

# A. Pichler, S. Säätelä: *Introduction to Wittgenstein*

Lecture 5 22.9.2022:

- Language game; Bringing philosophy back to everyday language games;  
Form of life; Mistakes of the «Augustinian picture»
  - Family resemblance
  - “übersichtliche Darstellung”

# Introduction to the PI (§§1-88) under 7 headings

- 1) Acting
- 2) The language game-method and the language game
- 3) Bringing philosophy back to everyday language games («einfach», «Bedeutung», «Satz» ...)
- 4) Form of life
- 5) Mistakes of the «Augustinian picture»
- 6) Family resemblance
- 7) Übersichtliche Darstellung

## 2) Language game («Sprachspiel»)

Between *calculus* (cf. *Tractatus!*) and *play*

- Acting with language
- Parts of acting with language
- Types of acting with language
  - Language learning!

# PI §23

## Types of acting with language

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". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

**Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.**

Review the **multiplicity of language-games** in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them—

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—

Reporting an event—

Speculating about an event—

Forming and testing a hypothesis—

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—

Making up a story; and reading it—

Play-acting—

Singing catches—

Guessing riddles—

Making a joke; telling it—

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—

Translating from one language into another—

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

—It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

# PI §7

7. In the practice of the use of language (2) one party calls out the words, the other acts on them. [Language learning] However, in instruction in the language the following process will occur: the learner *names* the objects; that is, he utters the word when the teacher points at the stone. — Indeed, there will be an even simpler exercise: the pupil repeats the words after the teacher — both of these being speech-like processes.

[Language learning] We can also think of the whole process of using words in (2) as **one of those games by means of which children learn their native language**. I will call these games “*language-games*” and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game.

[Parts of acting with language] And **the processes of naming the stones and of repeating words after someone** might also be called language-games. Think of certain uses that are made of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses.

[Acting with language] I shall also call **the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven**, a “language-game”.

# What is a "language game"? Five important aspects

- 1) *Types of linguistic practice*: Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others: ... [§23]
- 2) *Parts of linguistic practice*: Und man könnte die Vorgänge des Benennens der Steine und des Nachsprechens des vorgesagten Wortes auch Sprachspiele nennen. [§7]
- 3) *Learning language*: Linguistic "games" of a simple/primitive character, actually existing in the learning of first language: Wir können uns auch denken, daß der ganze Vorgang des Gebrauchs der Worte in (2) eines jener Spiele ist, mittels welcher Kinder ihre Muttersprache erlernen. [§7]
- 4) *The unity of language and action*: Ich werde auch das Ganze: der Sprache und der Tätigkeiten, mit denen sie verwoben ist, "das Sprachspiel" nennen. [§7]
- 5) *Method of philosophy*: Fictive, constructed linguistic "games" of a simple / primitive character; elements of philosophical method; objects of comparison [§5]

The PI §1 shopping example,  
from a slightly different  
perspective

# Language game-method

If we say thinking is essentially operating with signs, the first question you might ask is: “What are signs?” – – – Instead of giving any kind of general answer to this question, **I shall propose to you to look closely at particular cases which we should call “operating with signs”**. Let us look at a simple example of operating with words. I give someone the order: “fetch me six apples from the grocer”, and I will describe a way of making use of such an order: The words “six apples” are written on a bit of paper, the paper is handed to the grocer, the grocer compares the word “apple” with labels on different shelves. He finds it to agree with one of the labels, counts from 1 to the number written on the slip of paper, and for every number counted takes a fruit off the shelf and puts it in a bag. – – – And here you have one use of words. I shall in the future again and again draw your attention to what I shall call language-games. These are processes of using signs simpler than those which usually occur in the use of our highly complicated everyday language. Language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use of words. The study of language-games is the study of primitive forms of language or primitive languages. If we want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. ([Ts-309.26](#) / Blue Book p. 16f)

## Language games as philosophical method

- If you have a philosophical problem (typically, a “What is ...?” question): Find a simple everyday language game (a simple use of words that is intertwined with *action*) where the words / concepts that make up your problem, function in non-problematic ways
- Compare your philosophical use of the words to the unproblematic use in the language game where it is tied to action
- See that your philosophical and problematic use of the word is not tied to action / activity and thus has no (depth) grammar
  - For **philosophical** problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. (PI §38)
- Find a language game for which your philosophical conception of the use of the word is correct.
  - See the PI §2 builders’ language. What can you learn from that game? Is the PI §2 builders’ form of life the form of life where you want your philosophical concept to function in?



# PI §2ff: Positive use of Augustine's account → **Language games**

2. ... Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right.

...

- PI §§ 2, 6, 7, 8, ... 23 ...
- Cf. Brown Book (1934-35)

3) Bringing philosophy back to  
everyday language games  
(see PI §116)

The PI's description / diagnosis of the Tractatus' reasoning behind "simple names- / simple objects-philosophy":

**There is no philosophically separated / separable meaning of «einfach»**

# The *Tractatus* used the word «einfach» wrongly: PI §47

... We use the word "composite" (and therefore the word "simple") in an enormous number of different and differently related ways. (Is the colour of a square on a chessboard simple, or does it consist of pure white and pure yellow? And is white simple, or does it consist of the colours of the rainbow?—Is this length of 2 cm. simple, or does it consist of two parts, each 1 cm. long? But why not of one bit 3 cm. long, and one bit 1 cm. long measured in the opposite direction?)

# PI §39

39. But why does it occur to one to want to make precisely this word into a name, when it evidently is *not* a **name**?—That is just the reason. For one is tempted to make an objection against what is ordinarily called a name. It can be put like this: *a name ought really to signify a **simple***. And for this one might perhaps give the following reasons: The word "Excalibur", say, is a proper name in the ordinary sense. The sword Excalibur consists of parts combined in a particular way. If they are combined differently Excalibur does not exist. But it is clear that the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" makes *sense* whether Excalibur is still whole or is broken up. But **if "Excalibur" is the name of an object**, this object no longer exists when Excalibur is broken in pieces; and as no object would then correspond to the name it would have no meaning. But then the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense. **But it does make sense**; so there must always be something corresponding to the words of which it consists. **So the word "Excalibur" must disappear** when the sense is analysed and its place be taken by words which name simples. It will be reasonable to call these words the real names.

# PI §59

59. "A *name* signifies only what is an *element* of reality. What cannot be destroyed; what remains the same in all changes." ...We see *component parts* of something composite (of a chair, for instance). We say that the back is part of the chair, but is in turn itself composed of several bits of wood; while a leg is a simple component part. **We also see a whole which changes (is destroyed) while its component parts remain unchanged. These are the materials from which we construct that picture of reality.**

# PI §60

- 60. When I say: "**My broom is in the corner**",—is this really a statement about the broomstick and the brush? Well, it **could at any rate be replaced by a statement giving the position of the stick and the position of the brush**. And this statement is surely a further analysed form of the first one.—But why do I call it "further analysed"?—Well, if the broom is there, that surely means that the stick and brush must be there, and in a particular relation to one another; and this was as it were hidden in the sense of the first sentence, and is *expressed* in the analysed sentence. ...

# The reasoning behind the Tractatus' philosophy of «simples»

- 1) A sentence built with "Excalibur" (see PI §39)\* has sense even if the object which "Excalibur" refers to, no longer exists (or never existed).
- 2) For a sentence to make sense, it is a precondition that it contains elements which refer to objects.
- 3) Therefore, the object of reference cannot be Excalibur, and the expressions which refer to objects cannot be words like "Excalibur".
- 4) Therefore, there must be **simple** names which refer ("bedeuten"), and **simple** objects which are the target of their reference («Bedeutungen»):
  - So the word "Excalibur" must disappear when the sense is analysed and its place be taken by words which name simples. (PI §39)

\* Alternatively, think of a sentence about the lost / destroyed ring from *The Lord of the Rings*.



No philosophically separated  
/ separable meaning of  
«Bedeutung»

# The *Tractatus* used the word "Bedeutung" illicitly: PI §40

- 40. Let us first discuss *this* point of the argument: that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it.—It is important to **note that the word "meaning" ["Bedeutung"] is being used illicitly** if it is used to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to the word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the *bearer* of the name. When Mr. N. N. dies **one says** that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceased to have meaning it would make no sense to say "Mr. N. N. is dead." [cf. Frege's use of the word "Bedeutung"]

No philosophically separated  
/ separable meaning of  
«Satz»

# The *Tractatus* used the word «Satz» illicitly: PI §23 (cf. TLP #4.5, #6)

23. **Wieviele Arten der Sätze gibt es aber? Etwa Behauptung, Frage und Befehl? – Es gibt *unzählige* solcher Arten: unzählige verschiedene Arten der Verwendung alles dessen, was wir "Zeichen", "Worte", "Sätze", nennen.** Und diese Mannigfaltigkeit ist nichts Festes, ein für allemal Gegebenes; sondern neue Typen der Sprache, neue Sprachspiele, wie wir sagen können, entstehen und andre veralten und werden vergessen. (Ein *ungefähres Bild* davon können uns die Wandlungen der Mathematik geben.)

Das Wort "Sprachspiel" soll hier hervorheben, daß das *Sprechen* der Sprache ein Teil ist einer Tätigkeit, oder einer Lebensform.

Führe dir die Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachspiele an diesen Beispielen, und andern, vor Augen: (...)

- **Es ist interessant, die Mannigfaltigkeit der Werkzeuge der Sprache und ihrer Verwendungsweisen, die Mannigfaltigkeit der Wort- und Satzarten, mit dem zu vergleichen, was Logiker über den Bau der Sprache gesagt haben. (Und auch der Verfasser der Logisch-Philosophischen Abhandlung.)**

# PI §124

124. Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. ...

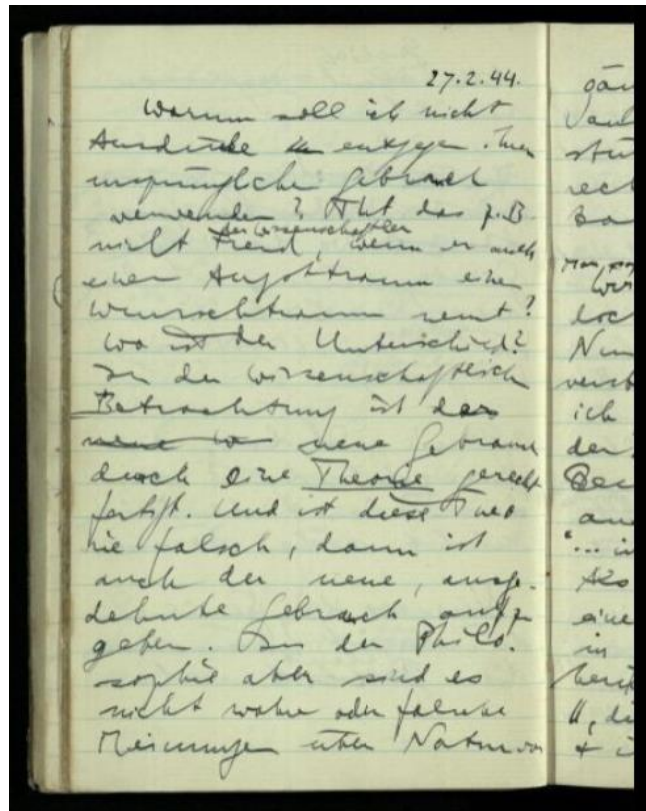
124. Die Philosophie darf den tatsächlichen Gebrauch der Sprache in keiner Weise antasten, sie kann ihn am Ende also nur beschreiben. ...

# ”Meaning is use”: PI §43

43. For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*.

Why can't philosophy have its own language game?



Why shouldn't I apply words in opposition to their original usage? Doesn't e.g. Freud do that when he calls even an anxiety dream a wish-fulfilment dream? Where is the difference? In the scientific approach the new use is justified through a *theory*. And if this theory is false then the new extended use has to be given up too. But in philosophy the extended use is not supported by true or false opinions about natural processes. No fact justifies it (&) none can overturn it.

(CV 1998: 50 = [http://wittgensteinsource.org/BFE/Ms-127,72\\_f](http://wittgensteinsource.org/BFE/Ms-127,72_f))



## 4) Form of life

# PI §19

19. Man kann sich leicht eine Sprache vorstellen, die nur aus Befehlen und Meldungen in der Schlacht besteht. – Oder eine Sprache, die nur aus Fragen besteht und einem Ausdruck der Bejahung und der Verneinung. Und unzähliges Andere. – Und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen. ...

19. It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. ...

➤ To imagine language and language use should not only involve imagining the **actions** with which it is interwoven, but to imagine also **the context in life which the language use is a part of. This includes not only social and cultural factors, but also behaviour, biology and physical facts of nature.**

# PI §§ 23-24

23. Wieviele Arten der Sätze gibt es aber? Etwa Behauptung, Frage und Befehl? – Es gibt unzählige solcher Arten: *unzählige* verschiedene Arten der Verwendung alles dessen, was wir "Zeichen", "Worte", "Sätze", nennen. Und diese Mannigfaltigkeit ist nichts Festes, ein für allemal Gegebenes; sondern neue Typen der Sprache, neue Sprachspiele, wie wir sagen können, entstehen und andre veralten und werden vergessen. (Ein *ungefähres* Bild davon können uns die Wandlungen der Mathematik geben.)

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Führe dir die Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachspiele an diesen Beispielen, und andern, vor Augen: ...

24. Wem die Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachspiele nicht vor Augen ist, der wird etwa zu Fragen geneigt sein, wie dieser: "Was ist eine Frage?" ...

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". And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

Here the term "**language-game**" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a **form of life**.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

...

24. If you do not keep the multiplicity of language-games in view you will perhaps be inclined to ask questions like: "What is a question?" ...

PI §241: Correctness / falsehood is an aspect of statements – agreement is a matter of shared practices and form of life rather than language games only

241. "So sagst du also, daß die Übereinstimmung der Menschen entscheide, was richtig und was falsch ist?" – Richtig und falsch ist, was Menschen *sagen*; und in der *Sprache* stimmen die Menschen überein. Dies ist keine Übereinstimmung der Meinungen, sondern der **Lebensform**.

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is **not agreement in opinions but in form of life**.

# Issues arising from making «form of life» into something substantial

- One or many human forms of life?
  - A universal human form of life? Common human nature? (cf. PI §§ 25, 415)
  - **Many autonomous and separated forms of life?**
- Is it biological or anthropological or social or cultural or lingual only?
  - Agreement in the language one uses is agreement in form of life. (PI §241)
  - Or all of them? (cf. PI §§ 25, 415)
- Is it specific or general?
  - Specific forms of greeting, saying Goodbye, ... as "forms of life" (see Majetschak 2010: "Forms and Patterns of Life: A Reassessment of a So-Called Basic Concept in the Late Philosophy of Wittgenstein")
- For discussion of «form of life», see:
  - <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/0472C6A422204BFB4480C84BAC1ABE5D/9781108931151AR.pdf/wittgenstein-on-forms-of-life.pdf>
  - <http://www.nordicwittgensteinreview.com/issue/view/NWR%20Special%20Issue%202015>

## 5) «Augustine's mistakes»

# «Augustine's mistake(s)»:

## They can all be regarded mistakes of the *Tractatus*!

1. "Cum ipsi (majores homines) appellabant rem aliquam, et cum secundum eam vocem corpus ad aliquid movebant, videbam, et tenebam hoc ab eis vocari rem illam, quod sonabant, cum eam vellent ostendere. Hoc autem eos velle ex motu corporis aperiebatur: tamquam verbis naturalibus omnium gentium, quae fiunt vultu et nutu oculorum, ceterorumque membrorum actu, et sonitu vocis indicante affectionem animi in petendis, habendis, rejiciendis, fugiendisve rebus. Ita verba in variis sentiis locis suis posita, et crebro audita, quarum rerum signa essent, paulatim colligebam, measque jam voluntates, edomito in eis signis ore, per haec enuntiabam." (Augustine, *Confessions*, I. 8.)

These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names.—In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.

Augustine does not speak of there being any difference between kinds of word. [Factual mistake: «There is only one type of words».] 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. [«Ethical mistake: Let's deal with this later, if at all.»]

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. ...

2. That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours.

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. ... The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language.

# «Augustine's mistake(s)»:

## They can all be regarded mistakes of the *Tractatus*!

3. Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe."

It is as if someone were to say: "A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules..."—and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others. You can make your definition correct by expressly restricting it to those games.

4. Imagine a script in which the letters were used to stand for sounds, and also as signs of emphasis and punctuation. (A script can be conceived as a language for describing sound-patterns.) Now imagine someone interpreting that script as if there were simply a correspondence of letters to sounds and as if the letters had not also completely different functions. Augustine's conception of language is like such an over-simple conception of the script.

5. ... If we look at the example in §1, we may perhaps get an inkling how much this general notion of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze ...

6. ... But if the ostensive teaching has this effect,—am I to say that it effects an understanding of the word? Don't you understand the call "Slab!" if you act upon it in such-and-such a way?—Doubtless the ostensive teaching helped to bring this about; but only together with a particular training. With different training the same ostensive teaching of these words would have effected a quite different understanding. ... [Factual mistake: «Ostensive definition stands at the beginning of learning language.»]

32. ... 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". [Factual mistake: «Learning to speak functions like learning a second language.»]



How did you learn to speak?

# Ms-110,89f

Drury sagte mir heute, er habe überlegt, **daß man sich nicht des Zustandes erinnern könne wo man noch nicht sprechen konnte || es unmöglich sei sich des Zustands zu erinnern vor der Erlernung der Sprache.** – Man könnte natürlich Erinnerungsbilder aus jener Zeit besitzen, aber man kann sich nicht an ein Fühlen des Mangels der Sprache erinnern, da man keinen Begriff der Sprache haben kann, ehe man spricht & freilich auch nachher nicht, weil es einen solchen Begriff nicht gibt. **Auch kann man sich nicht an das Bedürfnis nach dem sprachlichen Ausdruck erinnern, denn wo das vorhanden ist, gibt es schon eine Sprache in der man denkt.**

# Family resemblances

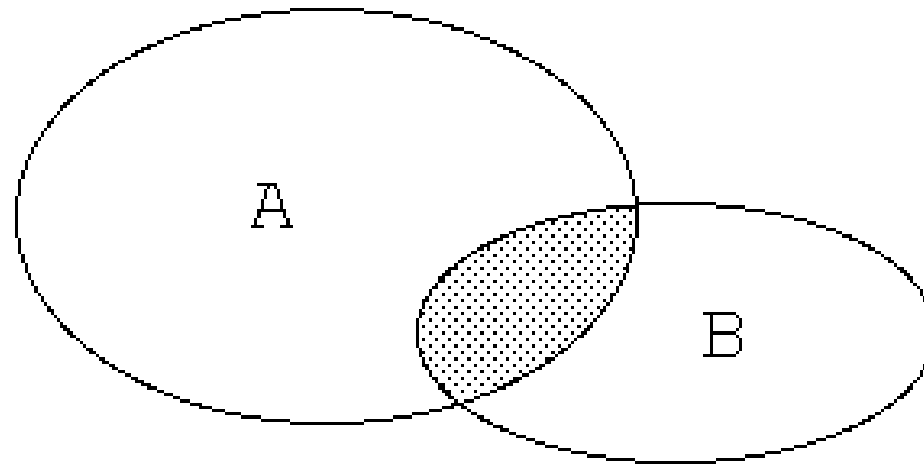
# PI §81

(...) All this, however, can only appear in the right light when one has attained greater clarity about the concepts of understanding, meaning, and thinking. For it will then also become clear **what can lead us (and did lead me) to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules.**

# Universals –

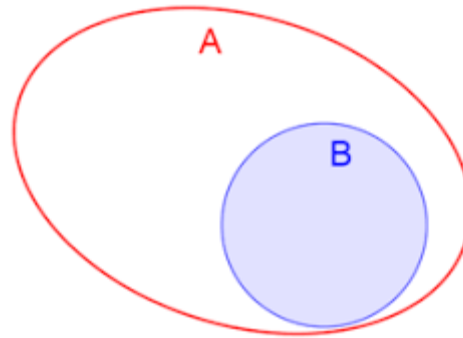
What is the justification for general concepts  
(«Allgemeinbegriffe»)?

«Homo = animal + rationale»



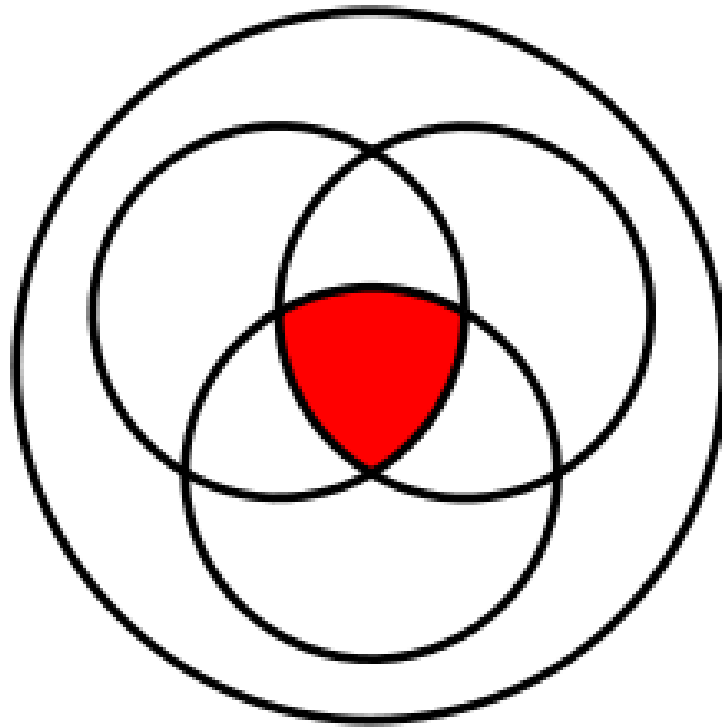
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«Biological male human = Human with one X and one Y chromosome in each cell»



(Graphic from <http://snvbrwvobs2.snv.at/matura.wiki/index.php/Mengenlehre>)

«Bachelor = human male + able to marry + unmarried»



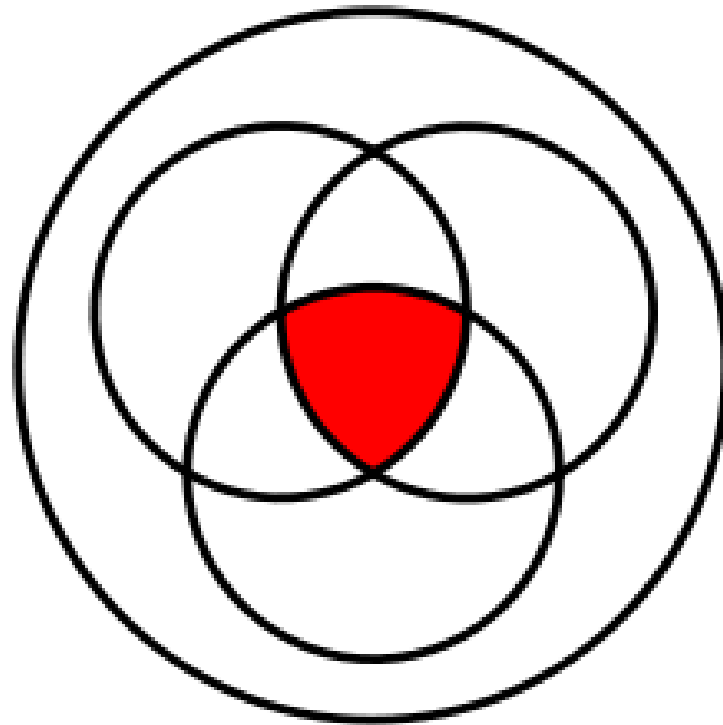
[i.org/wiki/File:Venn\\_0000\\_0001.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venn_0000_0001.svg))



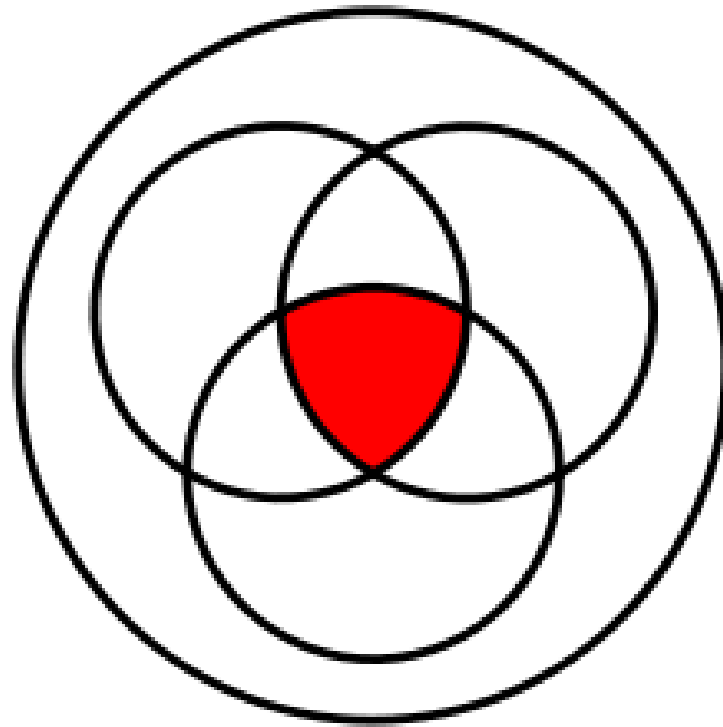
# A traditional view: Definitions give us the necessary and sufficient conditions of a thing, its «essential» properties / its «essence»



Student = ? + ? + ? + ... ?



Game = activity + competitive +  
social + ... ?



# Wittgenstein's suggestion: Family resemblances

Most everyday (general) concepts  
(*Allgemeinbegriffe*) **don't have essences** and

...

... are not like areas [«Bezirke»] with centers and sharp borders. Our everyday concepts do not work on the basis of essence and exactness (and don't actually presuppose essences and exactness either). They do *not* work «according to definite rules» (PI §81).

71. One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges.— "But is a blurred concept a concept at all?"—Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?

Frege compares a concept to an area [Bezirk] and says that an area [Bezirk] with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. ... For any general definition can be misunderstood too. The point is that *this* is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word "game".)

Rather, most of our everyday concepts  
are more like **ropes** [*Seil, Tau*] or  
**threads** [*Faden*]

... we twist fibre [*Faser*] on  
fibre. And the strength of  
the thread does not reside  
in the fact that some one  
fibre runs through its  
whole length, but in the  
overlapping of many  
fibres.



# PI §66: Not *one* defining property needs to be in common

66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see whether there is anything common to all.*—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at **board-games**, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to **card-games**; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to **ball-games**, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of **games like ring-a-ring-a-roses**; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.

**And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.**

# PI §67: «Family resemblances»

67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances«; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: 'games' form a family.

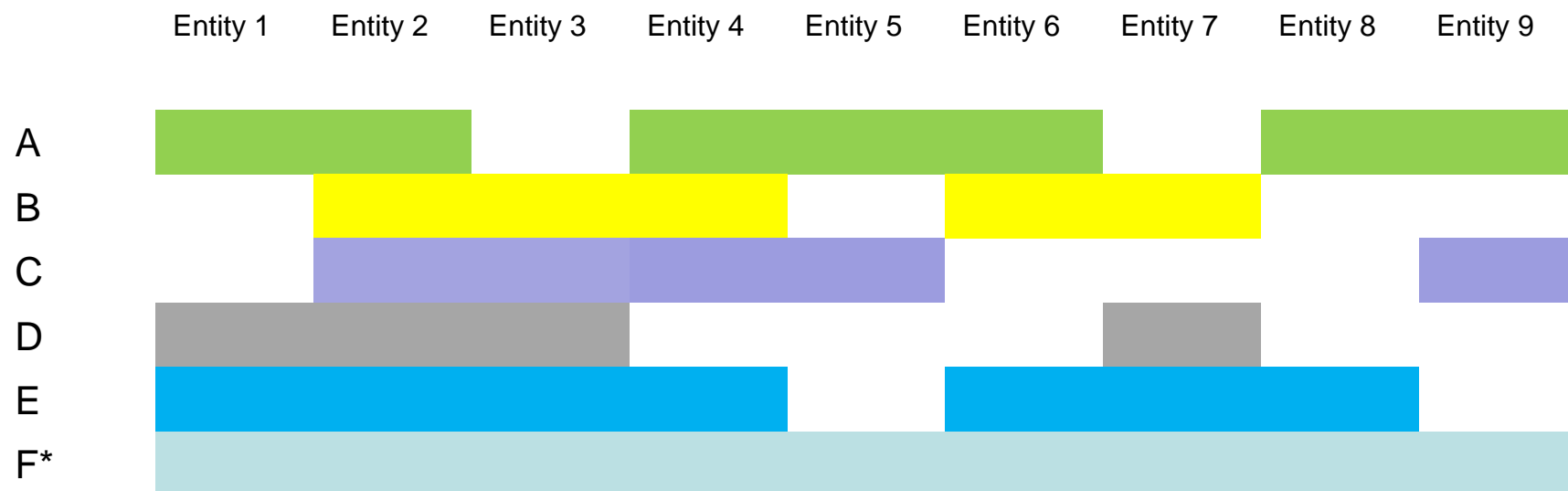
**And for instance the kinds of number form a family in the same way.** Why do we call something a "number"? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.



Summary: Most of our concepts do not have sharp borders, nor do they have an "essence", nor do they need any of the two in order to do their job

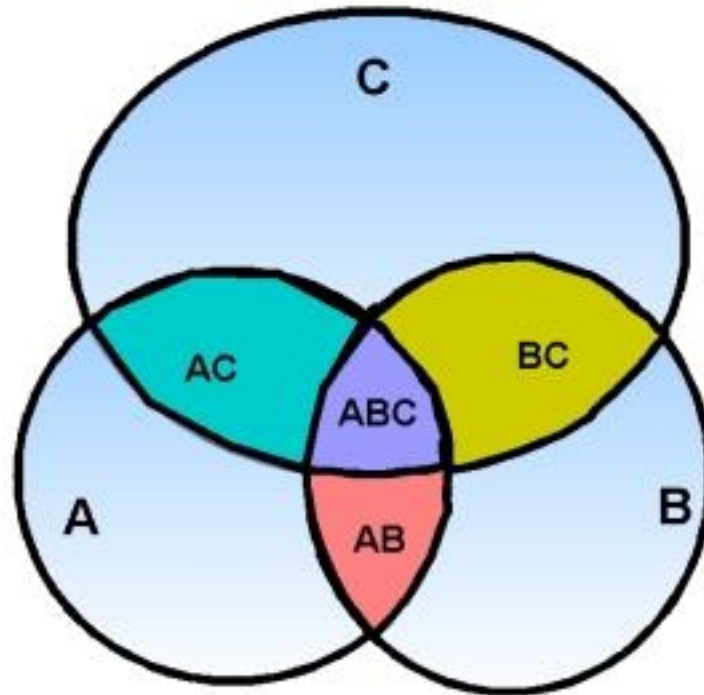
- Instances of a concept do not *need* to have a *defining* feature in common in order to be instances of that concept. (PI §§66-67)
  - There is not *one defining* thing which the instances of game (Bridge, Ludo, Tennis ...) need to have in common in order to be games.
  - There is not *one defining* thing which the members of a family need to have in common in order to be members of that family.
- A concept does not need to have sharp borders in order to function well. (PI §71)

# Wittgenstein's suggestion for understanding the nature of some (not all!) universality / generality: Family resemblances



\* Common properties (F) are still possible!

# Cf. intersection



(Graphic by Manfred Aulbach,  
<http://heimwerker-mathematik.aulbach-philosophy.de/-Schnittmenge/-schnittmenge-.html>)

Which of the concepts below are «family resemblance concepts»?

game, tree, chair, number, art, rationality, meaning, animal, language, acting, understanding, reading, thinking, male, female, human being, citizen, Bergenser, stortingsrepresentant, photosynthesis, electricity, modus ponens, diabetes type 2, bachelor, student ...

# Family resemblances vs. Definition

- The notion of family resemblances proves illuminating for a wide range of concepts: "game", "number", "understanding", "language", "proposition", "art", ...
- Definition by giving necessary and (collectively) sufficient conditions ("Homo est animal rationale") or putting up a disjunction ("A game is either ... or ... or ...") for the use of a word is often not possible, and where possible, not always helpful, and where helpful, not always true to our *actual* ways of using the concept.
- **However, nothing in Wittgenstein's remarks about family resemblances amounts to the view, that all concepts are «family resemblance concepts» or that definitions would *never* be required or in place.**

It can be difficult to come up with good *definitions* of our everyday expressions ...

156. This will become clearer if we interpolate the consideration of another word, namely "**reading**". First I need to remark that I am not counting the understanding of what is read as part of 'reading' for purposes of this investigation: reading is here the activity of rendering out loud what is written or printed; and also of writing from dictation, writing out something printed, playing from a score, and so on.

**The use of this word in the ordinary circumstances of our life is of course extremely familiar to us. But the part the word plays in our life, and therewith the language-game in which we employ it, would be difficult to describe even in rough outline. ...**

... but definitions *are* often possible and do also make sense in specific contexts

132: ... Such a reform for particular practical purposes, an improvement in our terminology designed to prevent misunderstandings in practice, is perfectly possible. **But these are not the cases we have to do with.** The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.

- N.B.: We should not forget that there indeed also already exist concepts which are precisely defined – see for example concepts from the sciences, political administration, medicine, pharmacy, or the transportation sector.
- N.B.: Nothing in Wittgenstein's remarks about family resemblances amounts to the view, that the instances falling under «family resemblance concepts» could not have properties in common. Of course they can – the question is whether it is *the common properties* that make them fall under the specific concept which they fall under!
  - All games are activities (PI §66: "proceedings" ☺) – but it is not the property 'being an activity' that makes a game into a game.

# The need for, and the power of the example

71. ... I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I—for some reason—was unable to express; but that he is now to *employ* those examples in a particular way. Here **giving examples** is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a better. For any **general definition** can be misunderstood too. The point is that *this* is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word "game".)

- We learn to understand and master «family resemblance concepts» by being given examples rather than by being given definitions!



# The argumentative locus of discussing family resemblances in the PI

65. ... Denn man könnte mir nun einwenden: "Du machst dir's leicht! Du redest von allen möglichen Sprachspielen, hast aber nirgends gesagt, was denn das Wesentliche des Sprachspiels, und also der Sprache, ist. Was allen diesen Vorgängen gemeinsam ist und sie zur Sprache, oder zu Teilen der Sprache macht. Du schenkst dir also gerade den Teil der Untersuchung, der dir selbst seinerzeit das meiste Kopferbrechen gemacht hat, nämlich den, die allgemeine Form des Satzes und der Sprache betreffend."

Und das ist wahr. – Statt etwas anzugeben, was allem, was wir Sprache nennen, gemeinsam ist, sage ich, es ist diesen Erscheinungen garnicht Eines gemeinsam, weswegen wir für alle das gleiche Wort verwenden, – sondern sie sind mit einander in vielen verschiedenen Weisen verwandt. Und dieser Verwandtschaft, oder dieser Verwandtschaften wegen nennen wir sie alle "Sprachen". Ich will versuchen, dies zu erklären.

65. ... For someone might object against me: "You make things easy for yourself! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what is essential to a language-game, and so to language: what is common to all these activities, and makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you the most headache, the part about the general form of the proposition and of language."

And this is true. – Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I'm saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all a but there are many different kinds of affinity between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all "languages". I'll try to explain this.