

Explanation and Definition: On Hallett on Wittgenstein

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An overall concern of mine is how to understand what Wittgenstein is doing in *PI* §43.¹ In this paper, I will examine an article by Garth Hallett having to do with that section. The article, “Did Wittgenstein Really *Define* ‘Meaning’?” is one with which I disagree; I do not believe that Hallett accurately represents Wittgenstein’s views. Nevertheless, his article is an extremely useful one, for he is remarkably clear about his views, and he raises the right questions. This makes for a well-defined, narrowly focused discussion of Wittgenstein’s views on meaning. A discussion centered on §43 is an important one, however slowly-paced caution dictates it must be. Understanding this section is, it seems to me, necessary if one is to understand the *Investigations* itself.

Let me briefly state my views first. I do not see Wittgenstein as offering a definition of meaning in *PI* §43, nor do I see him as offering *any* kind of theory as to what meaning consists in. My disagreement with Hallett begins with his views on Anscombe’s translation of *erklären* in *PI* §43 as “define” rather than “explain.” Hallett is content with her rendering, whereas I am not. I see this as indicative of a deeper misconception of the role of §43, which should be made clear below.

1. At the end of his article, Hallett offers three questions pertaining to §43. I shall concentrate on the first two in order to elicit our differences. First, Hallett asks, “Did Wittgenstein define the word ‘meaning’, in the broad sense of explaining, and intending to explain, its actual meaning?” (Hallett 1970, p. 298). His response to this is “definitely yes.” I agree that Wittgenstein did explain something about the meaning of “meaning,” and that he intended to do so. I do not agree, however, that this licenses us to say that Wittgenstein offered a *definition* of “meaning.”

Simply: an explanation of meaning and a definition may not be the same thing.² A definition is a kind of explanation, but an explanation need not be a definition. An explanation of the meaning of a word, for instance, can be a good explanation if it effects my understanding of the meaning of the word. For example, I might ask you what a university trimester system is, because I’ve only ever experienced semesters. Knowing this, you might then explain to me that it’s like what I’m used to, but instead of two terms, there’re three. Thus such an explanation would bring me to understand the meaning of “trimester system,” yet without having given me a definition. Even more vividly, this could work as an explanation: “It’s what Dave was talking about yesterday in the lounge.” (I see the explanation that Wittgenstein gives in §43 as analogous to this kind of an explanation.)

When Hallett says, then, that Wittgenstein defined “meaning” *in the sense of giving an explanation*, he has misconceived the relationship between definitions and explanations. This is no doubt part of the reason why he is content with Anscombe’s translation of *erklären* as “define”

and is significant for understanding his views throughout his article.

I said that I did agree, that Wittgenstein was explaining something about the actual meaning of “meaning.” The explanation that he gives, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language,” is an explanation that *is* based upon our actual use of the word “meaning.” As I see it, Wittgenstein wouldn’t really be giving us an explanation if it were not based upon our actual use of the word. So since I do see him as giving an explanation, I must be content with saying that it is based upon our actual use of the word.

Hallett endeavors to identify the source of disagreement that “many knowledgeable people” had with his view of §43 (Hallett 1970, p. 294). His conclusion is this: “It was the idea that Wittgenstein was giving *any* account of the word’s actual use that one person after another objected to...” (Hallett 1970, p. 294). There are two ways to take this conclusion. First, one might focus on the “actual use” aspect of it. I would then say, again, that what Wittgenstein says does relate to our actual use, and so this does not represent my disagreement. Second, however, one might focus on the word “account.” According to this emphasis, Hallett may be saying that Wittgenstein gives us something like a summary of how we use the word “meaning.” Here, I disagree. Wittgenstein does not say that he is giving an account of our use of “meaning”—rather, he gives us an *explanation* of “meaning” (which is, again, more general).

2. Let us return to Hallett’s second question about §43. “Did he define the word, in the sense of asserting synonymy between ‘meaning of a word’ and ‘use of a word in the language’?” (Hallett 1970, p. 298). His answer to this is, “maybe,” while mine is “no.” To understand the difference between our views, it will be necessary to return to the difference between an explanation and a definition. When I give an explanation of the meaning of a word, I may do a variety of things. I might try to actually say what the meaning of the word is. This is a type of explanation—sometimes the most effective type, though not necessarily. When my explanation is of this sort, though, I am said to be giving a definition of the word. This is what it is to give a definition: one gives the meaning of the word.³

As my example above showed, however, one need not give a definition to explain the meaning of a word. “It’s what Dave was talking about yesterday in the lounge,” can count as an acceptable explanation of the meaning of “trimester system.” Thus what we say, when we give an explanation of the meaning of a word, need not itself *be* the meaning. What it must do, if it is going to count as a good explanation, is get us to see the meaning of the word.

This applies to Hallett’s answer to his second question in this way: what Wittgenstein gave us was an explanation of the meaning of “meaning.” According to what we’ve just said about explanations, what the

1 “For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ [Bedeutung] it can be defined [erklären] thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained [erklärt] by pointing to its bearer.”

2 See, e.g., Baker and Hacker’s discussion of definition and explanation (Baker and Hacker 1980, p. 70). They describe it as a “cardinal sin of philosophers to think that the only legitimate form of Erklärung is Definition.”

3 This may be too simplistic: see §§29-30. Wittgenstein seems to want to resist, rightly, the notion that definitions somehow break through the words of the language and get us to the meaning. My analysis focuses on what explanations do, not on what definitions do—and so, for now, I can avoid the complications Wittgenstein suggests.

explanation consists in (“the meaning of a word is its use in the language”) need not itself *be* the meaning of the word “meaning.” Rather, as an explanation, it is supposed to get us to be able to see the meaning. Hallett takes Wittgenstein to have given a definition, precisely in the sense that what is said is supposed to *be* the meaning.

It is important to see that Wittgenstein is not “asserting the synonymy” of “meaning of a word” and “use of a word in the language.” To think that he is, is again to misconceive what an explanation does. “It’s what Dave was talking about yesterday in the lounge,” is not meant to stand on its own, as it were. Rather, when we give a explanation, it is often the case that it is particular to the circumstances of giving that explanation. I may give different explanations of the same word at different times, to different people. “It’s what Dave was talking about yesterday in the lounge,” will not be an explanation, most likely, for anyone who was not in the lounge yesterday, when Dave was talking about trimester systems.

This raises an important point about §43. Its explanation occurs in a particular setting. Speaking rather broadly (and somewhat roughly), this explanation comes following a prolonged discussion of the view first articulated in §1: “Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.” We have no reason to expect that the explanation given in §43 is one that can stand on its own, as it were.

We’ve seen that the question that forms the title of Hallett’s article is still as urgent a question as it was to begin with—we’ve seen how important a question it is.

The evidence I’ve presented thus far has shown that there is no problem in supposing that Wittgenstein did not define “meaning.”

I think that Hallett’s reading has a number of obstacles in its path. First, Wittgenstein does not talk about the expressions, “meaning of a word” and “use of a word in the language.” The only word *mentioned* is “meaning,” and that is because he is explaining it. He simply does not say even, “this phrase means the same as that phrase.” Notice in particular, that he does not speak about the word “use.” Second, if we take Hallett’s reading literally, what sense are we to make of “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” as a definition of “meaning?” Under the most charitable reading, this would at best be a definition of “meaning of a word.”

Moving beyond the first sentence of §43 itself, there are further reasons why I believe that we must reject Hallett’s assertion that Wittgenstein was offering a *definition* in §43: (1) When writing the first draft of the first version of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein explicitly decided not to write the verb that would most directly be rendered as “define”: *definieren*. Wittgenstein wrote *definieren* first, then crossed it out, ultimately ending up with *erklären*. (See Schulte 2001, pp. 90-91.) (2) There exists a translation of an early version of the *Investigations* done by Rush Rhees, together with Wittgenstein.⁴ This translation renders *erklären* as “explain.” (3) The second sentence of §43 gives us an example of an *explanation*, not of a definition. (4) Wittgenstein, throughout the 1930’s was never content with his statements about meaning. If we assume that his views were not changing radically during this time,⁵ then we can look upon his various

statements about meaning as different explanations. (Differences between them would be less worrisome then, as one can give different explanations for different reasons.) It should be noted that Wittgenstein’s explicit remarks about meaning almost always follow a consideration of something like the view articulated in §1 of the *Investigations*, which should emphasize the importance of that aspect of §43’s context.

Hallett does discuss the translation of *erklären* at the beginning of his article. He seems to think that objections to “define” as a translation are due to “connotations of precision and completeness” (Hallett 1970, p. 294). That he says this reflects that he does not appreciate facts about explanations highlighted above.

3. I will conclude with a brief look at Hallett’s third question, which is about the value of his reading— independent of its merit as a reading of Wittgenstein. He asks, “Did he define the word, in the sense of actually giving a good synonym (regardless of what his intentions were)?” (Hallett 1970, p. 298). I will only address this question briefly, as my main concern is with understanding what Wittgenstein says. Hallett’s answer is “yes,” while my view is that Wittgenstein did not, unwittingly, give us a good synonym. If I can give some indication of why he did not, then that will give us another reason for rejecting Hallett’s reading.

PI §561 will serve this role. Wittgenstein says, “Now isn’t it queer that I say that the word ‘is’ is used with two different meanings (as the copula and as the sign of equality), and should not care to say that its meaning is its use; its use that is, as the copula and the sign of equality?” I see this remark as directed against the kind of reading Hallett has of §43. For if “meaning of a word” were synonymous with “use of a word in the language,” then the meaning of “is” should simply be its uses. But here Wittgenstein explicitly highlights that that’s *not* what he will say. He says rather that “is” has two different meanings. I take it, as well, that this is what *we’d* be willing to say about “is.” On Hallett’s view, though, where can this judgment come from? Wittgenstein shows that we may see that the point of using the word can at times be different, and that this can (and does) lead us to conclude that the word has different meanings. (See *PI* §§563-564.) Without moving significantly beyond what Wittgenstein says in §43, I do not see how Hallett can accommodate what Wittgenstein reports about our language in §561.

Literature

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4 See, e.g., Baker and Hacker 1980, p. 10. They describe this (TS 216) as a translation of TS 220. This does not seem to be accurate, however.

5 Considering, say, from 1932 on. Wolfgang Kienzler, e.g., sees Wittgenstein’s work throughout this period as essentially consistent.