Philosophical Dialogues: The Impact of Style

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Most of us have probably been bemused by the appearance on the very first page of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* of a lengthy quote, in Latin, from Augustine's *Confessions*. I confess, however, that until reading Stacy Stoyanoff's interesting paper, I had thought of Wittgenstein's treatment of Augustine as simply a convenient straw man, a setup for Wittgenstein's attack on what he considered to be some widespread and entrenched notions of language and how we acquire it. It was a delight to pursue the issue further, to take Wittgenstein's invocation of Augustine more seriously, and to follow Stoyanoff's account of the relations between Wittgenstein's notions and those of Augustine as set forth in *De Magistro*.

Stoyanoff does us a favor to call attention to the connections between Wittgenstein and Augustine. It is, for instance, intriguing to read Augustine's treatment of the question of "what man is," which he quotes at length. Augustine notes that the question bears at least two possible legitimate answers: I might say that man is an animal, and I might say that man is a noun. How I will know which answer is right? By finding out how the questioner wishes to be answered, Augustine suggests. And this situates the issue, in Wittgensteinian fashion, in the context of use; or, it asks us to inquire as to the language game that is being played. In these and other examples, Stoyanoff makes a case for a closer comparison of the two philosophers than has evidently been done to date.

One direction that Stoyanoff's essay sent me was back to the text, to reread and rethink the passage from the *Confessions* that opens the *Investigations,* and Wittgenstein's critique of the "particular picture of the essence of human language" revealed in this passage.[1] As Stoyanoff tells us, Wittgenstein criticizes Augustine for leaving out language use in his account of language learning. But, if we pay attention to Augustine's words, we see quite a different account. Rather than what Wittgenstein takes Augustine's account to be — a simple correlation of meaning with word in a representational system — Augustine is describing a fully human situation dripping with meaning, before the child's learning of language even begins. His elders do not just name, they name and move toward: They show intention by bodily movements, including expressions of the face, eyes and other parts of the body, as well as the tone of voice which "expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something." They "speak," and share with the prelinguistic child, what Augustine refers to as "the natural language of all peoples" — not verbal, but physical, intentional, and emotional. What we have here is some kind of initiation into a form of life, from which emerges the learning of a language. It is consistent with Wittgenstein's suggestion that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (*PI*, 23). Wittgenstein even echoes Augustine's phrase *natural language* when he says that "Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (*PI*, 25). Augustine does not seem to be painting the picture of which Wittgenstein accuses

him, in which "a 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 a child could already *think*, only not yet speak." I concur with Stoyanoff that in this example it is more appropriate to consider Augustine to be a precursor of Wittgenstein than of Noam Chomsky. We might even accuse Wittgenstein of treating his predecessor shallowly.

I will use Wittgenstein's notion of language games to make one further point. Language games, Wittgenstein tells us, consist in such activities as giving orders and obeying them, reporting or speculating about an event, forming and testing an hypothesis, making up a story and reading it, singing catches, solving a problem in practical arithmetic, or translating from one language into another (*PI*, 23). And he goes on to warn us: "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*, 24).[2] It has occurred to me that the philosophical activities of the three philosophers we are discussing today may not in fact be in the same language-game, which may provoke some singular misses. What is Wittgenstein up to in the *Investigations*? What is Stoyanoff up to? And what is Augustine up to? We can ask this as a question of genre, of philosophical style, or of language-game, and if we do not take the question seriously, we run the risk of passing each other by, despite the marks of having made a connection.

It has been, for the most part, the assumption of those of us who read and write philosophy that style is a difference that makes no particular (philosophical) difference.[3] From this point of view, Plato meant to put all his philosophical ideas and arguments into Socrates' mouth, and we need to uncover Descartes' line of argument in the *Meditations* by translating them into third person prose (which requires, as Margaret Wilson points out, some awkward feats of syntactical translation).[4] Only recently has it occurred to us that there may have been some philosophical importance to his choice — this despite his insistence on this importance in the *Mediations* themselves.[5] We have supposed that philosophers pursue clear expression of concepts, construction and analysis of arguments, elimination of error and ambiguity, and so on, even though it is clear that some of the best of them persist in writing in genres and styles that are not best suited to such pursuits.

Stoyanoff intends to provide relatively clear linkages between certain of Augustine's and Wittgenstein's concepts. He has sought to reduce ambiguity so that the terms can become comparable (no mean feat across such a divide of time and culture), show us how the terms compare, and, if possible, add to our understanding of both Wittgenstein and Augustine by enriching the concepts of each by reference to the other. But ignoring the genre of Wittgenstein's text sometimes leads Stoyanoff astray.

One example stands out. Stoyanoff is unraveling what Augustine says about language and remembering. Words, according to Augustine, function only to remind; they cannot "actually show the things being represented." Stoyanoff quotes a passage from the *Investigations* to establish what Wittgenstein has to say about "remembering."

> And it is this inner process that one means by the word "remembering." — The impression that we wanted to deny something arises from our setting our faces against the picture of the "inner process." What we deny is that the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember." We say that this picture with its ramifications stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is (*PI*, 305).

What is Wittgenstein up to in this passage? What is the language game, the "language and the actions into which it is woven" (*PI*, 7)? Is he trying to clarify our notions of remembering, reduce ambiguity, come up with clear concepts, argue for a point of view? What he tells us is that when his interlocutor poses an "inner process" that takes place "in remembering," there is something he wants to deny. What he wants to deny is precisely that "the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word 'to remember.'"

And why does Wittgenstein deny this? Because in positing an inner process, we have put ourselves into a philosophical muddle, we have created a philosophical problem:

> How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviorism arise? — The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them– we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) — And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces. So we have to deny the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium. And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them (*PI*, 308).

Stoyanoff falls prey to the "decisive movement in the conjuring trick." His attempt is to clarify the internal process of remembering so that he can compare how Wittgenstein and Augustine differentiate reminding and remembering. The process described by Augustine, he claims, is similar to the one described by Wittgenstein, even though we must realize that it is "a bit tenuous with respect to assigning meaning, because it does not account for context or use."

But no *caveats* will help here, for Wittgenstein has not described a process at all.[6] Earlier in the essay, Stoyanoff tells us that Augustine has identified "two very important cognitive processes," that Augustine "expresses the purpose of language in very cognitive terms," and that "teaching is the external mechanism for language acquisition, while reminding acts as the internal process." Further, Stoyanoff tells us that "for Wittgenstein, these basic processes are simply two forms of his language-games [which are] basically activities for negotiating meaning."[7] Stoyanoff is attempting to equate, or compare, processes and language games, while Wittgenstein is attempting to circumnavigate the problems which arise when we talk of processes at all, by using the very different notion of language game. Stoyanoff has picked up the wrong stitch and his pattern at this point has gotten muddled.

The problem, as I see it, is that Wittgenstein is not trying to say things that will help Stoyanoff in his project. His aim here is not to build a clearer concept of what it is to remember, or to understand our inner processes. It is to help us to stop asking the kinds of questions that get us into such muddles in the first place. In the famous

passage which follows the one about inner processes quoted above, he tells us that his aim in philosophy is "to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle." If we do not take account of his aim, much of our discussion will take place inside the bottle.

In the final part of his essay, Stoyanoff takes on the "limitations of language," again finding Augustine's assertions to have "a very Wittgensteinian flair." I again will ask us to consider what the philosophers are up to, what we might say of language game or genre. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein is pursuing an investigation. His interlocutor (one might suppose that to be Wittgenstein himself in the thrall of philosophy) poses the questions that get us into the confusion, and Wittgenstein in the first person tries to find ways of addressing them, frequently taking on not the possible answers to the question, but the question itself (as in the above example). At some points he finds no way to continue, and ends the discussion for the time being with "explanations have to come to an end somewhere," or "this is the bedrock on which the spade turns."

For Augustine, too, explanations have to come to an end, and there is a bedrock, but for Augustine this bedrock is Christ's illumination, the illumination of the Magistro, the teacher. I suspect that it is accurate to say, as a recent translator of *De Magistro* does, that the investigation into language and signs which is the central burden of the text has a pedagogical point, to prepare the reader to understand and accept the theory of illumination.[8] Augustine was working toward where he knew the bedrock lay; Wittgenstein was coming upon it in the course of this investigation. The two works, which seem at first glance to share the genre of dialogue, are in fact very different. An inquiry into what Wittgenstein and Augustine have in common will have to ground itself in the differences in style, in genre, in language game, if it is to succeed in furthering our understanding of either philosopher.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 1. This book will be cited as *PI* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Wittgenstein's address to the question "what is a question?" echoes Augustine's address to the question, "what is man?"

3. See Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 11: "All that counts philosophically in this [that is, our usual] view of the history of philosophy…is the 'what' which is asserted there, not the 'how' [that is, style] by means of which the 'what' puts in an appearance."

4. See, for instance, Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 167. Nussbaum questions Gregory Vlastos's critique of the *Symposium*: "It requires us to treat as Plato's only the view expressed in the speech of Diotima as repeated by Socrates, and to charge him with being unaware of the rest of what he has written."See also Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

5. Both Lang ("Descartes between Method and Style," in Lang, *Anatomy*. and the collection of essays in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes' Meditation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) address the difference that genre makes in reading the *Meditations*.

6. Stoyanoff differentiates between what he calls Augustine's "internal mechanism" of understanding, saying that "Wittgenstein believes that understanding is not a mental process at all, but rather a result of particular circumstances" (*PI*, 152-54), but he does not apply this insight in other places where he takes him to be talking of processes.

7. Stoyanoff references *PI,* 7 and tells us that this is where Wittgenstein describes this activity. Stoyanoff

trades in processes again when he tells us that "human cognition creates signs to describe reality," refers to this as a Wittgensteinian statement, and tells us that Wittgenstein "described the cognition of words." I doubt he would want the words which he quotes ("One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from that.") to be so described. (*PI,* 340, quoted in Stoyanoff).

8. Peter King, "Introduction," in Augustine," *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995): "The result of Augustine's semiotic investigations in *The Teacher* is that language is inadequate to the task….We can't acquire knowledge about nonlinguistic items through language. Without language to serve as a medium, the information-transference account [of learning] cannot work, and so Augustine is free to present and argue for his alternative, namely the theory of illumination"; page xvii.