



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

WITTGENSTEIN'S SLAPSTICK

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In "Performance Philosophy — Staging a New Field," Laura Cull approaches performance as a source of philosophical insight and philosophy as a species of performance (Cull 2014, 15). This calls for a radical transformation of philosophy and its practices. What form might this take? Wittgenstein's later philosophy provides one example. The language games presented in the opening remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI, [1953] 2001) are meant to be played out. They involve improvisation based on general scenes, stock characters, and linguistic play. When enacted, they are slapstick. As such, they offer a method of philosophical investigation in which clarity and insight are inherent in the performance itself. Wittgenstein's language games were directly influenced by the subversive practices of Austrian *commedia dell'arte* and slapstick (through the works of Johann Nestroy and Karl Kraus). By their very nature, they challenge the pretensions of philosophical explanation and theory. Unlike attempts to compare Wittgenstein's philosophy to theatre, enacting language games is a form of philosophical performance. Andrew Lugg notes that recent attempts to compare Wittgenstein's philosophy to theatre problematize the opening remarks of the *Investigations*. However, enacting language games as a form of philosophical performance makes what is hidden, in all of its simplicity and familiarity, obvious, striking, and engaging.¹

Wittgenstein's move from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* is the story of a gesture. Ray Monk writes that:

one anecdote [...] was told by Wittgenstein to both Malcolm and von Wright, and has since been retold many times. It concerns a conversation in which Wittgenstein insisted that a proposition and that which it describes must have the same 'logical form' [...]. To this idea, Sraffa made a Neapolitan gesture of brushing his chin with

his fingertips, asking: 'What is the logical form of *that*?' This, according to the story, broke the hold on Wittgenstein of the Tractarian idea that a proposition must be a 'picture' of the reality it describes. (Monk 1991, 260–1)

In the repeated telling of this story, Wittgenstein acknowledges the power of gesture to break the hold of philosophical ideas, and in so doing sets the tone and scene for his later work. It is a moment of slapstick.² The breaking of the Tractarian idea ushers in important philosophical changes. Logical analysis gives way to grammatical investigation as Wittgenstein moves from a list of numbered propositions to language games. This not only represents a shift from static to moving pictures, but from serious logical analysis to comedic grammatical investigation.

Wittgenstein's art of grammatical investigation was inspired by the theatre of turn-of-the-century Vienna. In particular, he was influenced by the works of two prominent Austrian playwrights; Johann Nestroy and Karl Kraus. Nestroy's plays were recognized as an Austrian version of *commedia dell'arte* (Knight and Fabry 1967, 19).³ They influenced not only Karl Kraus and Bertolt Brecht, but popular German and Austrian political cabarets during the last years of Franz Joseph I and between the two world wars, especially during the rise of totalitarianism. Nestroy and Kraus attempted to challenge the complacent rationality of their age. Only comedy and grammatical improvisation appeared equal to the task, for words had lost their meaning and "imagination was the only check against the barbarism of modern man who, daring to analyze all human values, was able to cheapen human life and discount any idea of human dignity" (Iggers 1967, 203). This is consistent with the aims and goals of *commedia dell'arte* and slapstick which, in response to "man's inhumanity to man," offer a healthy deflation of dangerous pretenses and pompous self-deception. In the words of Charlie Chaplin, "through humour, we see in what seems rational, the irrational; in what seems important, the unimportant" and vice versa (Madden 1975, 132).

The motto Wittgenstein chooses for the *Investigations* is from Nestroy's play *The Protégé*, and reads: "It is in the nature of progress to appear much greater than it actually is." Within the play, these words are an acknowledgement that little social and physical evil has been eradicated from the world. It is a serious and solemn claim. However, Nestroy notes that "seriousness has a solemn side, a sad side, and many grave sides, but it also has a little spot of electricity from which, with the proper friction, the sparks of humor fly" (Knight and Fabry 1967, 16). In his choice of motto, Wittgenstein presents himself as Nestroy's protégé. And in the text that follows, he attempts to debunk the greatness, the seriousness, and the pretensions of philosophy. In the *Investigations*, for example, Wittgenstein alters Nestroy's friction metaphor and applies it to the *Tractatus* itself. He writes:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of language was, of course, not a *result of investigation*, it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty.—We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need *friction*. Back to rough ground! (PI 107)

From the ideal conditions of the *Tractatus*, which are in danger of becoming *empty*, Wittgenstein calls for friction and directs us back to rough ground. The tone of the *Tractatus* itself is challenged by the slapstick image of attempting to walk on ice (perhaps with arms flailing and feet flying); a philosophical attempt that hoists Wittgenstein on his own petard. A few remarks later, he compares the depth of philosophy to the depth of a grammatical joke (PI 111).

Language games are an integral part of Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations. They exhibit three of the defining characteristics of *commedia dell'arte* and slapstick: i) improvisation based on general scenes, ii) stock characters, and iii) linguistic play (Madden 1975, 2). In the opening remarks of the *Investigations*, Augustine's description of the learning of human language is followed by a shopping example and the language game of the builders. Wittgenstein writes:

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked "five red apples". He takes the slip to a shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples"; then he looks up the word "red" in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers—I assume he knows them by heart—up to the word "five" and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. (PI 1)

And:

Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. [...] A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. (PI 2)

These general scenes call for improvisation on the words, actions, and nonverbal projections of their characters. Given the limitations of sketchy scenes, stock characters, and linguistic play, "gestures must speak" (Madden 1975, 106). By enacting these scenes, we come to recognize that Augustine's description of his elders in the opening remark of the *Investigations* is a description of *commedia* or slapstick characters:

Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. (PI 1)

The idea that Augustine's elders express themselves in slapstick should give us both pleasure and pause. For the simplicity and exaggeration of *commedia* and slapstick involve complex and sophisticated uses of language and imagination. (They involve already having a language [or two] only not this one.) The silence of early slapstick films, like the silence of Augustine's written confessions, is only possible against the backdrop of spoken language. Wittgenstein confirms this when he writes that "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if 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." "As if," he continues, "the child could already think, only not yet speak"

(PI 32). Developing this insight further, the opening quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*, and Wittgenstein's subsequent shopping example, could both be depicted in silent film. In the shopping example, Wittgenstein hands the shopper a slip marked "five red apples," and neither the shopper nor the shopkeeper speak to one another. (The use of quotation marks and dashes throughout the *Investigations* often evoke the intertitles of silent films.) Slapstick reveals the limitations of Augustine's description with a clarity and immediacy not possible in theory.

With the language game of the builders, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is *right*. It is an example that is meant to be played out. There are various ways to imagine and enact this scene. Scholars and students often imagine a scene unfolding in silence; with builder A and assistant B slowly, ploddingly, moving individual building stones from one place to another. These builders are compared to cave men, trained animals, marionettes, or automata (see, for example, Goldfarb 2006; Rhees 1980; Ring 1983).⁴ Such descriptions suggest silent film. But why not imagine or enact this scene as *commedia* or slapstick? Imagine the language game of the builders; only this time builder A and assistant B are Abbot and Costello, or Laurel and Hardy. For example, imagine the language game of the builders as part of Laurel and Hardy's 1928 film *The Finishing Touch* (in which they attempt to "finish" a house and, in the process, destroy it). "A calls out 'block,' 'pillar,' 'slab,' and 'beam,' and B has to pass the stones in the order in which A needs them" (PI 2). Imagine A *teaching* B the use of these words, and expanding their language to include i) a series of words used as numerals, ii) the words "this" and "there," and iii) colour samples (PI 7–8). Further, imagine a language game in which A asks and B reports the number of blocks in a pile, or the colour and shapes of the building stones that are stacked in such-and-such a place (PI 21). Wittgenstein asks, "What is the difference between the report or statement "Five slabs" and the order "Five slabs!?" Imagine mixing them up: An order is given and instead of bringing the slabs, assistant B simply repeats the words (in imitation, in mockery, in confusion, or in confirmation of A's order or report). (Perhaps assistant B is the Count on *Sesame Street*: "One, two, three, four, five slabs, ha, ha, ha.") Or, perhaps, assistant B confuses numerals, nouns, and verbs (getting the order or the report wrong). (Think of Abbot and Costello's routine "Who's on First?") Such scenes provoke laughter, not metaphysical angst. But they are no less philosophically important because of it.

Tom Stoppard presents a variation on the language game of the builders in his play *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* ([1979] 1980).⁵ The play begins with an off-stage voice yelling "Brick!" A football is thrown from off-stage left to off-stage right, and a voice answers "Cube!" Later, a lorry-driver aids several schoolboys in building a stage (for a play within the play). Blocks, slabs, planks, and cubes are thrown from the lorry (and thrown back and forth between various characters). A wall is built, knocked down, and rebuilt several times, and each time random letters on the blocks spell different words. The dramatic conceit is that the schoolboys speak one language and the lorry-driver speaks another, although they are initially unaware of this fact. In one language, the words "block," "slab," "plank," and "cube" name the objects with which we are familiar, while in the other, the word "block" means "next," the word "slab" means "okay," the word "plank" means "ready," and the word "cube" means "thank you." The scene is filled with slapstick. Within the play, different meanings of the

same word sometimes cause hesitation or confusion; sometimes cause injury or insult; while at other times their coincidence is without incident.

Wittgenstein includes the possibility of humour and jokes in one of his own variations on the language game of the builders. In §15, he introduces the use of proper names through the introduction of tools bearing certain marks. "When A shows his assistant such a mark, he brings the tool that has that mark on it" (PI 15). Wittgenstein then asks:

But has [...] a name which has never been used for a tool also got a meaning in that game?—Let us assume that 'X' is such a sign and that A gives this sign to B—well, even such signs could be given a place in the language game, and B might have, say, to answer them too with a shake of the head. (One might imagine this as a sort of joke between them.) (PI 42)

John Mighton imagines something similar in his play *Possible Worlds* (1988), where a language consists of only four words: "block," "pillar," "slab," and "hilarious". All of these works investigate the concept of meaning through the presentation of words and the actions into which they are woven. Playing a language game for which Augustine's description is *right* reveals the limitations of his description. Augustine describes a system of communication, only not everything we call language is this system.

And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises "Is this an appropriate description or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe." (PI 3)

Augustine's concept of meaning has its place in a simple idea of the way language functions, but it is also the idea of a language simpler than our own (PI 3). Wittgenstein's slapstick response addresses both the idea and its description simultaneously.

Wittgenstein anticipates that he might be accused of tacitly assuming that the builders *think* (as Augustine does); that they are like people as we know them in this respect, and that they do not act merely mechanically (*Zettel* [Z] 99). He responds:

What am I to reply to this? Of course it is true that the life of those men must be like ours in many respects, and I have said nothing about this similarity. But the important thing is that their language, and their thinking too, may be rudimentary, that there is such a thing as 'primitive thinking' which is to be described via primitive behaviour. The surroundings are not the 'thinking accompaniment' of speech. (Z 99)

Not only is thinking exhibited in such language games, it also takes place through our enactment of them. Wittgenstein advises:

Do not be troubled by the fact that [such languages] consist only of orders [...] for it is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or

a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no.
And innumerable others.— (PI 18–19)

He purposely sets limitations. To imagine or enact simple language games is not to go back to a theoretical beginning, but to arrive at simplicity after complexity. According to Wittgenstein, philosophical pictures and ideas can surround the working of language in a haze that makes clear vision impossible (PI 5). It disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application, in which we can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of words (PI 7).

The use of [a] word in the ordinary circumstances of our life is of course extremely familiar to us. But the part the word plays in our life, and therewith the language game in which we employ it, would be difficult to describe even in rough outline (PI 156).

The expression “language *game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that speaking a language is part of an activity (PI 23). Slapstick brings this neglected aspect of language to our attention. Martin Puchner suggests that *Sprachspiel* (language game) be translated as “language play” (alluding to both games and theatre) (Puchner 2015, 107). The simplicity (and inherent exaggeration) of these scenes is precisely their point.

Consistent with *commedia dell'arte* and slapstick, Wittgenstein also introduces a set of stock characters who appear and reappear throughout his writings. They include a child and his elders; a shopper and a shopkeeper; and builder A and his assistant B. In so doing, Wittgenstein draws from a variety of cultural, literary, and theatrical antecedents. His shopping example alludes to passages from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* ([1785] 1977) and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 1977), while also introducing a recognizable *commedia* character; the Viennese shopkeeper. In the *Groundwork*, Kant presents the example of a shopkeeper who does not overcharge inexperienced customers (so that even a child may buy from him) (Kant 4, 397). Hegel, on the other hand, compares the results of science to rows of closed and labelled boxes in a grocer's stall (Hegel 1977, 31).⁶ To Kant's shopkeeper in Hegel's grocer's stall, Wittgenstein sends someone shopping with a slip marked “five red apples.” Instead of Kantian will and dead, boxed matter, Wittgenstein introduces characters who act and interact with one another. He sets the scene in motion, and the philosophical examples (which were previously merely illustrative) come to life.

Like *commedia dell'arte*, Wittgenstein's language games also involve linguistic play; words from different languages, regional dialects, nonsense sounds, and exaggerated tones of voice and gesture are all mixed up together. (The titles and intertitles of silent slapstick films also involve linguistic play.) Wittgenstein's awareness (and embrace) of such linguistic play is confirmed, not only in the language games and grammatical jokes that permeate his later writings, but in passages like the following from *Culture and Value* (CV, 1980):

Aus dem Simplicissimus: Rätsel der Technik. (Bild: Zwei Professoren vor einer im Bau befindlichen Brücke.) Stimme von oben: “Laß abi - hüah - laß abi sag' i - nacha drahn

mer'n anders um!" - - "Es ist doch unfaßlich, Herr Kollega, daß eine so komplizierte und exakte Arbeit in dieser Sprache zustande kommen kann." (CV 15)

From *Simplicissimus*: Riddles of technology. (A picture of two professors in front of a bridge under construction.) Voice from above: "Fotch it dahn -- coom on fotch it dahn A tell tha -- we'll turn it t'other rooad sooin" -- "It really is quite incomprehensible, my dear colleague, how anyone can carry out such complicated and precise work in such language." (CV 15e)

Simplicissimus was a German weekly satirical magazine (published from 1896–1967, with a hiatus between 1944–54). Peter Winch, the translator of *Culture and Value*, notes that he is grateful to Mr. S. Ellis of the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies at the University of Leeds for the rendering of this passage. Presented as a riddle, it is a joke at the expense of the author of the *Tractatus* himself.

The language game of the builders is played out from §§2–48 of the *Investigations*, and offers rich and varied insights into language, meaning, understanding (etc.). In all of its variations, this language game is not about the builders, it is about challenging our own philosophical pictures and ideas through the use of imagination and improvisation. Wittgenstein writes that we must do away with all explanation, and he offers slapstick in place of theory and argumentation (PI 109). The language game of the builders is an alternative to theoretical constructs, and a critique of logical forms of analysis. The *Investigations* is filled with dialogue, questions, exclamations, and extensive punctuation that draw attention to the performative aspect of this work. As Nestroy and Kraus understood, no explanation can capture the electricity from which the sparks of humour and insight fly. No explanation can make Wittgenstein's language game funny or illuminating if you do not get it (or play it). And any explanation will kill both the humour and the insight if you do.

Wittgenstein's language games are a source of philosophical insight. When limitations are set, we must employ our imagination to discover possibilities. Limitations become a source of investigative freedom. This alters the practice of philosophy, its audience (or readership), and its goals. Clarity and insight are inherent in the playing of language games themselves, and not in arguments, explanations, or theories that might result from, or exist independently of, their performance. Improvisation provides scope for individual inventiveness, while at the same time allowing ensembles (whether students, philosophers, or actors) to function at their most creative. It also encourages the imagination of readers or spectators. In his study of *commedia dell'arte* and slapstick, David Madden writes that "actors and audiences participate in a metaphysical conspiracy to raise the stock and the standard to the level of art" (Madden 1975, 153). This is also required when reading and responding to Wittgenstein's philosophy. Creating friction, and leaving such moments to the imagination is an expression of Wittgenstein's humour, playfulness, and respect for others. In a world in which imagination is being destroyed because *nothing is left to it*, philosophy enacted as *commedia dell'arte* or slapstick is an important bequest (Iggers 1967, 95).

Recognizing and enacting Wittgenstein's language games as slapstick dramatically alters our understanding of (and engagement with) the opening remarks of the *Investigations*. Andrew Lugg

criticizes recent attempts to compare Wittgenstein's philosophy to theatre for problematizing these opening remarks:

Until recently, §§1–7 of the *Philosophical Investigations* were mostly taken literally, and Wittgenstein understood as expecting the reader to treat what he says as it stands. Lately, however, the sections have come to be seen as requiring careful interpretation (and reinterpretation), and Wittgenstein seen as wishing the reader to question his remarks, even dispute them. [...] In particular, the examples of the shopkeeper and the builders in §1 and §2, examples once routinely judged unproblematic, are now frequently held to be problematic, if not out-and-out unintelligible, and the rest of the material is interpreted to accommodate this new interpretation. Instead of taking the sections to express exactly what Wittgenstein wanted to say, we are to look beyond his words to his deeper intentions, his true meaning being more subtle and more critical than it appears at first sight. (Lugg 2013, 20)

Lugg challenges interpretations that claim Wittgenstein's shopping example "reads as if it reproduced a skit written by Beckett or Ionesco and is better suited to the theatre of the absurd" (Lugg 2013, 25). He also challenges readings that describe or dismiss language games as "behavioural pantonimes" or "particular muted fantasies." He notes that skits by Beckett and Ionesco are coherent enough to be performed, although he does not acknowledge that Beckett himself was influenced by *commedia* and slapstick. He also writes that the scenario of the shopkeeper, although unusual and strange, could be filmed (Lugg 2013, 24). Both *commedia* and slapstick are recognizable forms of theatre, but they are not theatre of the absurd. Lugg quotes with approval Gasking and Jackson's description of Wittgenstein's 1930–32 lectures as attempts to work his way into and through a question, in the natural order and in the non-technical way in which any completely sincere man thinking to himself would come to it (Lugg 2013, 34). He also acknowledges that "Wittgenstein wanted to introduce the topic of meaning, and *bring into play* the question of how "one operates with words" at the beginning of the book" (Lugg 2013, 26, emphasis added). Enacting Wittgenstein's language games as slapstick is one possible way of bringing such questions into play (and working ourselves into and through them).

Lugg argues that there is no need to read Wittgenstein's philosophy as ironic, evasive, or ambiguous (Lugg 2013, 20). And I agree. However, he equates taking Wittgenstein at his word with reading his work *literally*:

The views he introduces, the questions he raises, and the suggestions he floats are best understood literally.... When the sections are read, as they are presumably meant to be read, starting at the beginning, they do not require supplementation or embellishment, only clarification and explanation. The hard thing, as so often in Wittgenstein's case, is to take him at his word and not read into what he says what is not there. (Lugg 2013, 20–21)

While asserting that Wittgenstein's opening remarks do not require supplementation or embellishment, Lugg acknowledges that they may require clarification and explanation.

Recognizing the slapstick nature of language games suggests that clarification and explanation may be two different things, and that clarification can take the form of *commedia* or slapstick. As noted above, Wittgenstein encourages us to do away with explanation (PI 109). He suggests that if we are haunted by explanations, we neglect to remind ourselves of the most important facts (Z 220). Such neglect is both philosophical and aesthetic. Significantly, there is nothing in Lugg's reading of §§1–7 that is incompatible with enacting language games as slapstick, for such enactment does not look beyond Wittgenstein's words for deeper intentions or a more subtle or critical meaning. Humorously, it does just the opposite (and this humour is not ironic). Further, creative engagement with Wittgenstein's text is not a veiled response to philosophical evasiveness or ambiguity. To respond to language games as *commedia* is, in fact, *one* way to take Wittgenstein at his word.

The difference between Lugg's reading of §§1–7 and the one presented in this paper involves Wittgenstein's request that we *imagine* the examples and language games presented in the opening remarks of the *Investigations*. Lugg cautions against reading into (or out of) Wittgenstein's texts things that are not there. However, engaging creatively with the text (through improvisation and linguistic play) enacts philosophy in the space between us. The resulting readings or enactments are not implicit in the text, nor attributable to Wittgenstein alone. Rather, they complement the text and encourage a state of philosophical discovery. In his paper, Lugg hopes to have shown that “nothing needs to be added—aside from elucidation and amplification—to make the sections intelligible or worthy of inclusion” (Lugg 2013, 33). It is my hope that this paper demonstrates that elucidation and amplification can take a variety of different forms, without violating the spirit or letter of Wittgenstein's writings. Unlike approaches that find the opening of the *Investigations* problematic or unintelligible, recognizing and responding to Wittgenstein's language games as *commedia* or slapstick makes what is hidden, in all of its simplicity and familiarity, obvious, striking, and engaging.

Wittgenstein's slapstick enriches and expands our philosophical practices, and is itself an important source of philosophical insight. It offers an example of performance philosophy in which performance is not merely illustrative, and philosophy is not merely theoretical. Rather, a radically new form of philosophical investigation is enacted through the performance of language games.⁷

Notes

¹ According to Wittgenstein, “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful” (PI 129).

² That Wittgenstein was *blinded* by the idea of a “picture-theory of meaning” is profoundly ironic; but it is an irony not lost on Wittgenstein himself. Throughout this paper, references to Wittgenstein’s work include both his writings and pedagogical practices.

³ For further discussion see Janik and Toulmin (1973) and Savickey (1999) and (2013).

⁴ These descriptions also appear to equate the use of language with being human (denying it of those who have few words or do not speak).

⁵ My thanks to Severin Schroeder for this reference.

⁶ The shopkeeper example occurs during Kant’s discussion of action done from (or in conformity with) duty, immediate inclination, or self-interest (Kant 4, 397). Hegel’s example occurs within a discussion of the scientific method. He claims that the scientific method consists of labelling all that is in heaven and earth with a few determinations of a general schema, and pigeon-holing everything (Hegel 1977, 31).

⁷ My thanks to Jane Forsey and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Biography

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