Language as Language-Games

(from *Philosophical Investigations*)

65. Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: "You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said that the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions and of language.*"

And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language." I will try to explain this.

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.

67.   I can think of no better expression to characterize these similari-
ties 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.

But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all
these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common proper-
ties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as
well say: "Something runs through the whole thread—namely the contin-
uous overlapping of those fibres".

68.   "All right: the concept of number is defined for you as the logical
sum of these individual interrelated concepts: cardinal numbers, rational
numbers, real numbers, etc.; and in the same way the concept of a game as

the logical sum of a corresponding set of sub-concepts."—It need not be
so. For I *can* give the concept 'number' rigid limits in this way, that is, use
the word "number" for a rigidly limited concept, but I can also use it so
that the extension of the concept is *not* closed by a frontier. And this is
how we do use the word "game". For how is the concept of a game
bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you
give the boundary? No. You can *draw* one; for none has so far been drawn.
(But that never troubled you before when you used the word "game".)

"But when the use of the word is unregulated, the 'game' we play
with it is unregulated."—It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules;
but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in ten-
nis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too.

69.   How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that
we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: "This *and similar
things* are called 'games'." And do we know any more about it ourselves? Is
it only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is?—But this
is not ignorance. We do not know the boundaries because none have been
drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary—for a special purpose. Does it
take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! (Except for that special
purpose.) No more than it took the definition: 1 pace = 75 cm. to make the
measure of length 'one pace' usable. And if you want to say "But still, before
that it wasn't an exact measure", then I reply: very well, it was an inexact
one.—Though you still owe me a definition of exactness.

70.   "But if the concept 'game' is uncircumscribed like that, you don't really know what you mean by a 'game'."—When I give the description: "The ground was quite covered with plants"—do you want to say I don't know what I am talking about until I can give a definition of a plant?

My meaning would be explained by, say, a drawing and the words "The ground looked roughly like this." Perhaps I even say "it looked *exactly* like this."—Then were just *this* grass and *these* leaves there, arranged just like this? No, that is not what it means. And I should not accept any picture as exact in *this* sense.

> Someone says to me: "Shew the children a game." I teach them gaming with dice, and the other says "I didn't mean that sort of game." Must the exclusion of the game with dice have come before his mind when he gave me the order? (Note added by Wittgenstein—ed.)

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 and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it.—But is it senseless to say: "Stand roughly there"? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand—as if I were indicating a particular *spot*. And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way.—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".)

72.   *Seeing what is common.* Suppose I shew someone various multi-coloured pictures, and say: "The colour you see in all these is called 'yellow ochre'."—This is a definition, and the other will get to understand it by looking for and seeing what is common to the pictures. Then he can look *at*, can point *to*, the common thing.

Compare with this a case in which I shew him figures of different shapes all painted the same colour, and say: "What these have in common is called 'yellow ochre'."

And compare this case: I shew him samples of different shades of blue and say: "The colour that is common to all these is what I call 'blue'."

73.   When someone defines the names of colours for me by pointing to samples and saying "This colour is called 'blue', this 'green' . . ." this case can be compared in many respects to putting a table in my hands, with the words written under the colour-samples.—Though this comparison may mislead in many ways.—One is now inclined to extend the comparison: to have understood the definition means to have in one's mind an idea of the thing defined, and that is a sample or picture. So if I am shewn various different leaves and told "This is called a 'leaf'," I get an idea of the shape of a leaf, a picture of it in my mind.—But what does the picture of a leaf look like when it does not shew us any particular shape, but 'what is common to all shapes of leaf'? Which shade is the 'sample in my mind' of the colour green—the sample of what is common to all shades of green.

"But might there not be such 'general' samples? Say a schematic leaf, or a sample of *pure* green?"—Certainly there might. But for such a schema to be understood as a *schema,* and not as the shape of a particular leaf, and for the slip of pure green to be understood as a sample of all that is greenish and not as a sample of pure green—this in turn resides in the way the samples are used.

Ask yourself: what *shape* must the sample of the colour green be? Should it be rectangular? Or would it then be the sample of a green rectangle?—So should it be 'irregular' in shape? And what is to prevent us then from regarding it—that is, from using it—only as a sample of ir-regularity of shape?

74.   Here also belongs the idea that if you see this leaf as a samp of the 'leaf shape in general' you *see* it differently from someone who re-gards it as, say, a sample of this particular shape. Now this might well be so—though it is not so—for it would only be to say that, as a matter of ex-perience, if you *see* the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such rules. Of course, there is such a thing as seeing in *this* way or *that;* and there are also cases where who-ever sees a sample like *this* will in general use it in *this* way, and whoever sees it otherwise in another way. For example, if you see the schematic drawing of a cube as a plane figure consisting of a square and two rhombi you will, perhaps, carry out the order "Bring me something like this" dif-ferently from someone who sees the picture three-dimensionally.

75.   What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equiva-lent to an unformulated definition? So that if it were formulated I should be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge? Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explana-tions that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of game; shewing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these; saying that I should scarcely include this or this among games; and so on.

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76.   If someone were to draw a sharp boundary I could not acknowledge it as the one that I too always wanted to draw, or had drawn in my mind. For I did not want to draw one at all. His concept can then be said to be not the same as mine, but akin to it. The kinship is that of two pictures, one of which consists of colour patches with vague contours, and the other of patches similarly shaped and distributed, but with clear contours. The kinship is just as undeniable as the difference.

77.   And if we carry this comparison still further it is clear that the degree to which the sharp picture *can* resemble the blurred one depends on the latter's degree of vagueness. For imagine having to sketch a sharply defined picture 'corresponding' to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle: for it you put down a sharply defined one. Of course—several such sharply defined rectangles can be drawn to correspond to the indefinite one.—But if the colours in the original merge without a hint of any outline won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won't you then have to say: "Here I might just as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle, for all the colours merge. Anything—and nothing—is right."—And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics.

In such a difficulty always ask yourself: How did we *learn* the meaning of this word ("good" for instance)? From what sort of examples? in what language-games? Then it will be easier for you to see that the word must have a family of meanings.