Aspects of Wittgenstein's Critique of Augustine

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Resumo

Neste trabalho começo por ressaltar os principais aspectos da crítica de Wittgenstein à visão agostiniana da linguagem como apresentado nas primeiras seções do *"Philosophical Investigations"*. Segue-se então uma pesquisa da relação entre a crítica de Wittgenstein a Agostinho e os temas mais tarde desenvolvidos nas *"Philosophical Investigations"*, tais como a semelhança de noção de família e considerações sobre seguir regras. Minha tese é que a discussão de Wittgenstein sobre Agostinho em ampla escala antecipa e se anexa à sua rejeição ao Essencialismo na metafísica e do Mentalismo na teoria do sentido.

Palavras-Chave: Crítica de Wittgenstein a Agostinho. Relação nominal. Definição ostensiva. Semelhanças familiares. Seguir regras.

Abstract

In this paper I start by surveying the main strands of Wittgenstein´s critique of the Augustinian view of language as presented in the early sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*. This is followed by an inquiry into the relation between Wittgenstein´s critique of Augustine and themes developed more fully later in the *Philosophical Investigations*, such as the notion of family resemblances and the rule-following considerations. My contention is that Wittgenstein´s discussion of Augustine to a large extent anticipates and coheres in interesting ways with his rejection of essentialism in metaphysics and of mentalism in the theory of meaning.

Key-Words: Wittgenstein´s critique of Augustine. Naming relation. Ostensive definition. Family resemblances. Rule-following.

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When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires (Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 8).

By placing such an extended quotation of some of Augustine's remarks on language right at the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to be motivated by a perceived, urgent need to single out for criticism a certain view of the nature of language which he believes the above passage to epitomize. Needless to say, the quoted words can hardly be taken to offer a full-fledged linguistic or philosophical theory, being, as they are, silent on so many issues. Nor do we need not be concerned about whether or not Wittgenstein did full justice to the views espoused by Augustine, as the latter may have expressed them elsewhere in his works. For my purposes, it suffices to note that the passage reproduced above is highly suggestive of, and congenial to, a certain take on language – one which important philosophers in the past century have done much to promote and which the later Wittgenstein takes himself to have ample reason to find fault with.

In what follows, I will seek to lay bare what I regard as being the most important threads in Wittgenstein's critique of Augustine. Whatever one chooses to make of them, it would seem obvious that some of the threads which stand in need of unraveling are already to be found in the initial sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Far less obviously, and perhaps no less importantly, Wittgenstein's critique of Augustine may be seen as cohering in interesting ways, or so I shall argue, with two apparently unrelated discussions which come later in the book. These are to be found in connection with Wittgenstein's strongly anti-essentialist arguments in the sections dealing with family resemblances and in his treatment of linguistic meaning in the sections devoted to the rule-following considerations.

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On the face of it, Augustine seems to be simply presenting us, by having recourse to introspection, with an account of his own linguistic development. More specifically, he appears to be telling us how he came to acquire a mastery of the words which were already in use by his elders. However, in the absence of any reason to suspect that Augustine saw his own development as being idiosyncratic in some way, we may safely assume that he took himself to be offering a portrait of linguistic development as such.

Clearly enough, Augustine is right to think that linguistic competence involves a mastery of the meanings of the words of one's language. Linguistic competence also requires that a speaker can be relied upon to use the words of his language in syntactically appropriate ways. The

acquisition of semantic, as opposed to syntactic, competence appears to be Augustine's main concern here, although he may have syntax in mind when he talks about "words repeatedly used in their *proper places*" (my emphasis). In any event, the important thing to notice is that Augustine's portrayal of how words come to be mastered presents the acquisition of semantic competence as being simply a matter of a learner's becoming aware of a connection between a word he hears from others and some extra-linguistic item – some objectively existing entity in the world – which the word is seen to stand for, and subsequently going on to use the word himself. Moreover, Augustine's remarks suggest that such a connection between word and object is paradigmatically exhibited by noting the possibility of having a word being uttered along with some ostensive act – variously represented by any of the bodily movements mentioned – intended to pick out the object one meant to refer to by uttering the word. In summary, two basic ideas seem to be present in the passage quoted by Wittgenstein: (i) words have meaning in virtue of standing for extra-linguistic objects and (ii) the connection between a word and the object it stands for can be straightforwardly displayed through an ostensive act.

Now, it is fair to say that some words might indeed have meaning simply in virtue of standing for some object. Proper names are perhaps the clearest examples of words that do just that. A simple way to capture this relation is to think of a name as a tag or label given to an object. Wittgenstein himself notes that "It will often prove useful in philosophy to say to ourselves: naming something is like attaching a label to a thing" (Section 15). And a simple ostensive act may be a perfectly legitimate way of displaying

the meaning of a proper name, as, when, say, I get to know who a certain John is after hearing the words "This is John", accompanied by some pointing gesture. In fact, Wittgenstein grants in Section 43 that "the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer". Thus, it would seem that Wittgenstein has no reason to offer a wholesale rejection of the Augustinian picture. Accordingly, he appears to concede that it may be appropriate in some limited domains. Section 2 presents a hypothetical primitive language, used by two builders, consisting solely of the words "block", "pillar", "slab" and "beam". These four words serve all their communicative needs in the course of performing their building activities. There would seem to be nothing wrong in saying that these words would have their meanings in just the way envisaged by Augustine, and that the objects they stand for could be unproblematically singled out by ostensive acts. And when, after noting in Section 3 that Augustine "does describe a system of communication", Wittgenstein goes on to say that "*not everything* that we call language is this system" (my emphasis), this clearly involves an implicit recognition that the Augustinian picture might have partial applicability in our actual complex language, as opposed to some hypothetical, primitive one. That this is the right way to interpret Wittgenstein is further suggested by his subsequent remark in Section 3 that in many cases in which one is confronted with the question "Is this an appropriate description or not?", the correct reply is "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe".

Thus, it seems safe to say that Wittgenstein's reasons for opposing the Augustinian picture do not reside in a desire

to expose it as wholly inappropriate. Rather, Wittgenstein's concern appears to derive from his realization that the Augustinian picture might, because of its very naturalness, lead philosophers to think that the whole of language may be treated along similar lines.

In varying ways, the Augustinian picture found its modern expression in the logical atomism of Russell and in Wittgenstein's early thought in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. As soon as one is tempted to think of the naming relation as being at the core of language and of names as being the fundamental meaningful units of language, one may be led to believe, as the early Wittgenstein did, that all propositions, despite their diverse and misleading superficial grammatical forms, can be shown, upon logical analysis, to be made up of simple, irreducible constituents, each of which is taken to stand for some extra-linguistic item. Now, once one has surrendered oneself to such a temptation, the particular ways in which such irreducible constituents are placed in relation to one another within a proposition could be further held to mirror possible relations obtaining between the extra-linguistic objects which the atomic constituents are supposed to stand for, and thus to represent possible states of affairs. A related temptation is to think of the study of propositions – which can be expressed by means of actual assertions in some language or other – as being the main task faced by those concerned with the philosophical analysis of language. That might lead philosophers to regard non-propositional uses of language as being of comparatively little philosophical interest. Wittgenstein's depictions of the non-propositional uses of language which could take place even in the very primitive language-games presented in Sections 2 and 8 of the

Investigations can be thought of as offering a much-needed antidote to the work of philosophers who fell prey to the latter temptation.

However, even if one deliberately sticks to purely propositional uses of language, the Augustinian picture is far from being an obviously correct one. Augustine himself was certainly in a position to see that the vocabularies of actually existing languages include a number of items, say, conjunctions and propositions, whose meanings do not seem to be conferred to them in virtue of their standing for some extra-linguistic object. Perhaps, Wittgenstein thought that Augustine was unconcerned with words of this sort. This is already suggested in Section 1, where he notes that

> Augustine does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word. If you describe the learning of language in this way you are, 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.

However, even if we disregard "the remaining kinds of word" and stick to the sort of words mentioned earlier – words, that is, for which the Augustinian picture might be thought to have some purchase – the arguments offered in the initial sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* still do a fine job of showing just how hopelessly naïve the piece of theorizing offered by Augustine in his *Confessions* really is.

For one thing, Augustine seems to think of a child in the earliest stages of its linguistic development as already being capable of learning the meanings of words by ostensive definition. However, it could hardly be the case that the

utterance – even accompanied by some appropriate pointing gesture – of people's names, generic names of objects like "table" and "chair", names of properties like "redness" and of actions like "fighting", and so on – could suffice to let the child know what the meanings of such words are. For in order to accomplish that feat, the child would be required to already know what a name is, or that some of the words it overhears *are* names. But that could not possibly be effected within the confines of the sort of detached observing stance that Augustine places the child in. Instead, the ability to learn the meanings of words ostensively seems to presuppose an on-going process of acculturation, of learning the ways of one's linguistic community by actually engaging with the community – which would seem to require that the child actually use the words *not* after, as Augustine would have it, but *in the course* of learning their meanings, make guesses and occasional mistakes, correct itself and the like. In other words, a child learns the words of its language as a result of receiving a certain form of training in whose initial stages, as Wittgenstein points out in Section 6, a major role might be played by "the ostensive teaching of words", as opposed to their "ostensive definition". I shall later return to what I take to be serious flaws in Augustine's depiction of the child learner, conceived of by him as a detached observer, whom Augustine seems to regard as being endowed from the outset of his development with a sort of meaning-grounding capacity which it is not reasonable to ascribe to it, or, indeed, to mature language users.

Augustine's failure to notice that a child's learning of words through ostensive definition cannot be thought of as being brought about by some uncanny power of detached apprehension – operating in isolation from its practical

engagement with the linguistic life of the community – is, of course, related to his oversimplified picture of ostensive definition. Far from being an unproblematic way of exposing the connection between a word and what it stands for, ostensive definition is a complicated affair in its own right. For any actual attempt at ostensively defining some word will always fall short of making it undisputably the case that a particular meaning was intended. As Wittgenstein notes at the end of Section 28, "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in each case". Although, as he remarks earlier in the section, an attempt at ostensively defining the number "two" by saying "That is called 'two'", while pointing to two nuts, "is perfectly exact", one's addressee could conceivably suppose that "two" is the name being assigned to a particular group of nuts. Of course, in many actual cases one's intended meaning may be rendered clear once the circumstances surrounding one's utterance are factored in by one's intended audience. Absent from Augustine's oversimplified view of ostensive definition is any indication of an awareness of the supplementary role which the circumstances play in conveying to one's addresses that an ostensive definition was meant to be interpreted in some particular way. Now, an ability to take circumstances into account is presumably not a godsend, but rather a result of being immersed in one's linguistic community and of being trained in its practices, linguistic and otherwise. This takes us as far as it could from the idealized observing stance envisaged for language learners by Augustine.

One might, of course, attempt to rescue Augustine's model of ostensive definition by maintaining that it can be made to work provided one is perfectly explicitly in one's statements. Thus, in Section 29 Wittgenstein has his imaginary

interlocutor suggest that complete precision may attend ostensive definitions like "This *number* is called 'two'", "This *colour* is called so-and-so", "This *length* is called so-and-so", and so forth. But, if one tries to solve this difficulty by resorting to such a move, one is immediately faced with the problem of how the italicized terms themselves might be defined in ways that might be assimilated by the Augustinian picture, that is, by resorting to other ostensive definitions, which procedure threatens us with an infinite regress.

In addition to the difficulties already mentioned, there is another major problem for the Augustinian picture. It may be fully appreciated once we remind ourselves that, apart from special cases involving perceptual error, hallucinations and the like, ostensive acts presuppose the existence of the entities that are pointed to. These are explicitly mentioned right at the start of the quoted passage: "When they (my elders) named some *object*, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the *thing* was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out […]" (my emphases).

Augustine talks as if the learner's prior individuation of the objects which he later goes on to associate with particular words was an unproblematic affair. More pointedly, he talks as if certain objects naturally presented themselves, as it were, as the extra-linguistic entities which, quite apart from our actual linguistic practices, are bound, in due course, to become objects of discourse by being assigned their proper names. This makes it sound as though the objects had, in a sense, powers of self-individuation, presumably as a result of possessing essences, which the mind's eye cannot help perceiving. On the Augustinian view, once objects are thus

individuated, the ostensive definition of the words meant to single them out in a sense seems to do no more than assign labels to naturally given constituents of reality.

Now, if, following Wittgenstein's suggestion in Section 1, we take the words which Augustine saw as liable to be defined through ostensive acts to include not only proper names, but nouns like "bread", "table" and "chair", and "the names of certain actions and properties", the difficulties for the Augustinian view of language will seem all the more evident. In addition to overlooking the problems pertaining to ostensive definition as such – problems encountered even in those cases in which ostensive definition of words may after all be possible – by failing to acknowledge just how the ostensive definitions of words only acquire their full meaningfulness when the broad features of their context of utterance are taken into account, the Augustinian picture can be seen to run into further difficulties once we remind ourselves that the relation between words and the entities they purport to denote may exhibit a degree of complexity liable to make all attempts at their ostensive definition a pointless undertaking.

The reason why this is so is that so many of the objects we may be inclined to define do not constitute natural kinds. Accordingly, a close look into our linguistic practices should suffice to convince us that many of our denotative terms cannot be held to pick out objects to which individuating essences could be plausibly ascribed. If talk of essences strikes us as unnecessarily metaphysical, the point can always be made by noting that what it takes for us to make any object or entity broadly conceived into the referent of a denotative word in our actual linguistic practices need

not rest on a presumed ability to define it by recourse to the sufficient and necessary conditions which it must satisfy to be the legitimate bearer of the denotative word in question.

Clearly enough, the above paragraph has as its backdrop the arguments adduced by Wittgenstein in the sections on family resemblances in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The general point that important regions of our vocabulary cannot be thought of as standing for essences "out there" is given vivid expression in Wittgenstein's remarks on our use of the word "game" to refer to a broad spectrum of different activities. Wittgenstein convincingly argues that although each single game making up the whole continuum of activities for which the word "game" is used may well have something in common with one or more of the other component parts of the continuum, there seems to be no single property shared by all the activities we willingly refer to as "games", in much the same way as the individual members of a family may resemble one another in varying ways without exhibiting some physical feature shared by them all.

Now, if we take it that Wittgenstein's argumentation in the sections on family resemblances embody an important general lesson about the way in which much of human language works, we will be able to see that it creates further difficulties for Augustine's view of ostensive definition. For, even if we disregard the fact that any actual ostensive act of definition severely underdetermines what it was meant to define and go on to suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Augustine's detached observer could, even prior to an actual immersion in the linguistic life of his community, easily grasp, in some cases, at least, the purpose of some ostensive definition expressed on the model of "N is something *like*

this" – where the 'N' may stand for some generic concept, property or activity – the problem remains that the words denoting many such items could not be defined along those lines. When it comes to a word like "game", the arguments adduced by Wittgenstein show that the range of activities it applies to fail to have some single common feature or essence – anything that might be captured by the familiar locution *like this* in the above model. At the very least, we should be bound to conclude, then, that words like "game" cannot have their meanings conveyed by a single ostensive definition: one would have to say, of many different activities, "Something *like this* is a game", "Something *like that* is also a game", and so on. Now, the Augustinian position could in no way be easily rescued by someone who just went on to remark that all Augustine would need is to make some extra provision for words which require multiple, as opposed to single acts of ostensive definition. After all, as Wittgenstein aptly notes, the concept of "game" is an open-ended one, with no sharp boundaries. There is just no way of telling ahead of time when the word "game" should cease to be employed or when it should be replaced by some other word of the language. Yet, such an absence of sharp boundaries, which places severe constraints on what may be achieved by an exhaustive employment of ostensive definition, in no way forces upon us the conclusion that language users lack the necessary mastery of words like "game". Again, considerations such as the preceding further reinforce the basic point that the actual acquisition of linguistic competence presupposes a continuous process of acculturation, an immersion into the forms of life – if we may here allow ourselves to use some Wittgensteinian jargon – of one's linguistic community, just

the sort of immersion that is denied to Augustine's detached observer.

The idea that Wittgenstein is importantly concerned to reject the Augustinian view of the language learner as being an individual who contemplates language from the standpoint of what I referred to in the preceding as a "detached observing stance" is further suggested to me by his sharp remarks in Section 32, which section I reproduce below in its entirety:

> 32. Someone coming into a strange country will sometimes learn the language of the inhabitants from ostensive definitions that they give him; and he will often have to *guess* the meaning of these definitions; and will guess sometimes right, sometimes wrong.

> And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. *Or again: as if the child could already* think*, only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to itself".* (my emphasis).

There are a number of important things going on in this passage, some of which have already been briefly considered above. Wittgenstein's commonsensical remark to the effect that an individual struggling to learn a foreign language will find himself groping and making guesses, which may go wrong or right, reminds us that the learning process is often an interactive one. After all, what will count as right or wrong is not for the language learner himself to decide. Rather, he will have to rely on others to set him right whenever his attempts at communication misfire. He may occasionally

toy with some particular form of expression and find out that it does not produce the desired effects on his addressees. Proceeding by trial and error, he may eventually get it all right. Sometimes, others may explicitly correct him. In any case, the actual learning does not proceed from some idealized, detached perspective.

And, yet, if compared to the child who is learning its own native language, the mature student of a foreign language does enjoy some decided advantages. After all, he already knows, through his prior acquaintance with his own language, that some words are used as nouns, some, as adjectives, and so on. It should seem, then, that if the learning of a foreign language cannot take place in a detached, non-interactive, way, the same should *a fortiori* be true of an individual's acquisition of his own language.

Now, when Wittgenstein says that Augustine treats the child learner as if he were like a person visiting a foreign country whose language he is trying to learn, he may be simply giving a different expression to a claim already made earlier, namely that the process described by Augustine could not plausibly be described as the ostensive definition of words, since it implicitly presupposes that the child is already in a position to know that some of the words it hears are the names of people, properties, activities and so forth – an ability which it is reasonable to ascribe to the adult learner of a foreign language, but not to a child in the earliest stages of its linguistic development.

Far more interesting is the suggestion found in the two sentences which I quoted above using italics. Wittgenstein says: 'Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only yet not speak. And "think" here would mean something like "talk to itself"'. What could be the purport of this remark?

Augustine is offering an account of how children come to acquire a mastery of the meanings of words – or, at the very least, of some types of words – in its own language. The passage makes it clear that Augustine is not simply concerned with the child's growing ability to correctly *pronounce* the words it overhears, or its ability to go from a stage in which it may mentally entertain the words to some later stage in which it goes on to actually utter them (as could happen to some adult person recovering from a stroke, say). Rather, he is clearly concerned with the learning of words as such. But, then, what could be Wittgenstein's reason for saying that Augustine regards the child as already being able to "talk to itself", even though it cannot yet speak? How could the child talk to itself if, by hypothesis, it starts out by knowing no words with each to talk?

Here, I believe that there is reason to suspect that Wittgenstein is, as is so often the case, staking a very important claim in a somewhat round-about way. He likens the child's "talking to itself" to a form of "thinking". What is his point?

It seems to me that a perfectly natural way to interpret the last two sentences of the quoted passage readily presents itself if we take Wittgenstein to mean that Augustine regards the child learner as being already in the possession of fully articulated concepts or mental images – which enable him to "talk to himself", though not by means of actual words. Wittgenstein appears to be suggesting that, on the Augustinian view, learning words is simply a matter of acquiring a mastery of the sonorous, and further down the line, the written marks which amount to external, tangible tags for concepts or images that have prior existence in the mind – concepts or images which though already fully well-

formed in their inner realm, need spoken words or written marks to give them outward expression. If Wittgenstein is right in thinking that meaning is, for Augustine, a purely mental affair, it would seem that Augustine's remarks may naturally be taken to mean that the child's learning of a word like "green" consists in its picking from the surrounding linguistic community a convenient label which it goes on to associate with a privately entertained concept or image which already of itself determines the extension of the word in question.

If it is right to ascribe to Augustine the mentalistic conception outlined above, then it is, of course, no surprise that Wittgenstein should reject the Augustinian picture on this score also – given that Wittgenstein persuasively argues in the sections devoted to the rule-following considerations that the meaning of the words one uses is severely underdetermined by occurrent mental events.

The passage in the *Confessions*, with its talk about the child's acquisition of words for things that it has already mentally individuated anyway, does seem to suggest, to give one concrete example, that for Augustine the way a child learns a word like "green" amounts to no more than coming to acquire a label or tag for a property whose extension is already fully determined by what is going on in the child's mind. Already behind Augustine's remarks, there might be a hint of some hyper-rigid link between mental contents and meaning – precisely the sort of "superlative fact" that Wittgenstein finds so hard to accept.

But, of course, the rule-following considerations cast serious doubt on the very plausibility of such a view. In a number of places, Wittgenstein makes the vital point that privately entertained images, though often to be expected as

typical accompaniments that may attend people's use of words, fall short of capturing the normative dimension of meaning, that is to say, of determining just how people should go on to use the words in a variety of different settings and occasions. It is presumably the case, though, that to understand the meaning of a certain word involves a mastery of how the word in question is to be used. In the context of this rejection of the overly mentalistic view of meaning which Augustine appears to favor, we may remind ourselves here of the use made by Kripke in *Wittgenstein On Rules and Private Language* of Goodman's talk of "green" and "grue".

The important thing to note is that there is nothing in any individual's occurrent mental image of what both he and others might regard as a patch of green which need imply that for the person to whom the image occurs the color green has to be assigned the same extension as it does for most other people. Conceivably, some linguistically deviant individual might on a given occasion entertain the same image or concept as the rest of us, and yet use the word "green" all along in such a way as to make it clear that for him the actual extension of the term is the one that might be covered by the fictive word "grue", which word is one that might be used in the course of referring with complete indifference to objects for which the rest of us would employ *our* color words "green" and "blue" in a more discriminating fashion. If facts about occurrent events in people's minds do not provide us with what we need to ground the notion of meaning, one may well ask just what sort of fact could do the job. Although there is no easy answer to this question, one eminently plausible take on this issue is to see meaning as being based primarily on the sheer fact of

overwhelming agreement in the way most members of a linguistic community employ words in the context of shared ways of going on.

A natural correlate of what was said above, when it comes to a child's acquisition of words, is the realization that the learning of a word – be it "green", "plus" or what have you – is not grounded in the child's picking up from its surrounding linguistic community a word that merely labels some previously entertained private item of thought. Rather, the meaning of a word like "green" is determined – in some way which is admittedly hard to define – by what counts as green in the community. The child's successful learning of this word and of others can only be regarded as being a byproduct of its actual engagement with the appropriate range of practices – linguistic and otherwise – already in place in its learning environment. And this, of course, is a far cry from Augustine's conception of the child learner as a remarkable creature who comes to master language from an idealized, detached standpoint.

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