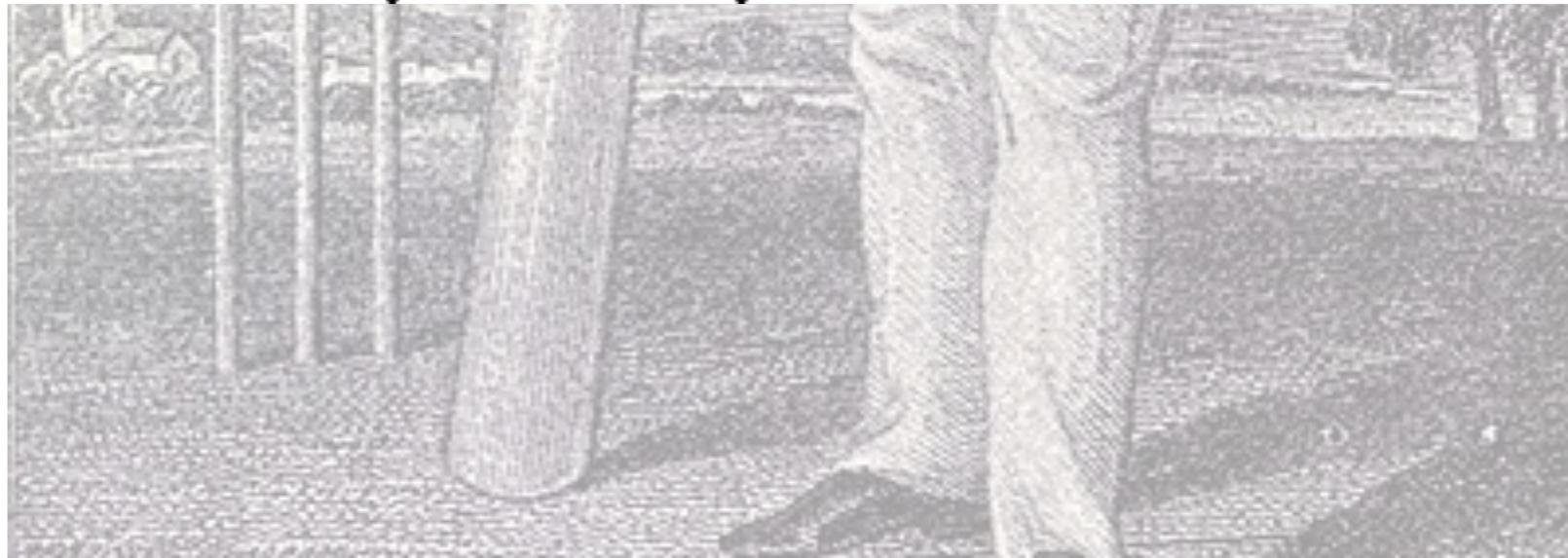


I can only answer a question of the form 'What is the meaning of "x"?' if "x" is some *particular* word you are asking about. This supposed *general* question is really just a spurious question of a type which commonly arises in philosophy.

(5) FAMILY RESEMBLANCE



But what I wish to object to in it tonight is rather this: that *it is not in the least true* that all the things which I 'call by the same (general) name' *are* in general 'similar', in any ordinary sense of that much abused word.



PAPERS READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY.

1939-1940.



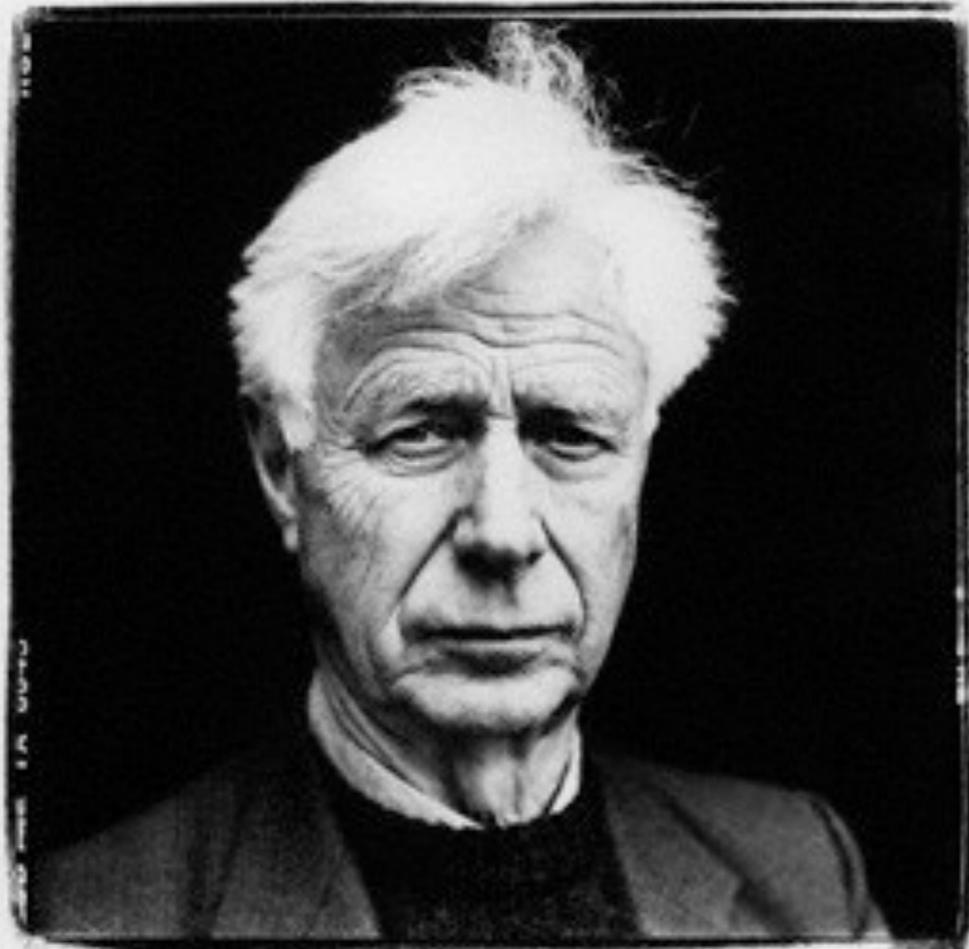
*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at Christchurch, Oxford,
on Friday, December 8th, 1939, at 8.15 p.m.*

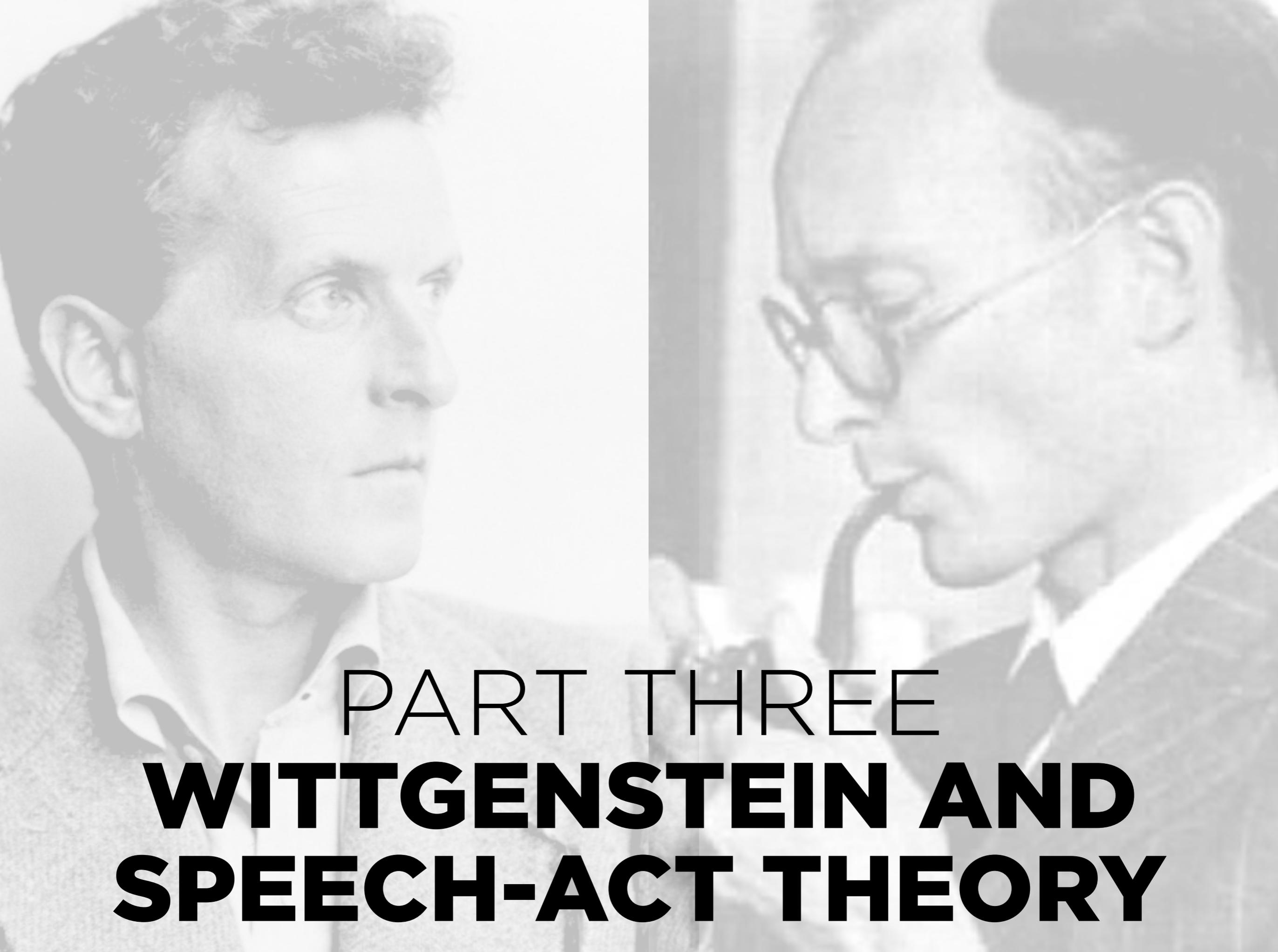
I.—IDEAS, PROPOSITIONS AND SIGNS.

By STUART HAMPSHIRE.

I

CONTEMPORARY empiricism derives from two traditions which converge and meet in the work of Bertrand Russell. The first is the epistemological tradition descending from Berkeley and Hume ; the second is inspired by the formal and exact use of symbols in modern logic, mathematics and physical science. This new formal method is a contribution





PART THREE

**WITTGENSTEIN AND
SPEECH-ACT THEORY**

Two senses of 'speech-act theory':

1. The study of the actions we perform in speaking (assertions, commands, questions, etc.), *whatever* their nature turns out to be.
2. Austin's own theoretical approach to the study of speech acts: *conventionalism* (Further developed by Searle and others.)

Austin's Conventionalism

How to do Things with Words (1955); 'Performative Utterances' (1956)

- The distinction between *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* acts.
- Focus on the nature of illocutionary acts.
- To perform an illocutionary act is to behave in accordance with the felicity conditions that govern it.
- Felicity conditions are ultimately social conventions.

How to do Things with Words

- L1 introduces the subject matter—speech act theory in the broad sense.
- L2–L7 seek to draw a distinction between *constatives* and *performatives*.
- Austin abandons this distinction in L7: *All* uses of language are acts.
- L8–L12 develop Austin's positive view.

Why think that Austin came up with speech-act theory independently?

“Austin says of the views that underlie these lectures that they ‘were formed in 1939’”

—J. O. Urmson,
Editor’s Introduction to
How to do Things with Words

Austin began presenting early versions of his ideas about speech acts in 1946:

- In 'Other Minds', *Aristotelian Society*, 1946
- In 'Nondescription' (unpublished), which Austin presented in Cambridge and Wittgenstein attended.

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“Price at the last Mor. Sc. Cl. meeting was by far better than Austin had been”

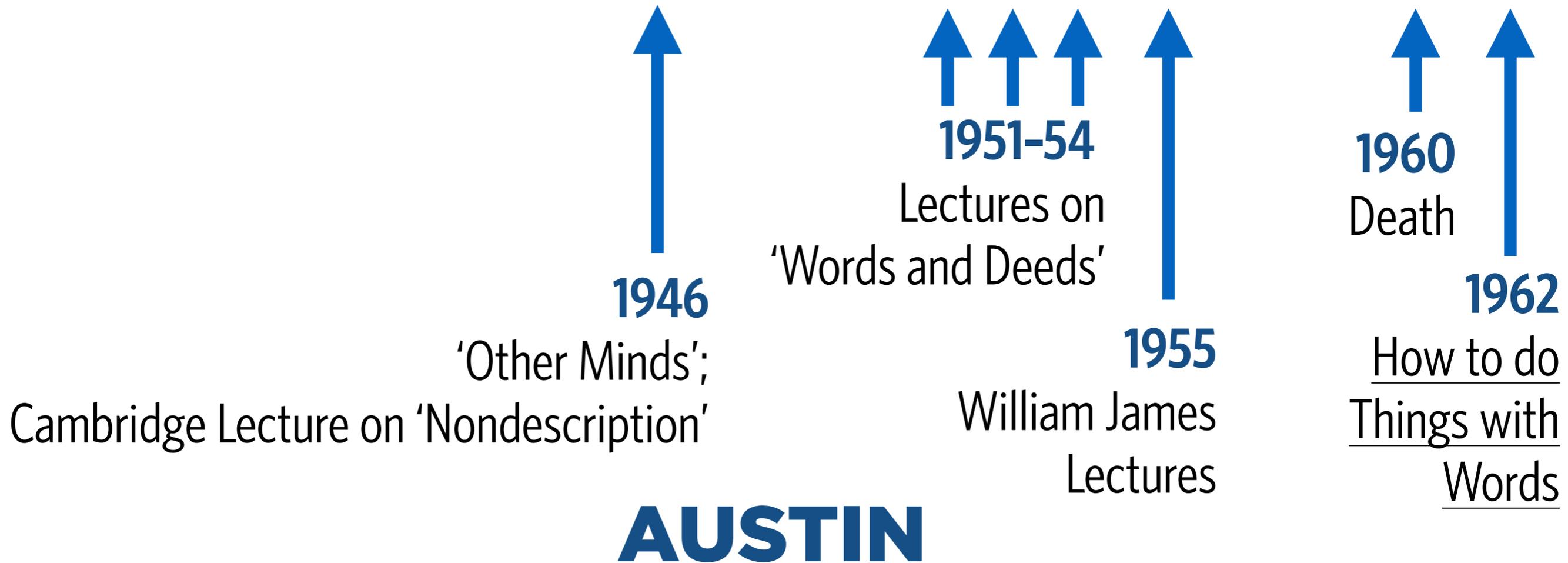
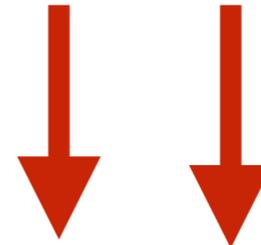
—Wittgenstein, in a letter to Moore (McGuinness, 2008, 405).

Austin presented early versions
of *How to do Things with Words*
as 'Words and Deeds' in 1951-54

WITTGENSTEIN

Death
1951

Philosophical
Investigations
1953



WITTGENSTEIN

Dictates
Blue Book
1933

Blue Book
reaches Oxford
1936-37

Death
1951

Philosophical
Investigations
1953

1940s Word of Mouth



1940

'The Meaning
of a Word'



1946

'Other Minds';

Cambridge Lecture on 'Nondescription'



1951-54

Lectures on
'Words and Deeds'

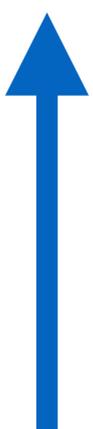


1955

William James
Lectures



1960
Death



1962

How to do
Things with
Words

AUSTIN

A HYPOTHESIS

Austin developed speech-act theory in two phases (Mirrored by the negative and positive halves of *How to do Things with Words*):

- 1. The performative-constative distinction.**
(HTW §§1-7; nascent in 'Other Minds', 1946.)
- 2. The locutionary-illocutionary-perlocutionary distinction; the doctrine of felicity conditions.**
(HTW §§8-12; no textual evidence prior to 1955).

THEREFORE

There was plenty of time for Wittgenstein's later philosophy to exert an influence on speech-act theory:

- Via the *Blue Book*
- Indirectly, via word of mouth and others' work (Wisdom, Waismann, Ryle, Anscombe, Stevenson, Malcolm, etc.)
- After 1953, via the *Philosophical Investigations*

Okay, but *how* did Wittgenstein influence speech-act theory?

Where's the textual evidence?

‘OTHER MINDS’ (1946)

“To suppose that 'I know' is a descriptive phrase, is only one example of the *descriptive fallacy*, so common in philosophy. ... Utterance of obvious ritual phrases, in the appropriate circumstances, is not *describing* the action we are doing, but *doing* it ('I do')...”

—Austin, 'Other Minds', p.103

‘OTHER MINDS’ (1946)

- Austin deploys an early version of the performative-constative distinction.
- He gives an early version of the doctrine of felicity conditions.

But:

- No use of the term ‘performative’.
- No sign of rejecting the performative-constative distinction, as in L7 of HTW.
- No sign of the locutionary-illocutionary-perlocutionary distinction.

‘OTHER MINDS’ (1946)

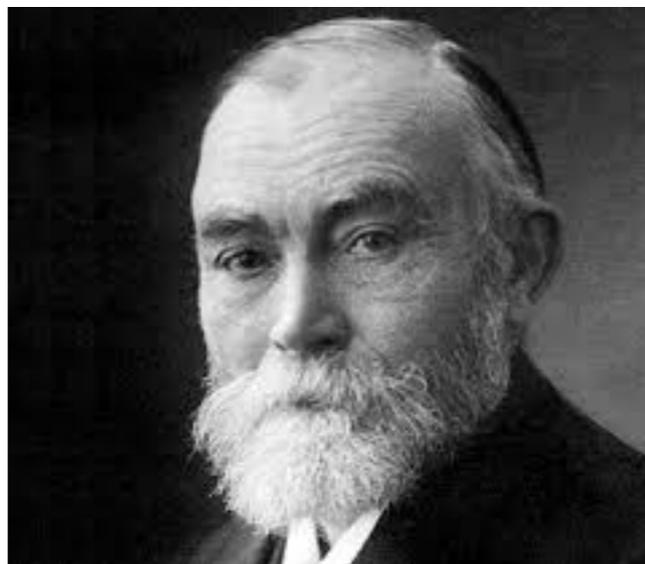
- Written as a response to ‘Other Minds’ by John Wisdom.
- In that paper, Wisdom uses a version of Wittgenstein’s distinction between *describing* thoughts in the third person and *expressing* thoughts in the first-person.
- Wittgenstein makes this point in the *Blue Book*.
- Austin’s performative–constative distinction starts with similar examples (e.g., ‘I know...’) and generalizes.

HTW (1955); PU (1956)

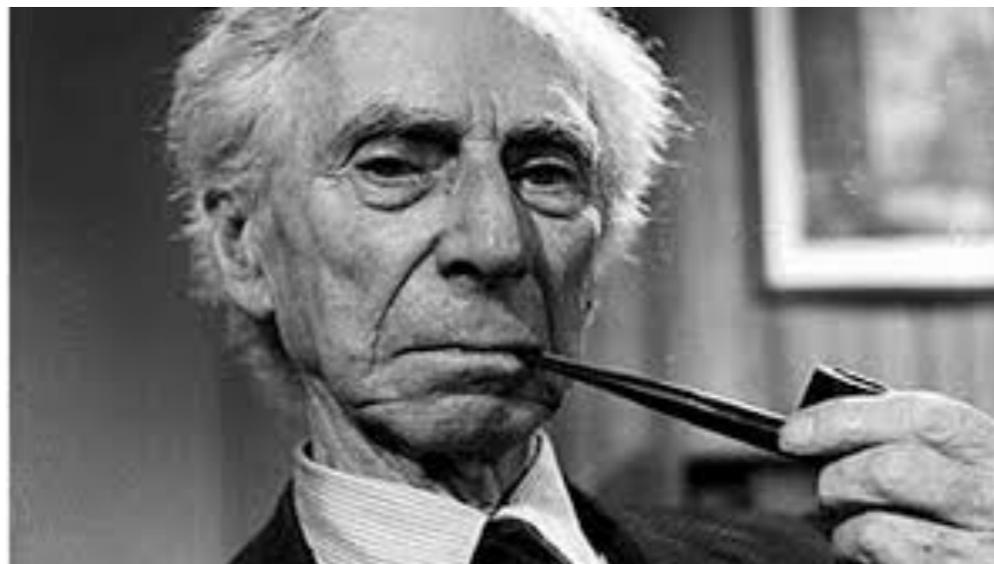
Austin introduces his subject matter by discussing three “stages” of recent philosophy of language:

1. An idealized conception of language as consisting of declarative sentences and as being used only to make true or false statements.
2. The idea that some purported statements are actually nonsensical for reasons that aren't obviously grammatical.
3. The idea that language—including declarative sentences—has perfectly good, and not nonsensical uses other than making statements.

1



FREGE

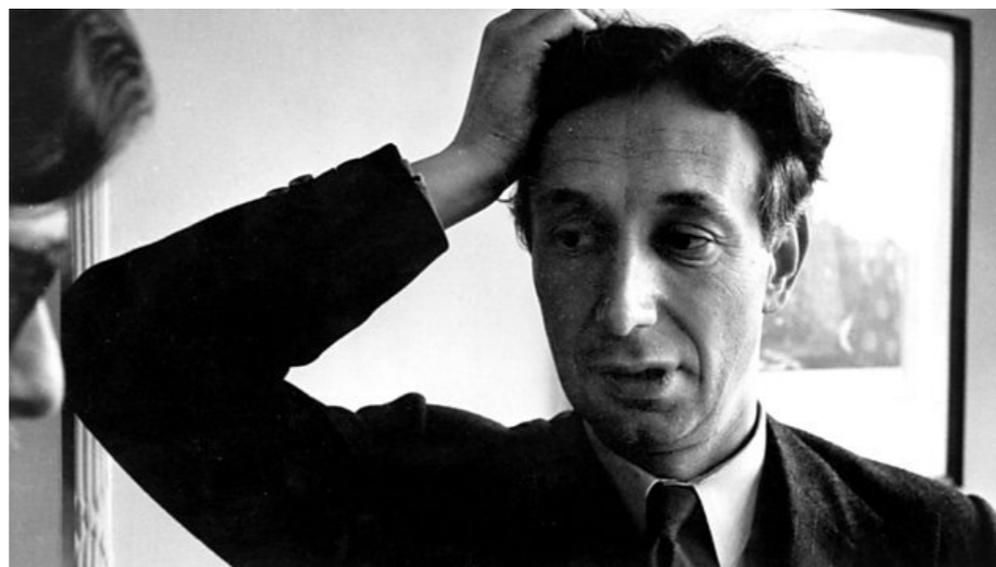


RUSSELL

2

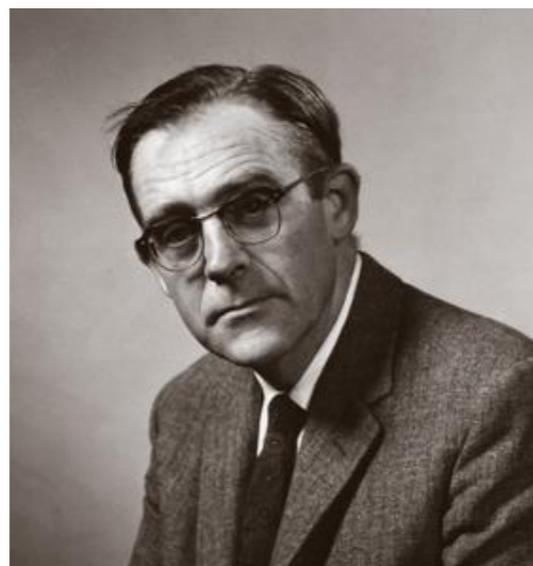


CARNAP

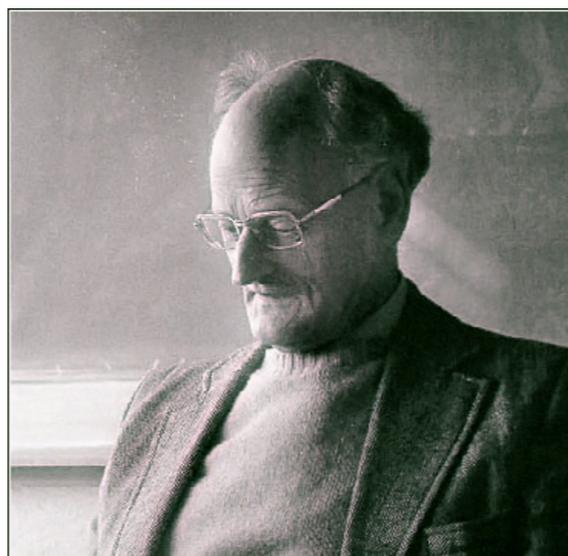


AYER

3



STEVENSON

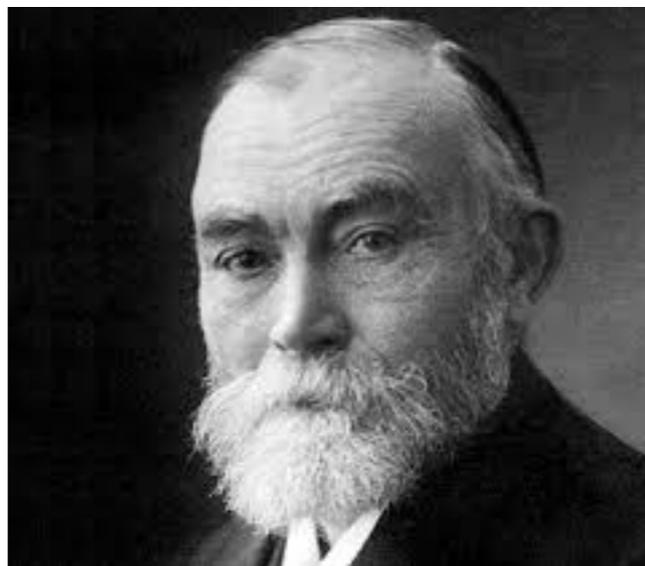


HARE

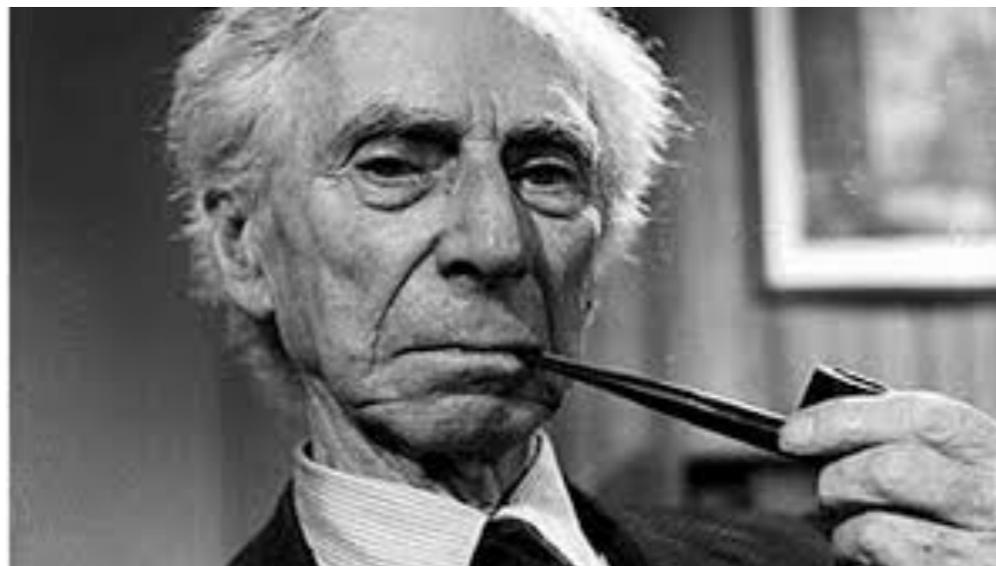


AUSTIN

1

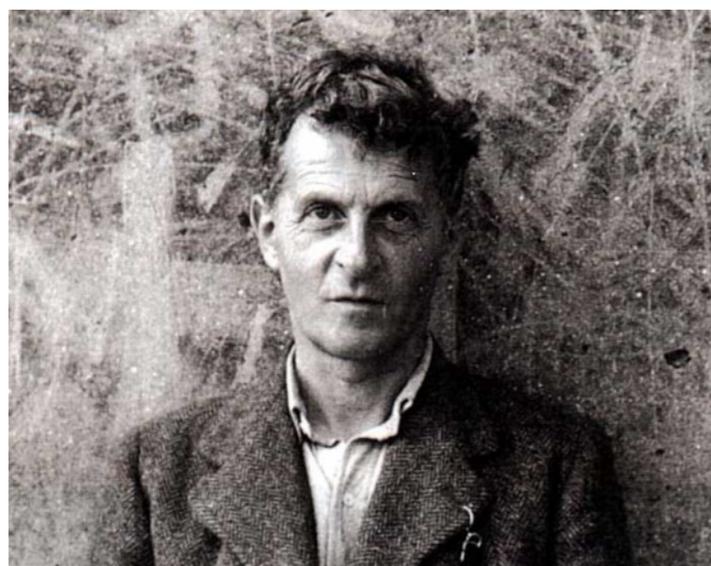


FREGE



RUSSELL

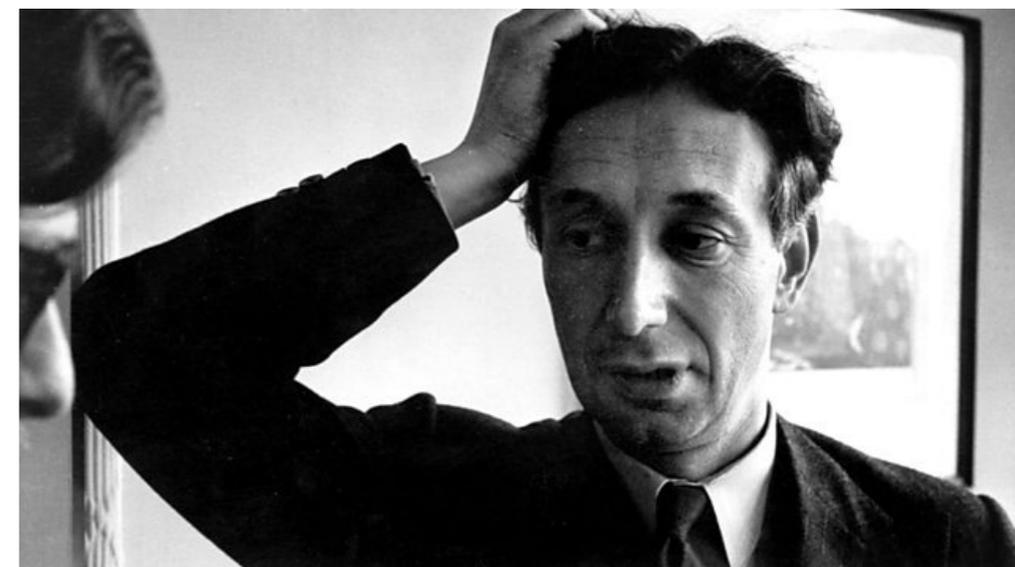
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WITTGENSTEIN

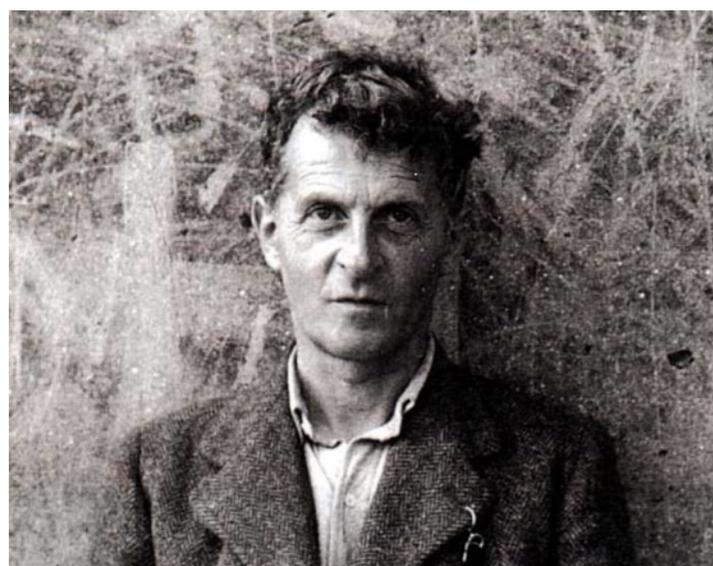


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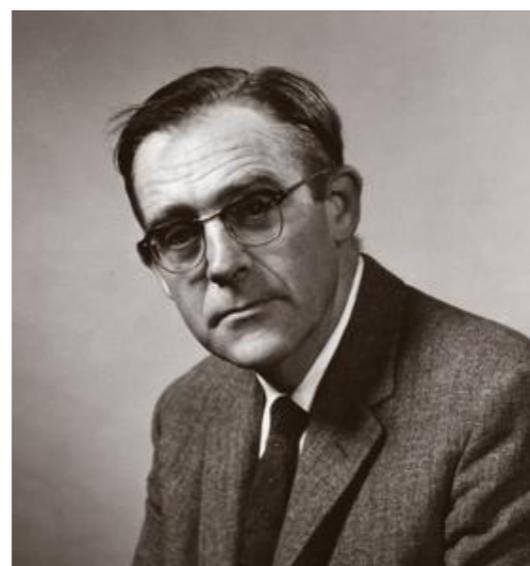


AYER

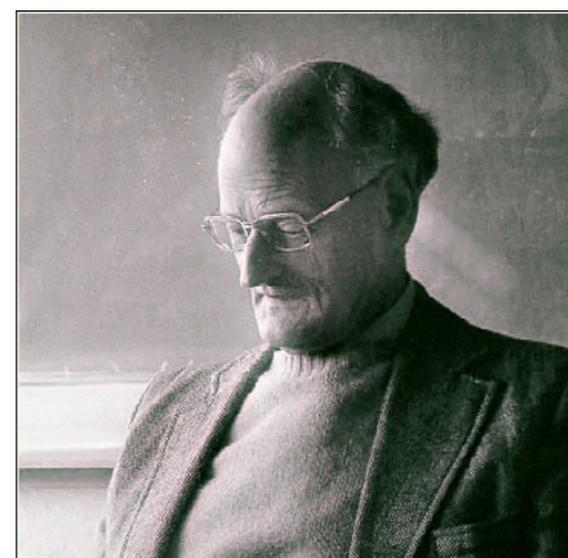
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WITTGENSTEIN AGAIN



STEVENSON



HARE



AUSTIN

“Certainly there are a great many uses of language. It's rather a pity that people are apt to invoke a new use of language whenever they feel so inclined, to help them out of this, that, or the other well-known philosophical tangle; we need more of a framework in which to discuss these uses of language; and also **I think we should not despair too easily and talk, as people are apt to do, about the infinite uses of language. Philosophers will do this when they have listed as many, let us say, as seventeen;** but even if there were something like ten thousand uses of language, surely we could list them all in time. This, after all, is no larger than the number of species of beetle that entomologists have taken the pains to list.”

—Austin, 'Performative Utterances' p.121

Wittgenstein, *PI*, §23:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command?—There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call "symbols", "words", "sentences".

Wittgenstein, *PI*, §23:

1. Giving orders, and obeying them—
2. Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
3. Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
4. Reporting an event—
5. Speculating about an event—
6. Forming and testing a hypothesis—
7. Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
8. Making up a story;
9. and reading it—
10. Play-acting—
11. Singing catches—
12. Guessing riddles—
13. Making a joke;
14. telling it—
15. Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
16. Translating from one language into another—
17. Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

In the course of our conversation, I let it be known that I thought words were tools, with manifold uses. Austin said, 'Let's see what Wittgenstein has to say about that', and he reached for his copy of the *Philosophical Investigations*. He read, among others, section 23, where Wittgenstein lists some of the uses of language —giving orders, speculating about an event, play-acting, making a joke, and so on. Austin remarked that these things are all quite different, and can't just be lumped together like that.

—George Pitcher,
recounting a 1955 conversation
with Austin at Harvard

...the expression 'use of language' can cover other matters even more diverse than the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. For example, we may speak of the 'use of language' *for* something, e.g. for joking; and we may use 'in' in a way different from the illocutionary 'in', as when we say 'in saying "p" I was joking' or 'acting a part' or 'writing poetry'; or again we may speak of 'a poetical use of language' as distinct from 'the use of language in poetry'. These references to 'use of language' have nothing to do with the illocutionary act. ...The normal conditions of reference may be suspended, or no attempt made at a standard perlocutionary act...

—Austin, *HTW*, p.104

He then expressed doubts about the toolhood of words: 'Are you quite sure that "tool" is the right word? Mightn't they be more like something else—utensils, for example?' He suggested that we try to determine what the various possibilities were; accordingly, he leafed through the Concise Oxford Dictionary picking out candidates, while I wrote them down. My list contained about thirty words, including 'appliance', 'apparatus', 'utensil', 'implement', 'contrivance', 'instrument', 'tool', 'machine', 'gadget', 'contraption', 'piece of equipment', 'mechanism', 'device', and 'gimmick'. I seem to remember that 'gewgaw' even had a half-serious day in court.

—George Pitcher,
recounting a 1955 conversation
with Austin at Harvard

To what extent did
Wittgenstein influence
Austin's positive theory?

(Warning: Speculative)

How to read Wittgenstein as a proto-Austinian conventionalist.

- Uses of language are rule-governed, like games.
- Which games exist is a matter of social conventions.
- The “meaning” of a move is a matter of its role in the game, as dictated by the conventions.

Imagine a language-game in which A asks and B reports the number of slabs or blocks in a pile, or the colours and shapes of the building-stones that are stacked in such-and-such a place. — Such a report might run: “Five slabs”. Now what is the difference between the report or statement “Five slabs” and the order “Five slabs!”? — Well, it is the part which uttering these words plays in the language-game.

—Wittgenstein, *PU*, §21

CONCLUSIONS

- Austin's earliest extant work in philosophy of language is the product of direct engagement with Wittgenstein.
- Austin's earliest use of the performative-constative distinction frames it as an improvement on a distinction of Wittgenstein's.
- In HTW and PU, Austin frames his whole project in relation to Wittgenstein.
- It is tempting to read a proto-Austinian conventionalism into Wittgenstein's later work.

THANKS