

# Achievements of language

By Norman Malcolm

G. P. BAKER and P. M. S. HACKER: *Wittgenstein—Understanding and Meaning*. An analytical commentary on the *Philosophical Investigations*. 692pp. Oxford: Blackwell. £35. 0 631 12111 0

The *Philosophical Investigations* begins with a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine is purporting to describe how, as a child, he learned to speak:

When my elders named some object and therewith turned towards it, I saw this and I grasped that the object was designated by the sound they uttered when they meant to point to it. Their intention was shown 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 states 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.

Wittgenstein found in these charming remarks a certain conception of the nature of human language, namely, that words are names of objects, and that sentences consist of combinations of names. Countless readers of Augustine have, no doubt, passed over those lines without feeling that anything there was questionable. Some scholars have declared that Wittgenstein was, unjust to Augustine, because the latter in other writings calls attention to words that don't stand for objects, and to other functions that words have when they do stand for objects.

Wittgenstein was indeed neither scholar nor historian, but merely a profound philosopher who knew what he was doing. He did not regard Augustine as stating a theory but rather as expressing a primitive or naive picture (*Bild*) of the nature of language. It is a picture in the sense in which an ordinary person expresses a vague picture of the relation of human perception to physical reality if he asks "Do you think the falling of trees in a forest produces sounds when no human beings are around?"

Because of its pervasiveness and huge influence in shaping philosophical theories of language and meaning, G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker (henceforth B/H) refer to Augustine's picture as an *Ur Bild* or proto-picture. It works like an unconscious force. Or as B/H put it, "a paradigm towards which theories gravitate". They concentrate on the Augustinian picture, demonstrating in detail how it guides the articulated theories of Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein's own *Tractatus*, and showing the extent to which the *Investigations* is a prolonged and massive criticism of the implications of the Augustinian picture, and of the various ingenious modifications and refinements of it that sophisticated philosophers have produced while revealing at the same time that they are captivated by the paradigm.

Volume One of the B/H commentary, despite its length, goes only as far as paragraph 184 of Part One of the *Investigations*. Part One has a total of 693 paragraphs, and Part Two has fifty-eight pages. A forthcoming Volume Two by B/H, entitled *Wittgenstein—Meaning and Mind*, will carry on from 184.

B/H wisely do not attempt a sentence-by-sentence commentary. They divide the 184 paragraphs into six Chapters according to topics, and each Chapter into Parts. There is an essay corresponding to each Chapter and each Part, followed by exegesis of Wittgenstein's paragraphs. The essays are the main meat of the book. They present the argumentative background for each topic, focusing especially on the views of Frege, Russell, and the *Tractatus*. B/H summarize these views in careful and perspicuous outline. They then present Wittgenstein's criticism point by point, supplementing the *Investigations* with material drawn from the vast corpus of Wittgenstein's writings

after 1929. Essays of particular excellence are those entitled "The uses of sentences", "Ostensive definition and its ramifications", "Logically proper names", "A word has meaning only in the context of a sentence", "Family resemblance", "Vagueness and determinacy of sense", "Proper names".

The problem of the "creativity of language", expressed in the question, "How is it possible for us to understand sentences we have never heard before?", has been of utmost fascination to philosophers and linguists. Frege stated this seeming problem, and also his solution, in the following remarks:

The achievements of language are wonderful. By means of a few sounds and connections of sounds it is capable of expressing a vast number of thoughts, including even such as have never before been grasped or expressed by anyone. How are these achievements possible? It is in virtue of the fact that thoughts are built up out of thought-building-blocks. These building blocks correspond to groups of sounds from which the sentence is constructed, so that the construction of the sentence from sentence-components corresponds to the construction of the thought from thought-components. One can call the thought-components the sense of the cor-

responding sentence-components, just as one conceives of the thought as the sense of the sentence.

This is a nice example of the kind of view that Wittgenstein attacks. Frege's remarks are linked to the Augustinian picture, but refine it with the notion that the sense of a sentence is computed from the thought-components that correspond to the components of the sentence. Language is conceived of as a kind of calculus. The senses of complex expressions, including sentences, are derived from the senses of simpler constituents by a series of operations in accordance with definite rules. Our understanding of a sentence is a result of our calculating its sense from the senses of its constituents and their mode of combination. Wittgenstein had a similar conception in the *Tractatus*, but in the *Investigations* he assails it with a battery of objections which B/H summarize in detail.

B/H address themselves to various current misinterpretations of Wittgenstein: for example, the impression that when he says there is only a "family resemblance" between games or numbers, he is holding that the concept of a game, or of a number, is a "cluster concept"; or again, that he endorses a "cluster theory" of proper names. B/H are surely right in

holding that Wittgenstein's remarks on these topics are purely negative—that he is not proposing theories but is merely criticizing the widespread assumption that in order to understand a concept-word or a proper name one must have, consciously or unconsciously, a grasp of necessary and sufficient conditions for applying the term.

Or take paragraph 80 of *Investigations* where Wittgenstein, speaking of the sentence "There is a chair", imagines bizarre circumstances in which we wouldn't know whether to say there is a chair there or not. This has given rise to the conclusion that Wittgenstein thinks that the concept of chair is "open-textured"—which is supposed to mean that the rules for defining "chair" are incomplete. If they were "complete" the truth-value of "There is a chair" would be decided for every conceivable situation. But as B/H neatly remark:

From the perspective of the *Investigations*, this is a muddle. The impossibility of satisfying this demand for completeness of definition shows not that the demand is utopian, but rather that it makes no sense. It is a complete distortion of what it is for a definition or explanation to be complete. Since the concept of open texture is introduced as

correlative to such a concept of completeness, there is no such thing as open texture either.

B/H bring out the versatility and resourcefulness of Wittgenstein's treatment of a philosophical confusion. He circles around it, probing it from different angles, drawing implications in striking examples, inventing language-games as objects of comparison, but always seeking out the *Ur Bild* that feeds and preserves the confusion and makes it resistant to criticism. Wittgenstein was never satisfied with a crisp refutation. His characteristic attitude towards philosophical work is expressed in remarks written in 1931:

One must begin with the error and lead it to the truth. That is, one must uncover the source of error; otherwise hearing the truth won't help us. It cannot penetrate when something else is taking its place. To convince someone of the truth it is not enough to state it; but one must find the path from error to truth.

A commentary on the *Investigations* is a colossal undertaking. Baker and Hacker skilfully conduct the reader through the tangles of controversy that surround the topics of sense and meaning. They have an admirable grasp of the whole corpus of Wittgenstein's writings, and they constantly display the sharp contrasts between Wittgenstein's thought and the currently influential "scientific" semantics.

## In search of confirmation

By David Papineau

CLARK GLYMOUR:

*Theory and Evidence*

383pp. Guildford: Princeton University Press. £13.90. (paperback, £5.60).

0 691 07240 X

Clark Glymour confesses in his opening sentence that "If it is true that there are but two kinds of people in the world—the logical positivists and the god-damned English professors—then I suppose I am a logical positivist". Some modern readers might be tempted to stop right there. Nowadays we are generally agreed that, whatever one thinks of the English professors, there was something very wrong with the logical positivists. But Glymour is as aware of the positivists' failings as the rest of us, and those of their concerns that he revives in this admirable book he shows still to be important ones.

The logical positivists held that for a sentence to be meaningful it must be capable of experiential verification. In consequence they had a central problem with discourse about unobservables, and in particular with theoretical discourse in science. Their standard line of solution was some kind of definitional reduction of unobservables to observables, to be effected by certain supposed analytic "correspondence rules". A significant amount of contemporary work is still devoted to smoothing away the internal difficulties of this solution. But most of this work has a definitely steam-age air, the philosophical machinery involved having been made obsolete some decades ago by Quine's attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, and by criticisms of the idea that observation language is semantically basic.

Put as questions about meanings the positivists' worries were largely misconceived. But many of those questions can as well be read as questions about the confirmation relation: what makes one statement evidence for another? Glymour shows that under this interpretation they remain good questions. Not that the positivist tradition has left us any good answers. The widely accepted hypothetico-deductive account of confirmation has difficulty avoiding the consequence that if a piece of evidence confirms a hypothesis then it confirms the conjunction of that hypothesis with any statement whatsoever: ploys designed to block this inevitably seem to end up with the equally unwanted consequence that observational evidence is never able to support any claims about unobservables.

In the face of this dilemma there has been a general retreat to confirmational holism in the style of Quine and Duhem (Quine: "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body"), with vague hand-waving in the direction of "simplicity" and suchlike to explain how we choose when the evidential tribunal passes more than one corporate theory. But as Glymour rightly insists, this holism will not do. "Cite the color of the grass as evidence for or against Nixon's innocence and you will be judged either frivolous or daft."

His positive thesis is simple enough. A body of evidence supports a specific hypothesis if it implies values for the variables appearing in the hypothesis which actually satisfy the hypothesis, but are not logically predetermined to do so. The bite comes in the last clause. It is this that stops evidence confirming a hypothesis when the only route to some variable in it is from other variables in it via the hypothesis itself. In essence this is the idea that moves Popper

in *Objective Knowledge* to bemoan Winston Churchill's lack of recognition as an important epistemologist, when he quotes Churchill as holding that support for our views about reality requires "what in military map-making is called a 'cross-bearing'". But for all that, it is a good idea and Glymour develops it with precision and intelligence.

The crucial feature of this approach is that it does not attempt to explicate confirmation simply in terms of the overall deductive relationships between hypotheses and evidence. Instead it focuses on the way these relationships depend on the internal logical structure of the sentences involved, by imposing specific requirements on how the quantities and properties mentioned in a hypothesis under test can be identified from the evidence.

Glymour's approach allows due recognition to the truth in holism. Getting from a body of evidence to the values of the variables in a given hypothesis will in general require the help of a number of other hypotheses, themselves requiring evidential assessment. But, Glymour points out, there is nothing stopping the evidential assessment of these other hypotheses in turn by similar procedures. The need for this "bootstrapping strategy", as he calls it, does mean that the various hypotheses in a given theory will be confirmationally interlocked to some extent. But even so the focus on the internal structure of the links involved gives a far finer resolution on confirmation relations than that allowed by the holist's picture of theories appearing before the evidential tribunal only as corporations. Indeed Glymour is able to make a good case that his approach enables us to keep the wanted baby of serious explanatory hypotheses about unobservables while getting rid of any idle theoretical bath water.

He applies the bootstrapping idea to a wide range of problems. But

there are questions that he leaves unanswered. For one thing, his defence of the bootstrap strategy itself is entirely on an intuitive level, resting solely on its making sense of a number of things we know pre-theoretically to be so. This is by no means a worthless defence, but it does mean that nothing explicit is said about what "having reason to believe" a theory, in the sense of its being supported by the bootstrap strategy, has to do with the theory being true. To some extent it is obvious what might be said here. But difficulties are raised by the question of what makes a theory containing untested (or untestable) hypotheses worse than one that differs only in that it does not. Perhaps the natural answer (and the one implicitly endorsed by Glymour) is that while the former theory may be true we (can) have no reason to accept it, and so would be better advised to stick with the latter. However, there are persuasive arguments of a verificationist sort for thinking that in some (if not all) cases of such pairs of theories there is no real choice to be made, simply because the two theories really say the same thing. How far such verificationist arguments are sound, though, depends on questions of meaning, and on this Glymour has little or nothing to say.

There is a further respect in which this omission is surprising. Throughout the book Glymour emphasizes the importance of the internal structure of scientific statements. This echoes Michael Dummett's frequent complaint against semantic holism, that by ignoring the way the meanings of sentences depend on the meanings of their parts semantic holism is unable to explain the existence of inferential links between sentences. But Dummett stresses further that if attributions of sentential structure are to play this explanatory role, then they themselves require an independent grounding. Exactly what this grounding should be depends on our general model of meaning. Dummett himself favours a non-standard verificationist model. The more popular model (and again the one implicitly endorsed by Glymour) is a realist one which sees meaning as a matter of words standing for independently existing things and sentences standing for independent states of reality. Considering these as general models of language, there is probably more to be said on the realist side. However in the specific case of theoretical discourse in science there are well-known arguments, both old and new, against taking a realist construal for granted. Given the weight he places on matters of internal logical structure, Glymour owes us something in the way of an explicit account of the semantics of scientific discourse. The positivists may have worried about meanings in the wrong way. It does not follow that we can manage without worrying about meanings at all.

## Humphrey—a Tortoise

There was one of Oxford's undergraduates  
Who, in '39, having drunk what was left in the bottle,  
Closed Homer and Hesiod, Aristophanes, Aristotle,  
Duly marking his place (he was reading *Mods and Greats*)

And went down—to fight for his country. In '46,  
Finding each marker exactly where he had put it,  
He read on from the line he had reached in each book when he shut it.  
And the name of that man was Trench—A. Chenevix.

—The same who later became headmaster of Eton.  
From October, Humphrey sleeps in a cardboard box,  
Having marked, as it were, in his mind where he last had his feet on

The ground, until April, when, finding his place by the rocks  
In the sun, and his place in the shade, he just carries straight on.  
It's a wonderful thing to see how wise he looks.

John Goudge



Papineau, David. "In search of confirmation." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4046, 17 Oct. 1980, p. 1181.  
The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200160088/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200160088/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH). Accessed 13 June 2023.