

Response

Michael Kevin Greene
DePaul University

Before beginning, I want to ask a question: How does one make a comment on a work of deconstruction? Certainly the task is not to say what the work has meant. So instead I will purposely say something different. I will set forth a different text in order that a space may open up between this text and Mrs. Willett-Shoptaw's text--a space which makes both our texts possible.

I was struck when I first saw the initial title of the paper just delivered: "A Deconstruction of the Philosophical Investigations." I was struck because in my encounters with Wittgenstein's Investigations I had never really thought of this work as holding the traditional metaphysical doctrine of presence, which would make it an obvious candidate for deconstruction. Quite the contrary, I have always been somewhat intrigued by the parallels and compatibilities between Derrida's and Wittgenstein's thinking. These parallels and compatibilities already have been examined in works by Marjorie Grene, David Allison and Newton Carver. Let me briefly mention a few of these parallels.

First of all, both thinkers are highly critical of the manner in which language has traditionally been thought. Secondly, both thinkers question the primacy--and even the possibility--of logical simples. Thirdly, and this is most important, both Wittgenstein and Derrida strive to free language from the immobilizing weight of logic and the rigidity of metaphysics. Let us examine this last point in some detail.

In order to free language of these burdens, both Wittgenstein and Derrida employ methods which are comparable to some degree. In general, it can be said that both thinkers dismantle the traditional theories of language. Wittgenstein shows the ways in which the traditional expression of the theory of language does not work. He shows a plurality of things for which it cannot account. He shows complexities which render the traditional theory of language to be bursting at the seams with inconsistencies. Derrida, on the other hand, is perhaps more devious, certainly less straightforward. But in the act of deconstruction, in which the text is pitted against itself, Derrida makes things

difficult for the traditional representational theory of language. He makes things irreversibly complex.

Insofar as Wittgenstein is concerned, all of these parallels involve the critical aspects of his thinking. But unlike Derrida, Wittgenstein offers something other than his critical assessment of the tradition. Wittgenstein offers a description of language. Derrida does not; he does not because in order to do so he would need to speak, and, as Derrida points out in his work on Levinas: to speak is to speak philosophically. Instead of presenting a new theory which would take up the language of philosophy, Derrida becomes a reader, and his works of deconstruction are double readings which are content with discovering the unavoidable contrasts found in philosophical discourse.

I think it is important to pause here at this juncture, contrasting Wittgenstein's willingness to present a description of language and Derrida's avoidance of any such "philosophical" descriptions. The question must be asked whether Wittgenstein's descriptions of language clearly distinguish his work from Derrida's work. What is at issue here is how we are to read Wittgenstein's Investigations.

Mrs. Willett-Shoptaw claims that the Investigations are an attempt at exemplary philosophy. Her argument in light of this is that this attempt at exemplary philosophy is itself contaminated by bad philosophy. I would like to interject a different claim, namely that neither Wittgenstein nor Derrida presents a new philosophical system. The key word here is not system; it would be easy enough to show that neither thinker is systematic--with Derrida's flamboyant excesses and Wittgenstein's terse, disjuncted style.

Rather, the key work is philosophical. Clearly we can say Derrida is trying not to be philosophical. Indeed, he is trying to show that philosophy is impossible. But Wittgenstein? Although his work is a result of his philosophical investigations, is not his attempt to restore language to its everyday contexts an attempt to somehow get rid of philosophy, or at least a certain traditional understanding of philosophy?

The move Wittgenstein makes towards everydayness is not a move towards philosophical rigor. He is not moving towards good philosophy, not unless good philosophy requires the absence of the exacting rigor of philosophy. Instead, Wittgenstein moves towards contexts. In doing so he is restoring language to the place where it is at home, and in doing so he frees language from the sort of rigorous requirements and exact rules that are endemic to philosophical discourse.

Wittgenstein's descriptions are not exact rules. He does not offer exact rules because once language is restored to its everyday context, it does not need them. I would like to point out some of the other ways in which Wittgenstein shows that he is not subject to

the criteria peculiar to what we usually term philosophical discourse. Most obvious is his use of metaphor. If we consider Wittgenstein's descriptions of language as philosophical, his flagrant and blatant use of metaphors should strike us as odd. Yet we find metaphors at every key juncture of his thinking. There are flies in bottles, family resemblances, frictionless ice, cities and suburbs, therapies, albums and--most centrally--language games.

If Wittgenstein intended to set forth the sort of propositional truth that is endemic to philosophical discourse, would he have used analogical predication? Metaphor lacks the rigorous precision that philosophy pretends to have. Is not Wittgenstein's attempt to get the fly out of the bottle an attempt to free language from the constraints of philosophical rigor? Philosophical rigidity is what Wittgenstein sees as getting in our way. It prevents us from getting back to work, into our everyday context. The task is not to find some absolute ground, but to work. Although we can subject Wittgenstein's thinking to philosophical restraints, I think it would be a mistake to do so. Wittgenstein is trying to get free of the restrictions of philosophy.

Wittgenstein describes language as being determined by context. He says that once we see language in its relation to context we will see with complete clarity. He says that philosophical problems should disappear, and we will see clearly. But this does not mean that once we are freed from the pretended clarity of philosophy we will be looking at clear things. No, instead we will be able to look clearly at that which is not itself clear cut. We will clearly see contexts. We will be looking clearly at something which is inherently interconnected with some vagueness.

Mrs. Willett-Shoptaw points out that in his move to context, Wittgenstein leaves himself vulnerable. She claims that rather than having clarified language by context, context is found to be incomplete; it always needs another context in order to determine it. But this need for context to be something that is definitely bounded is not a criterion which Wittgenstein requires. As far as Wittgenstein is concerned, language works quite well without such definite clarity. Although Derrida considers everyday language to be already contaminated by philosophy, Wittgenstein believes everyday language can be free from the paralyzing effects of philosophy.

The Philosophical Investigations are therapies for such philosophical rigidity. If this is the therapy, if the Philosophical Investigations are Wittgenstein's unravelling of the problems of philosophy in such a manner that philosophical criteria become unravelled in the process, then is it not somewhat redundant to

deconstruct Wittgenstein? Is it not something like
deconstructing Derrida?