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## **Language-games, *Lebensform*, and the ancient city**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Wittgenstein's method of language-games, by discussing how simple language-games are related to language of real-life complexity. It is argued that Wittgenstein rejects as unintelligible an atomist conception of this relation, according to which the step from simple language-games to complex language is a matter of mere accumulation of individually self-standing building-blocks which are supposed to remain substantively unchanged throughout the process. The upshot of Wittgenstein's non-atomism is that his method involves as a crucial element the consideration of how simple language-games themselves undergo transformations when we build up complicated forms of language from rudimentary starting-points. In this connection, it is investigated how the notion of "form of life" enters Wittgenstein's discussion. It is considered why the connection made between his method and Goethean morphology in Waismann's *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* is absent in PI, and then argued at some length that a different analogy that he does make use of – that of language as an ancient city – sheds more light on his method than is usually appreciated.

**Keywords:** atomism, city planning, essentialism, form of life, holism, Jacobs, Kuusela, language, language-game, method, Waismann, Wittgenstein

## 1. Introduction

The terms “form of life” and “language-game” are closely associated in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In Part I of the book, the term “form of life” occurs only three times, and in two of these it is used precisely to explain the significance of simple language-games such as those of the builders in §§2 and 8.<sup>1</sup> In §23, Wittgenstein says “[t]he word ‘language-*game*’ is used here to emphasize the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life”. A few paragraphs earlier, in §19, the term occurs in the midst of a discussion where he seems to insist that simple language-games can be conceived as self-standing languages:

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in a battle. Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering Yes and No – and countless other things. – And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.

Many commentators have felt uncomfortable with this passage, arguing that it is not at all easy but in fact hardly possible to imagine a genuine *language* consisting only of orders and reports in a battle. Such commentators have claimed that we cannot

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<sup>1</sup> I prefer the old headings, “Part I” and “Part II”, of the *Investigations*, and thus take exception to the renaming of Part II by Peter Hacker and Joachim Schulte in their revised translation of the book (they call it *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment*). As Hugh Knott has convincingly shown in a recent paper (Knott 2017), there are good reasons – both historical and philosophical – to stay with the old titles.

really make sense of the meager language-games in §§2 and 8 as self-standing languages. “The trouble”, says Rush Rhees, “is to imagine that [the builders in §§2 and 8] spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all. I do not think it would be speaking a language” (Rhees 1960, p. 177). More recently, Peter Hacker has come to a similar conclusion: “It is [...] doubtful whether one can coherently imagine a language consisting only of orders in a battle, but no orders and reports before or after the battle, and no orders and reports at home or in the fields. [...] It is none too easy to imagine such a language, any more than it is easy to imagine language-game (2) as a complete primitive language” (Hacker 2015, p. 5).<sup>2</sup>

Wittgenstein, however, seems to want to forestall precisely this sort of reaction. For, in §18 he writes:

Do not be troubled by the fact that languages (2) and (8) consist only of orders. If you want to say that this shews them to be incomplete, ask yourself whether our own language is complete; – whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated in it[.]

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Hacker, like Oskari Kuusela (see below), does not take this objection to be of much relevance for Wittgenstein’s central, methodological points. However, it should also be noted that Hacker’s conception of Wittgenstein’s method is quite different from Kuusela’s.

In a recent paper, Oskari Kuusela argues that the reason why Wittgenstein urges us not to worry about the extreme sparseness of his simple language-games is that such worry displays a misapprehension of their methodological purpose. Kuusela notes, “the method of language-games [...] is a method for isolating and describing particular aspects or facets of language use for the purpose of philosophical clarification, but involves no claim that such a description captures language use in all its actual complexity” (Kuusela 2014, p. 151). Hence, he concludes, “nothing depends on whether we acknowledge [Wittgenstein’s] primitive language-games as proper languages, as long as we accept that those systems bear enough similarity to actual language in order for it to be compared with them to clarify its particular aspects” (Kuusela 2014, p. 147). According to Kuusela, the reason why Wittgenstein nonetheless insists that we conceive of a simple language-game such as that of the builders “as a complete primitive language” (PI §2) is that the language-game can have a determinate function as a model or an object of comparison only if we think of it as completely described: “it would be problematic, if the model had hidden dimensions on which their comprehensibility as examples of language or as comparable to language depended” (Kuusela 2014, p. 148).

I think Kuusela is right that language-games are primarily meant to function as tools for clarification, and that Wittgenstein’s insistence that they be conceived as complete and self-standing (cf. BB, p. 81) must be read as methodologically motivated rather than as involving some sort of theoretical claim about what is sufficient for something to be a *language* proper. However, Kuusela does not address one of the principal objections commentators such as Rhees have about Wittgenstein’s conception. What such commentators argue is not merely that more parts must be added in order to get a genuine language. Their claim is not that we

need to aggregate sufficiently many individual language-games in order to reach a critical mass such that the total sum is extensive enough to count as a full-blown language. Rather, they are making a more thoroughly holistic point: the enrichment they are asking for is not a matter of mere aggregation, but of a wider surrounding of linguistic practices in relation to which a simple “game” is understandable and describable as a *language-game* in the first place. Thus, what they claim is that we cannot speak, say, of orders in a battle, or of the naming of objects, without *already* presupposing that the simple activities we describe stretch beyond themselves as integrated within a rich array of linguistic practices. The point these commentators make is that if we think we can separate and treat as complete a simple language-game such as that of the builders, while at the same time continue to use notions such as “giving an order” and “pointing at and naming an object” to characterize the moves within that game, we must be working under the illusion that language can be conceived as a merely analytic sum of individually self-standing patterns of activity. As Warren Goldfarb puts it, “[t]he trouble comes when we segment the description, i.e., when we take ‘naming’, ‘wishing to point’, and so on, as if they picked out isolatable phenomena, whose character can be given independently of any surrounding structure” (Goldfarb 1982, p. 272).

Why is this point of methodological significance? Why could not Kuusela’s Wittgenstein respond simply by repeating his apparently non-committal claim, that it suffices if the simple language-game we introduce as a tool of clarification bear enough similarity to actual language in order for the specific comparison we want to make to fulfill its purpose?

The problem is that this response fails to explain how there can *be* “enough similarity” between simple language-games and actual language for the envisaged

comparison to be illuminating. More precisely, the worry is that there is an unacknowledged tension between the demand for self-standing simplicity and the aim of philosophical illumination. On the one hand, we have seen Kuusela emphasizing that the usefulness of simple language-games in such comparisons presupposes that they have no hidden dimensions on which their comprehensibility as examples of language or as comparable to language depends. On the other hand, it is unclear how such comparisons can be illuminating if they do not allow that the activities involved in the language-games be characterized in at least rudimentary semantic terms, such as “naming”, “wishing to point”, “ordering”, and so on. However, if Rhees and Goldfarb are right, such characterizations presuppose that the simple language-games are *not* treated as complete and self-standing. The upshot seems to be that Kuusela’s method of language-games involves inconsistent demands on the model used. In order to handle this sort of holistic worry, it is not enough to insist on a purely methodological conception of how simple language-games are supposed to function. For the point about the holistic interdependence between different parts of language will matter to the question how the envisaged method of clarification itself is supposed to work.

My aim in this paper is to explore this connection between holistic interdependence and Wittgenstein’s method of language-games. I will argue that Wittgenstein rejects as unintelligible an atomist conception of the relation between language-games and language in its real-life complexity, and that the methodological significance of language-games is therefore more intricate than Kuusela’s discussion sometimes suggests. In particular, I argue that the method will have to involve as a central element the consideration of how simple language-games themselves undergo transformations when we build up complicated forms of language from such

rudimentary starting-points. In this connection, I consider how the notion of “form of life” enters Wittgenstein discussion. I discuss why the connection he makes between his method and Goethean morphology in Waismann’s *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* is absent in the *Philosophical Investigation*, and then considers at some length how a different analogy that he does make use of – that of language as an ancient city – says more about his method than is usually appreciated.

## **2. Two Different Targets: Essentialism and Atomism**

Doesn’t Wittgenstein himself conceive language as a mere aggregate of simpler and individually self-standing language-games? Consider the following passage from *The Blue Book*:

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. When we look at such simple forms of language the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent. On the other hand we recognize in these simple processes forms of language not separated by a break from more complicated ones. We see that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms. (BB, p. 17)



Again, the holistic worry arises: How can Wittgenstein take it for granted that “these forms of thinking” – truth-telling, assertion, assumption, and so forth – appear in the sort of primitive language-games that remain once the “confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought” has been taken out of the picture? Will not the “activities” and “reactions” he talks about be merely non-semantic stimulus-response patterns or “signals”, deprived of linguistic significance? (Rhees 1960, p. 177) If so, how can the isolation of these patterns of reaction shed any light on such “forms of thinking”? In fact, isn’t it clear that Wittgenstein is working with a highly questionable, atomistic picture of language according to which the step from the simple to the complex, or from the primitive to the less primitive, is a matter of mere accumulation of individually self-standing games which are supposed to remain substantively unchanged throughout the process?

Similar questions can be raised with regard to some of Kuusela’s descriptions of the methodological function of language-games in Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

Consider the following passage:

Language-games in the capacity of primitive and simple forms of language use can be used, so to speak, to isolate and study specific aspects of the functioning linguistic expressions. Hence, they can be characterized, in a certain sense, as a tool by means of which the logic of language (or the function of expressions) can be analyzed. By means of simple language-games we can abstract from and take apart complicated uses of linguistic expressions with the purpose of clarifying their specific aspects. The shopping language-game [in PI §1] can be used to explain the sense in which we might speak of analysis here. (Kuusela 2014, p. 139)

How, exactly, are we to make sense of the “analyzing”, “isolating”, “taking apart” and “abstracting from” that Kuusela is talking about? Again, an atomistic reading seems near at hand: by taking apart our complicated language and studying its building-blocks – individual and self-standing language-games – we isolate specific aspects of our usage from the surrounding complexities and thereby get a clear view of how they function. In response to Rhees’s objection against using the word “analysis” to describe the functioning of language games – “If we call them ‘more primitive’ or ‘simpler’ languages, that does not mean that they reveal anything like the elements which a more complicated language must have” (BB, p. ix) – Kuusela says, “Rhees is right that the language-game method doesn’t aspire to reveal any underlying elements in this sense. But the notion of an analysis need not be understood in this way” (Kuusela 2014, p. 157, n. 12). However, Rhees’s objection is not directed against the view that Wittgenstein’s simple language-games are to be seen as elements *underlying* linguistic practice, but against the view that they constitute elements that can be *isolated from* the rest of language and yet retain those linguistic features and the “logic” that we want to understand. Rhees is worried about the very idea that we can “take apart” language in this analytic, atomistic sense. Kuusela’s remarks do little to alleviate *that* worry.

At this point, it is important to distinguish between two forms that a criticism of an atomistic picture of the relation between language-games and language can assume. One form of criticism is based on some general ideas of what makes language *language*. In its attack on the atomistic picture, this form of criticism invokes ideas of when patterns of activities can be properly counted as genuinely linguistic. An important part of Rhees’s criticism seems to be of this sort. He lists a

number of things that he takes to be crucial to language proper. Language, he says, must involve *conversation* between speakers (where “conversation” is different from mere game-playing); he claims that “[l]anguage is something that can have a literature”; and he suggests that language is something that can be understood only in relation to how it is anchored in humanly basic customs of farming, building, marrying, and so forth (Rhees 1960, pp. 180-183, 185). So, one argument he uses against the idea that Wittgenstein’s simple language-games can be conceived as self-standing and isolatable linguistic practices is that they do not fulfill these conditions for being a language: Wittgenstein’s builders are not engaged in proper conversation, their signaling is not something that could have a literature, and so on.

I think this is a genuine point of disagreement between Wittgenstein and Rhees. As we have seen, Wittgenstein insists that we can recognize his simple language-games as forms of language not separated by a break from more complicated ones, and he wants us to see that we can build up complicated forms from more primitive ones by gradually adding new forms. This gradual transition is difficult to make sense of from Rhees’s point of view. It seems to me that Wittgenstein would find in Rhees’s argument a residual form of essentialism that is better abandoned.

However, does this mean that Wittgenstein must therefore embrace the sort of atomistic picture that Rhees rejects? Or is there a way of resisting the atomistic picture without embracing any essentialist criteria for what makes a language language? I think so; and this will then constitute a second, non-essentialist criticism of the atomistic picture. The key here is to find a way of conceiving the gradual process of building up complicated forms from more primitive ones, not as the mere accumulation of self-standing practices that remain the same throughout the process,

but as a process in which the building-blocks themselves undergo changes as the process goes along, so to speak. Conversely, the “isolation” of a simple language-game will be seen as involving changes in this very game, so to speak: the isolated, primitive game will nowhere be found intact in more complicated structures, but can still somehow be used to shed light on aspects of these structures. This non-atomistic conception of how simple language-games are related to languages of real-life complexity will have to be given in terms that involve no essentialist presuppositions. In what remains of this paper, I will explore this non-atomistic and non-essentialist possibility as it is developed in Wittgenstein’s reflections on language-games and their methodological significance.

### **3. Language-Games and Morphology**

One of the clearest indications that Wittgenstein does not have an atomistic conception of how simple language-games are related to languages of real-life complexity is his recurring attempts to clarify this relation by reference to Goethe’s thoughts on morphology.<sup>3</sup> The most extensive discussion is in a work of which Wittgenstein was not formally the author, but whose content is so directly shaped (sometimes literally dictated) by him that it should be given a central position in the present discussion. In the section “Language Games” in Friedrich Waismann’s *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy*, it is emphasized that simple, rule-governed language-games are to be used merely as objects of comparison. According to

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<sup>3</sup> For illuminating discussions of Wittgenstein’s relation to Goethe, see Rowe 1991 and various essays in Breithaupt, Raatzsch and Kremberg 2003. For Wittgenstein’s thoughts on Goethean morphology, see Schulte 2003.

Waismann – and, I think we can assume, Wittgenstein – we should resist the temptation to “try to arrange the reality of language according to a particular pattern, if not to alter it to fit the pattern” and instead “simply place the pattern beside language and let it throw as much light upon its nature as it can” (Waismann 1997, p. 77). Waismann notes that the method bears similarity to a method proposed by Boltzmann, namely,

that of describing a physical model [...] without making any claim that it conformed to something in the real world. It is simply described and then whatever similarities exist between it and reality will reveal themselves. [...] There is no temptation to counterfeit reality, for the model is, so to speak, given once and for all, and it can be seen how far it agrees with reality. And even if it does not, it still retains its value. (1997, p. 77)

Waismann then goes on to contrast this comparative method with that of looking for an explanation:

[W]e are not dealing here with an explanation of phenomena; [...] but I silence the questionings which seem to resemble a problem by setting a number of similar cases side by side. It is remarkable that the mere bringing together of cases gets rid of perplexity. (1997, p. 80)

And then, strikingly employing the method itself to clarify its own character, he sets his approach side by side with Goethe's. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

Our thought here marches with certain views of Goethe's, which is expressed in his *Metamorphosis of Plants*. We are in the habit, whenever we perceive similarities, of seeking some common origin for them. The urge to follow such phenomena back to their origin in the past expresses itself in a certain style of thinking. This recognizes, so to speak, only a single scheme for such similarities, namely the arrangement as a series in time. [...] But Goethe's view shows that this is not the only possible form of conception. His conception of the original plant implies no hypothesis about the temporal development of the vegetable kingdom such as that of Darwin. What then *is* the problem solved by this idea? It is the problem of synoptic presentation. Goethe's aphorism 'All the organs of plants are leaves transformed' offers us a plan in which we may group the organs of plants according to their similarities as if around some natural centre. We see the original form of the leaf changing into similar and cognate forms, into the leaves of the calyx, the leaves of the petal, into organs that are half petals, half stamens, and so on. We follow this sensuous transformation of the type by linking up the leaf through intermediate forms with the other organs of the plant.

That is precisely what we are doing here. We are collating one form of language with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of the space in which the structure of our language has its being. (1997, pp. 80-81)

This is a rich and difficult passage, and I cannot here give anything like a full interpretation of it. What I want to point out, first of all, is that the parallel drawn

between Goethe's morphology of plants and the method of language-games seems clearly incompatible with an atomistic conception of the relation between language-games and language in its real-life complexity. Notice that Goethe's aphorism is "All the organs of plants are leaves *transformed*". Even the *leaves* of real-life plants are to be conceived as "leaves transformed", according to Goethe. He thought of the simple original plant as a single leaf, but this single leaf is not fully similar to any leaf of a real-life plant. Rather, the original plant would be "the strangest creature in the world" (Goethe 2009, p. 310), and transformations of this strange creature are required not only to generate stamens and petals but also to generate the leaves of plants we actually encounter in the world. Similarly, Waismann explicitly says that a "transformation in imagination" is required in order to see the relation between the simple language-games and those aspects of real-life language use that they are supposed to illuminate.

It is worth remembering, more generally, that the living organism is a favorite analogy among holists. The relation between an organism and its parts (its organs) is *the* standard case of a non-atomist relation. The very unity of an organ is tied to its function in the organism: it is by reference to this function within the organism as a whole that we identify and re-identify something as the kind of organ it is, distinguish it from other organs, and identify the organ's own vital parts. So, organs are precisely not self-standing objects, and an organism is not a mere aggregate of such objects.

All in all, it would be peculiar indeed if Waismann (and Wittgenstein) had drawn such a close parallel between Goethean morphology of plants and the method of language-games, had he conceived of the relation between a language and its parts in atomistic terms.

So, the Goethe connection speaks clearly in favor of a non-atomist reading of Wittgenstein. However, what about Wittgenstein's alleged non-essentialism? Here, the situation is less clear-cut. My aim is not to engage in Goethe exegesis, but it would not seem too far-fetched to interpret Goethe's conception of the original plant as a form of essentialism. For isn't the original plant conceived by him as a sort of fundamental archetype in virtue of which plants are conceivable as plants at all, and without which botany would not have any formal unity? At some point, Goethe even thought that such an original plant must actually exist (he hoped to find it somewhere in Italy); but even as he abandoned that assumption, it seems natural to read him as saying that the original plant is the *Urform* that any careful morphologist *must* arrive at after a suitably deep and wide-ranging consideration of how the plants of the earth resemble each other.

In this connection it is also worth pointing out that the overall parallel between language and living organisms invites a sort of essentialism – not necessarily in terms of a common *Urform*, but of organisms qua exemplars of *species*. It is at least arguable that a holistic conception of how a living organism is related to its parts involves the idea that this relation is intelligible only by reference to the species of which the individual organism is a member. The eyes of Tim, the Siamese, are the eyes of a *cat*, and their proper functions are identified accordingly. For example, those eyes are not working properly if Tim does not have night vision. And if Tim does not see at all, he is blind. By contrast, not having night vision is not a way of being incapacitated for a human being – for night vision is not a capacity humans have *qua* humans. And an earthworm is not blind, although it does not see – for an earthworm *qua* earthworm has no organs of sight, not even malfunctioning ones. Thus it would seem that the individual organism and its organs form a unity in virtue of a



teleological pattern delineated by reference to the species of which the organism is an exemplar – a pattern of which it seems natural to say that it constitutes the organism’s essence. This also means that there is a certain notion of *completeness* associated with living organisms. A blind cat lacks something, namely, properly functioning eyes. By contrast, the fact that an earthworm has no eyes does not mean that it is incomplete – for having eyes is not something that belongs to an earthworm *qua* the kind of creature it is. In this sense, fully worked out botanical and anatomical pictures can be said to depict complete living organisms – organisms that have all those properly functioning organs that are essential to them *qua* exemplars of the relevant species.<sup>4</sup>

All in all, whereas the parallel with Goethean morphology of plants strongly supports a non-atomist reading of Wittgenstein, it does not by itself offer any clear support for a non-essentialist interpretation. However, if one looks at how Waismann (and Wittgenstein) spells out the parallel, the non-essentialist reading still seems motivated. For Waismann clearly pushes the parallel in a non-essentialist direction. Here is how he describes what the method of language games can achieve, just a couple of paragraphs before he brings in Goethe:

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<sup>4</sup> Among Anglophone philosophers, Michael Thompson and Philippa Foot have developed this Aristotelian kind of essentialism in detail (Foot 2001, Thompson 2008). Arguably, it is also present in Anscombe’s works – see Gustafsson 2017. Of course, many philosophers of biology argue that such essentialism is scientifically primitive and unacceptable – for a recent influential rejection, see Godfrey-Smith 2009). Given my purposes in this paper, I do have to take a stand in this debate.

As long as we are familiar only with actual language, we tend to make all sorts of dogmatic assertions, such as ‘Aristotelian logic governs every language’, or ‘Every language must contain the alternatives true or false’, or ‘In every language a sentence is composed of words’, etc. In such a case it is better not to enter into a discussion but simply to describe the language-games which contradict these principles. Suppose that a certain tribe of people possessed a language comprising only commands and commands of a sharply defined type, such as those which direct people from place to place. [...] Exploring such possibilities would finally focus a new light on this function of our language; we would then see that our language can be contrasted with an infinite number of other possible languages which may be adapted to other possible empirical worlds. (1997, pp. 79-80)

A little later, and right before he introduces the comparison with Goethean morphology, he says:

It is remarkable that the mere bringing together of cases gets rid of perplexity. What happens in such cases is similar to what happens if we imagine that some phenomenon in the physical world is unique (e.g. if we imagine that the earth is unique among the heavenly bodies) and are then tempted to attribute metaphysical significance to it but are finally satisfied by seeing this phenomenon in a context of similar ones which take from it its appearance of uniqueness.

Our thought here marches with certain views of Goethe ... [and so on]  
(1997, p. 80)

In fact, Waismann seems to go out of his way to downplay any essentialist tendency in Goethe. As we saw above, he says that Goethe's aphorism, "All the organs of plants are leaves transformed," offers "a plan in which one may group the organs of plants according to their similarities *as if* around a natural centre" (1997, 81; italics added). He sees Goethe's plan as only one among a large or infinite number of alternatives, and his "as if" clearly suggests that the "natural centre" is not "natural" in any essentialist sense, but only one among many possibilities the suitability of which depends on for which particular purpose of clarification the "synoptic presentation" is being made.

#### **4. The Ancient City**

Waismann and Wittgenstein worked on *The Principles of Linguistic Philosophy* during the first half of the 1930's. This is the period during which Wittgenstein was most influenced by conventionalist ideas, and it is arguable that this conventionalist strand is one (of many) ways in which the book differs significantly from his mature later works, and in particular the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is also arguable that the term "form of life" is used in the *Investigations* at least partly to undermine such conventionalist ideas. I believe there is more than a grain of truth in these observations. However, I see no reason to believe that Wittgenstein's later questioning of various conventionalist ideas led him to embrace any form of essentialism about language. After all, he explicitly rejects such essentialism (PI §65). His view seems rather to be that both conventionalism and essentialism involve confusions that need to be disentangled.

In line with this non-essentialist reading, it should be noticed that even if Wittgenstein associates the terms “language” and “language game” closely with the term “form of life”, he nowhere in the *Philosophical Investigations* tries to clarify the relation between these terms by using an analogy with the nature or morphology of living organisms. Apparently, that is *not* where he wants to go with his notion of “form of life”. The organism analogy is conspicuously absent from his discussion, and the only explicit mentioning of Goethe (in Part II, vi) has little relevance for the present discussion.

Instead, the analogy Wittgenstein uses in this connection is that between language and an ancient city. As we saw earlier, in PI §18 Wittgenstein asks his reader not to worry about the fact that his simple language games (2) and (8) consist only of orders. He acknowledges the temptation to think that these languages are “incomplete”, but then wonders what notion of “completeness” we are working with here. He asks, was *our* language complete or incomplete before chemical symbolism and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus became part of it? And then the city analogy is introduced:

for these [the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus] are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

Wittgenstein uses the city analogy to resist the philosophical urge to draw a line between complete and incomplete languages; he wants us to ask ourselves if we really have any clear idea of what the complete/incomplete distinction would amount to in this case. Given this purpose, notice how misplaced it would be for him to instead compare language to a living organism. As we have seen, the notion of a living organism lends itself naturally to an intelligible notion of completeness. Indeed, it is arguable that we can identify a living organism only insofar as we have at least a rough and ready conception of what a “complete” organism of its kind would be like. As Wittgenstein uses it, the city analogy goes in the opposite direction: it is meant to help us realize that the idea of a “complete” language is a philosophical fantasy.

Now, it may of course be argued that Wittgenstein is wrong about cities. Perhaps they are more like living organisms than he would acknowledge. In fact, talk of cities as organisms is common, and some have wanted to draw the parallel so close as to say that there is a kind of completeness to a city, in that there are certain vital functions that define a city *qua* city. Plato comes to mind here – he seems to take the analogy between a city and an organism *very* seriously (for a compelling discussion of exactly how seriously, see Ford and Laurence, forthcoming). One may argue, though, that what Plato is discussing is the nature of a polis *qua* human society, whereas Wittgenstein speaks of cities in more narrowly architectural terms. However, it is an interesting question whether this distinction is really so clear-cut, and whether Wittgenstein would want to make such a separation. I cannot pursue this issue here; for my purposes, it is sufficient to note that in using the city analogy, Wittgenstein

seems to count on the reader's agreeing with him that essentialist ideas about what constitutes a "complete" city make little sense.<sup>5</sup>

It may seem as if Wittgenstein's use of the city analogy shows not only that he rejects essentialist ideas about language, but also that he has an atomist conception of how language is built up from self-standing language games by mere aggregation. For isn't this how he describes the ancient city in PI §18: First there was the mazelike inner city, then newer houses were added, and finally the modern suburbs with straight streets and uniform houses were built? If we are supposed to think of language in similar terms, then mustn't we end up with a conception that is not only non-essentialist, but also atomist?

No. Cities are not mere aggregates of separable elements, and Wittgenstein's description implies no such thing. The character and functions of streets, parks, squares, bridges, residential buildings, libraries, schools, shopping centers, and so on, cannot be understood independently of the surroundings in which they are situated, and those surroundings are in their turn affected by the addition of such structures. Indeed, this mutual interdependence between the elements of a city is crucial to city planning, and a failure to take it into due consideration can have disastrous results. Consider Jane Jacobs's reflections on parks in her classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*:

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<sup>5</sup> Of course Wittgenstein would acknowledge that purpose-relative talk of the completeness of a city can make perfectly good sense: "Paris has everything that a lover of tasteful Christmas decorations can wish for".

Too much is expected of city parks. Far from transforming any essential quality in their surroundings, far from automatically uplifting their neighbourhoods, neighbourhood parks themselves are directly and drastically affected by the way the neighbourhood acts on them. (Jacobs 1994, p. 105)

In some surroundings, a park may indeed provide the sort of benefits that are commonly associated with it, but in other surroundings it may become a deserted, dangerous place. As Jacobs convincingly shows, the holistic interdependence between the park and its surroundings is staggering and pervasive:

Any single factor about the park is slippery as an eel; it can potentially mean any number of things, depending on how it is acted upon by other factors and how it reacts to them. How much the park is used depends, in part, upon the park's own design. But even this partial influence on the park's design upon the park's use depends, in turn, on who is around to use the park, and when, and this in turn depends on uses of the city outside the park itself.

Furthermore, the influence of these uses on the park is only partly a matter of how each affects the park independently of the others; it is also partly a matter of how they affect the park in combination with one another, for certain combinations stimulate the degree of influence from one another among their components. In turn, these city uses near the park and their combination depends on yet other factors, such as the mixture of age in buildings, the size of blocks in the vicinity, and so on, including the presence of the park itself as a common and unifying use in its context. (Jacobs 1994, pp. 446-447)

Thus, adequately planning the construction of a park is a difficult task, and “there is no use wishing it were a simpler problem or trying to make it a simpler problem, because in real life it is not a simpler problem” (Jacobs 1994, p. 447). Jacobs calls such problems “problems of organized complexity”, and she says the same kind of pervasive holism is characteristic “of all other parts or features of cities” (Jacobs 1994, p. 447).

After having read Jacobs’s book, thinking of a city as “a collection of separate file drawers” (Jacobs 1994, p. 450) is virtually impossible. Strikingly, the convincingness of her discussion is not due to the presentation of some new and sophisticated theory, but largely a matter of her assembling a mass of simple but detailed and pertinent reminders of how everyday city life works. These reminders are perhaps too humdrum to attract the attention of more fanciful visionaries, but once Jacobs has put them before you their collected force is virtually irresistible. I do not know if Jacobs ever read Wittgenstein, but this is one of the ways in which the spirit of her book strikes me as Wittgensteinian.

Jacobs says problems of organized complexity are problems of a kind that the life sciences deal with, and she occasionally talks of cities as organisms (witness the very title of her book). However, she also distinguishes the two: “Because the life sciences and cities happen to pose the same *kinds* of problems does not mean they are the *same* problems. The organizations of living protoplasm and the organizations of living people and enterprises cannot go under the same microscopes” (Jacobs 1994, p. 453). In general, Jacobs’s emphasis is always on the holistic character of cities, whereas essentialist notions of what constitutes a “complete” city are of little or no importance in her discussions. I suggest that Wittgenstein’s use of the city analogy is congenial to Jacobs’s conception of cities: he employs the analogy to criticize



essentialist conceptions of what makes a language “complete”, but this criticism by no means commits him to an atomist conception of language.

There are two other but related ways in which Jacobs’s discussion resonates with Wittgenstein’s. To begin with, she emphasizes that the parts of a city hang together in virtue of the human life that goes on there, the *activities* of real-life people: working, traveling, playing, socializing, shopping, and so on and so forth. To understand what a city is, she says, *processes* are more fundamental than objects – for the objects of a city (buildings, streets, parks...) “can have radically differing effects, depending on the circumstances and contexts in which they exist” (Jacobs 1994, p. 454). Similarly, in Wittgenstein, the terms “language game” and “form of life” are used to make us see language in terms of human activity rather than as a formally specifiable structure separable from the various concrete circumstances of human communication and interaction.

Second, Jacobs expresses a worry that her holistic conception of cities may invite the idea that city planning is somehow impossible to deal with in a fully rational manner – as if the intricate hanging-together of the city’s parts can be grasped only via some special, intuitive capacity or gaze whose insights do not lend themselves to rational discussion and criticism. However, she vehemently protests against such mystification: “Although the interrelations [...] are complex, there is nothing accidental or irrational about the ways these factors affect each other” (Jacobs 1994, p. 447). The idea that we are dealing here with something irrational stems, she suggests, from an overly narrow conception of what constitutes a rationally solvable problem – a conception which takes its paradigm of rationality from what she calls the “two-variable problems” of classical physics and the problems of “disorganized complexity” of probability theory and statistical mechanics (Jacobs 1962, pp. 443ff.).

Similarly, even if Wittgenstein distinguishes the philosophical collection of reminders from the methods of empirical science, his point is not that philosophy is irrational. One may in fact speculate that one reason he prefers the city analogy to the organism analogy is that the organism analogy lends itself more easily to a sort of mystification that Wittgenstein wants to avoid at all costs. Even if he admired Spengler, he seems to have sensed that Spengler inflates the analogy between cultures and organisms into metaphysical theorizing and conceives the application of Goethean morphology as a sort of sublime insight in to the necessary character of cultural development.<sup>6</sup>

## **5. The method of language-games**

Where does all this leave us with regard to the methodological significance of language-games? How should their philosophical import be conceived, if not only essentialism but also atomism turn out to be unintelligible? After all, the atomist picture of language as a mere aggregate of self-standing language-games had the apparent advantage of making the methodological function of such games seem pretty straightforward: by isolating one feature or aspect of language use, treating the surrounding practices as disturbing noise, the atomist thinks he can get that feature or aspect into clear, undistorted view. But now, if such isolation cannot be intelligibly pursued, since what gets “isolated” is in fact a product of the simplification process

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<sup>6</sup> The similarity between Jacobs and Wittgenstein at this point should not be exaggerated. Jacobs would not distinguish her investigation from the methods of empirical science in general, but says that her observations *are* empirical and that she employs the inductive method in drawing her conclusions.

rather than something that was somehow already present as a self-standing building-block of real-life language use – then how can simple language-games be philosophically illuminating?

In the *Blue Book*, we saw Wittgenstein saying that his simple language-games are not separated by a break from more complicated ones, and that we can build up the complicated forms from the primitive ones by gradually adding new forms. I have argued that he rejects the atomist conception of what this process of “addition” amounts to. According to Wittgenstein, such addition is not a matter of mere aggregation, but must be conceived as a process of *transformation*. The simple language-games get transformed as surrounding patterns of use develop. Now, the key to understand the methodological significance of such simple games is to see that *describing and reflecting on these processes of gradual transformation is itself a crucial part of the method*. This is precisely the point at which the method of language-games is close to Goethean morphology. It is not a study of fixed games, but an investigation into the dynamics or potentiality of such games: What developments can we imagine such that more complex forms of language “grow” from these simple starting-points? Thus, the simple language-games provide philosophical illumination, not because they isolate one feature already present in real-life language use, but because they allow us to see a possible development of that feature from more rudimentary stages.

In this paper, I have repeatedly expressed the worry that simple language-games such as those of §§2 and 8 of PI are not similar enough to languages of real-life complexity to provide philosophical illumination. However, once we realize that the methodological significance of language-games is tied to how they must be transformed in order to develop into something like real-life language, we see that

how they *differ* from language of real-life complexity can be just as illuminating as the ways they are similar. As Waismann says in a passage I have already quoted, where he compares the method of language games with a method proposed by Boltzmann: “the model is [...] given [...] and it can be seen how far it agrees with reality. *And even if it does not, it still retains its value*” (Waismann 1997, p. 77; italics added). The same is true of language-games in relation to language of real-life complexity: Since what we want to understand is not a feature “captured” by the rudimentary language game, but a feature that will come clearly into view only once we ponder potential *transformations* of the language-game, the differences between the language-game and real-life language will be just as important as the similarities.

The city analogy may be helpful in order to understand what this means. Suppose we want to get clearer on what a park is. One method would be to imagine a very rudimentary park – say, simply an open commons in the countryside, surrounded by three or four farmhouses. Someone may object: But this is not a proper *park*! However, our aim here is not to draw a line between parks and non-parks, by identifying what properties are essential to a park. Rather, we want to understand the functions of a park, what significance a park may have in different circumstances. Therefore, we start with this very rudimentary “park”. What do the people in the farmhouses use this park for? Perhaps the children play there; the families arrange festivities; the farmworkers rest in the grass on a sunny Sunday afternoon; in the evening it may be a place for amorous adventures; and so on and so forth. And then we start imagining various developments. Suppose the small village grows; someone opens a small pub in one of the corners of the field; some pathways are laid out; and so on. Eventually, the village grows into a small town, and a gardener is hired to take care of the pathways and lawns, lay out flower beds, and so on. The park is now, non-

controversially, a *park* – but the question when, exactly, it became one is of little interest. Rather, what is interesting is the details of the gradual developments, the ways in which the role of the park hangs together with its changing surroundings. Suppose the town grows into a large city, and the park thrives, as it is used by all kinds of people in all kinds of ways. But then the city council decides to use half of the park to build a mall and a big parking lot, and much of the park's allure is gone. Eventually, people become afraid of visiting it at night. It gradually develops into a hangout for drug dealers and prostitutes. The city decides to close it, the mall is extended, and the park is gone.

I do not mean the analogy to be perfect, of course. In the city case, how its various elements interact will in the end be an empirical matter (perhaps the mall attracts even more people to the park, and the park therefore continues to thrive). The methodological role of language-games is not empirical in this sense. Rather, Wittgenstein's says it suffices if the imagined transformations are *possible*, for their purpose is not to offer speculations about what might plausibly happen in a process of actual development, but to display a possible series of transformations in such a way that certain claims about what (say) language *must* be like, or certain questions about what makes (say) language *language*, no longer seem significant. (Of course, considerations of such transformations may have many different purposes, depending on what specific philosophical problem or confusion we are dealing with; I focus here on the essentialist worries about what makes language language.) Still, I think the example with the park sheds light on how the method of language-games is supposed to work. For what we get to see in the park case is the pointlessness of drawing a line between what is a park and what is not, or of trying to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a park. Of course, there might be particular purposes

for which such a line needs to be drawn – legal or administrative purposes, say. However, if what we are seeking is an understanding of how a park can have the significance it has in the life of a city, what we need is not to draw such a line. Rather, what we need is an understanding of how the park’s significance varies with and depends on the park’s wider surroundings. Similarly, my claim is that Wittgenstein’s method of language-games provides a perspicuous view of patterns of variation and transformation, and thereby undermines the felt need to identify what is necessary to language *qua* language, or to draw the line between activities that are properly linguistic and activities that are not.

So, when Wittgenstein urges us not to worry that the language of the builders consists only of orders and that it is therefore incomplete, what he urges us to resist is the essentialist tendency to think that a detailed investigation of the sort imagined is unnecessary. An essentialist about parks may object that the simple commons surrounded by three or four farmhouses imagined above is not a proper park. In a sense he might have a point! – but he would miss the opportunity to engage in a profoundly illuminating discussion where the various functions that a park may have come into detailed and perspicuous view. Similarly, the essentialist about language will miss the lessons that can be drawn by considering the “growth” of language from simple language-games such as those in §§2 and 8 in the *Investigations*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I cannot here engage in extended exegesis of how Wittgenstein uses the language-games of the builders to shed light on problems about naming, compositionality and so forth. For a very illuminating discussion, see Goldfarb 1992. In the end, I think my position here is close to the interpretation of Wittgenstein given by Goldfarb in that paper.

In the end, I am not sure how much my view of Wittgenstein's method differs from Kuusela's. Kuusela is clear that Wittgenstein uses language-games as "centres of variation", arguing that "such centers of variation are exemplary or prototypical cases that the varying actual uses of an expression can be related to in order to achieve perspicuity or create order into our knowledge of actual use" (Kuusela 2014, pp. 151-152). This may seem close to my talk of how the transformations of language-games matters to Wittgenstein's method . On the other hand, Kuusela wants to distinguish between Wittgenstein's method of describing language-games as games played according to rules, and other methods where "language is regarded as intertwined with actions and activities or as part of a form of life." He goes on:

However, the description of these activities may also assume a natural historical form, whereby it is described, not by means of statements of a rule but in terms of pictures of forms of behavior or forms of life. (Kuusela 2014, p. 153)

I do not want to separate these methods. I believe the natural-historical form is more essential to the method of language-games than Kuusela suggests. For the natural-historical form is, precisely, a matter of describing the sort of transformations I have talked about in this paper. If I am right, the importance of taking such transformations into consideration will be clear as soon as we consistently reject the atomist picture of how language-games are related to language in its real-life complexity.

One may worry that I make the method of language-games too difficult. From an atomist viewpoint, it all seems relatively simple: You isolate that aspect of real-life language use that confuses you, and by looking at it as it is displayed in a simple

game, without the disturbing noise that surrounds it in ordinary life, you get clear about its logic. What I have argued is that this cannot work, and that the method can be illuminating only if it includes as a crucial element reflection on the transformations needed for such simple language-games to develop into languages of real-life complexity. This may seem to make everything murky again, and one might feel that the problems we thought we had gotten hold of have once again become “slippery as an eel”. However, I think Wittgenstein would defend my stance. After all, there is no use wishing that a philosophical problem were a simpler problem or trying to make it a simpler problem – because it is not a simpler problem.

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