

The Standard Meter by Any Name is Still a Meter Long

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Abstract:

In §50 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein wrote the sentence, "There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris." Although some interpreters have claimed that Wittgenstein's statement is mistaken, while others have proposed various explanations showing that this must be correct, none have questioned the fact that he intended to assert that it is impossible to describe the standard meter as being a meter long- Given that Wittgenstein introduces this sentence as analogous to the claim that "existence cannot be attributed to an element," and that the preceding passages discuss a language- game the simples of which can be described by their own names, there is good reason to think that Wittgenstein did not intend to assert this infamous sentence.

Article:

In §50 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes a curious thing. He writes, "There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris."¹ There is, of course, nothing new in noting the oddity of the claim expressed by this sentence. Many philosophers have noted it before. Some believe that, regardless of its apparent oddity, the claim is true. Others insist that it is obviously false. Regardless of their evaluation of the truth of this sentence, however, everyone seems to agree about one thing: Wittgenstein not only wrote it, he intended to assert it. In what follows I will present some reasons for thinking that we can, in fact, say of the standard meter that it is a meter long.² My main purpose, however, will be to demonstrate that it was not Wittgenstein's intention to deny this. The sentence is not an assertion of Wittgenstein's own view. Rather, it is a false statement of the sort to which his interlocutor (and Wittgenstein's own earlier self) would be committed.

Before we get into detailed textual analysis, let me make a comment or two about reading *Philosophical Investigations*. As anyone who has studied it knows, one of many things that makes interpretation of this text so difficult is the fact that some passages are to be read as if in Wittgenstein's voice, and some are to be read as if in the voice of his interlocutor. A transparent example of this is found in the very first section:

—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. —"But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red, and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" —Well, I assume that he acts as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. —But what is the meaning of the word "five"? —No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used.

There are clearly two voices in this passage, and if we were to do a dramatic reading of it the person taking the part of Wittgenstein would read the statements, while a person playing an interlocutor read the questions. That both questions are in the interlocutor's voice is obvious, despite the fact that the first is in scare quotes while the second is not. Unfortunately it is not always this clear when an unquoted sentence belongs to the interlocutor.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references are to Wittgenstein (1958).

² Throughout this paper I will write as if the standard for being a meter long is a metal bar in Paris- This is no longer true, but that fact has no bearing on our current discussion.

But things are even more complicated. Some sentences are to be read in Wittgenstein's voice, but not as statements he wishes to assert. In conversation, you or I might rephrase an opponent's point-to make sure we have it right, or to put it in terms that highlight its problems, etc.-and Wittgenstein does the same sort of thing at various points in the Investigations. Here is a clear instance:

But why does it occur to one to want to make precisely this word into a name, when it evidently is not a name? —That is just the reason.... if "Excalibur" is the name of an object, this object no longer exists when Excalibur is broken in pieces; and as no object would then correspond to the name it would have no meaning. But then the sentence "Excalibur has a sharp blade" would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense. But it does make sense; so there must always be something corresponding to the words of which it consists. (§39)

Again, if we were to do a dramatic reading of the Investigations this response would certainly be read by the person playing Wittgenstein; but the view expressed cannot be attributed to him. He is merely setting out his interlocutor's line of thought.

I agree with the received interpretation that the statement about the standard meter is in Wittgenstein's voice. But as the passage just quoted shows, that is not sufficient to make it an expression of his view. Wittgenstein introduces the standard meter as a means of translating the discussion about an hypothesized type of object (Tractarian ultimate elements) into an analogous discussion carried on in terms of objects of a more familiar and undisputed type (standards).³ When Wittgenstein writes: "There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris" he is merely translating a Tractarian statement about ultimate elements into a statement about standards in preparation for that discussion. The Wittgenstein of the Investigations no more endorses the statement that results from this translation than he endorses the original.

I.

Before I demonstrate that it is possible to describe the standard meter as being a meter long, and that Wittgenstein knew this, let me give a few illustrations of the sort of thing that has been said by the philosophers with whom I am disagreeing. Some of them believe that the standard meter can be said to be a meter long, and some do not. But none defend their assumption that Wittgenstein denied the possibility of describing the standard meter in this way.

For instance, in Naming and Necessity Kripke writes:

Another sort of example in the literature is that one meter is to be the length of S where S is a certain stick or bar in Paris.... Wittgenstein says something very puzzling about this. He says: "There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one meter long nor that it is not one meter long, and that is the standard meter in Paris...." This seems to be a very 'extraordinary property,, actually, for any stick to have. I think he must be wrong .⁴

Despite the oddity of the claim he is attributing to Wittgenstein, Kripke does not pause to consider the possibility that there might be a more charitable reading of the relevant passage.

On Robert Fogelin's interpretation, Wittgenstein himself recognized the (apparent) oddity of which Kripke complains. After quoting §50 Fogelin paraphrases what he takes Wittgenstein to have been saying:

To begin with, it may not seem obvious that we cannot say of the standard meter that it is a meter long; indeed, we may be inclined to say the opposite, that it is the only thing that really is one meter long. But suppose, for a moment, we analyze the claim that x is a meter long as the assertion that x has the same length as the standard meter. In this case, the claim that the standard meter is a meter long amounts to saying that the standard meter is the same length as the standard meter. Thus our attempt to ascribe a length to the standard meter leads to the formulation of an empty tautology which, of course, does not attribute a length to a particular object.⁵

³ As will be noted below, the statement about the standard meter is explicitly introduced as *analogous to* the statement that neither existence nor nonexistence can be attributed to an element.

⁴ Kripke, (1980), p. 54.

⁵ Fogelin, (1995), p. 127.

Elsewhere Fogelin mentions that if the object currently playing the role of standard meter is replaced by another, it might then be said to be a meter long; "for we can always remove something from its position as standard and measure it against some other standard."⁶ But he does not question the fact that Wittgenstein held that insofar as an object is the standard meter, it can neither be said to be nor not to be a meter long.

And finally, Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, in the first volume of their analytical commentary on *Philosophical Investigations* write: "Wittgenstein agrees [with his interlocutor] that the standard metre cannot be said to be or not to be one metre long, but interprets this as merely marking the special role of the standard metre in the institution of measurement."⁷ Like Fogelin, they correctly note that the rod or stick used as the standard meter is so used only contingently, and might be replaced. If this object were replaced, and ceased to be the standard, then we might describe it as being a meter long. But they insist that —'That is one metre', 'The length of that is one metre', etc., uttered when pointing at the standard metre could not but be grammatical, i.e., ostensive explanations."⁸ That is, as long as this stick is the standard meter, it cannot meaningfully be described either as being, or as not being a meter long.

Even those who intend to defend Wittgenstein often agree that it initially appears possible to describe the standard meter as being a meter long. Thus, it's worthwhile noting that anyone who holds this combination of views—that it initially appears possible to say the standard meter is a meter long, and that Wittgenstein rightly denies it really is possible—is committed to holding that Wittgenstein made one of two mistakes.⁹ She might say that Wittgenstein mistakenly believed it to be obvious that it's impossible to describe the standard meter this way. But even if it is true, it certainly isn't obvious, so he would have been mistaken about that. Alternatively, she might hold that he recognized that it isn't obvious. On this interpretation, however, Wittgenstein's discussion of the standard meter is in direct conflict with his general view of philosophy. On this interpretation his reason for saying that we cannot describe the standard meter as being a meter long is that this would not fit with an explanation of how things must be—even if only within a given language-game—despite how they appear. But perhaps his primary criticism of other philosophers is that they give these sorts of arguments in an attempt to provide explanations when they should, instead, accurately describe things the way they find them; "don't think, but look!" (§66)

II.

In this section I'll use two stories to illustrate why I think that it is possible to describe the standard meter as being a meter long, regardless of what Wittgenstein says. In the next I'll demonstrate that he wouldn't dispute this.

Although few writers put any qualifications on the claim that it is impossible to describe the standard meter as being a meter long, it seems safe to assume that what they mean is that this is impossible insofar as the person offering the description recognizes that what is being described is the standard meter. Nevertheless, although this is a much more plausible claim, it is still false. Consider the following story:

Ms. Jones is a rich collector of unusual objects, and an avid reader of the later Wittgenstein. Unfortunately, she is also a bit demented. One day, after having spent too much time pondering §50 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Ms. Jones decides that she must possess the standard meter—even though she recognizes that it has no extraordinary properties. Thus she sets about planning to steal it. She does a bit of research and discovers where the standard meter is, and that it is kept in a room with many other measurement standards. Unfortunately, the theft will have to occur at night, and Ms. Jones despairs of being able to read the labels and find the stick she wants. But then she hits upon an idea. She will bring along a meter stick from the local hard-

⁶ Ibid., p. 128.

⁷ Baker, G. P. and P. M. S. Hacker, (1980), p. 292.

⁸ Ibid., p. 293, my emphasis.

⁹ I note this because some discussions of this topic have evidently been motivated by the belief that Wittgenstein cannot be mistaken. That is not my view, nor is it the view of any of the philosophers mentioned in this paper.

ware store and measure the standards. Surely the one that is a meter long will be the standard meter. So this is what she does. While an accomplice stands watch by the door, Ms. Jones measures the likely looking sticks until, at last, she calls out: "I've found it. This one is the standard meter. It is a meter long." Ms. Jones knows that what she has in her hand is the standard meter, and it certainly looks as if she has just said of it that it is a meter long.

Here's the second story: Imagine that we come across an unfamiliar civilization—either in some wilderness on this planet, or on another planet—and we set upon the task of translating its language into English. We expect, of course, that when we translate their claims about the lengths of things we will not merely have to translate, we will also have to do some conversions; just as we convert measurements given in terms of feet and yards into measurements given in terms of meters. But suppose we make the happy discovery that this civilization has a measurement standard that is precisely the same length as the standard meter bar in Paris. That is, as we would put it, the object they use as a standard is precisely one meter long. What we have discovered is that we can translate their word (let's say it is "retem") into our language without doing any conversions, and that the correct translation for "retem" is "meter". The foreigners' word means the same thing as "meter". This being the case, if the table at which I am writing is a meter long, a foreigner can correctly describe it in his own language using a sentence which means: "This table is one meter long". Moreover, just as I have told you that the measurement standard for this civilization is precisely a meter long, someone from our imagined civilization can explain to his friend that in our language "meter" refers to a certain length, and that our standard for this length is precisely one retem long. That is, in full knowledge of the significance of what he is saying, he can utter a sentence meaning; "The standard meter bar in Paris is a meter long."

These examples seem to me to show that it is possible to describe the standard meter stick as being a meter long, and that it is possible to do so even when you know that what you are describing is the standard meter.¹⁰ Now, can we find a reasonable interpretation of §50 which does not commit Wittgenstein to the opposite view?

III.

The following two paragraphs provide a very brief overview of what I see happening in §50 and the sections immediately preceding it. The next two sections expand upon and defend my interpretation of these passages and explain why I don't think that Wittgenstein intended to assert that the standard meter bar in Paris is the one thing of which one can say neither that it is nor that it is not a meter long.

§50 begins with a question referring back to §46, so this seems a good place to start. In this section Wittgenstein quotes Socrates as a means of sketching a particular view of language and the world. His real interest in this view, however, derives from the fact that it is one he himself held while writing the *Tractatus*. Socrates and the early Wittgenstein each took it as a consequence of the view presented in §46 that the elements out of which the world is constructed could not be described, nor, more particularly, could one say of them either that they exist or that they do not exist. Wittgenstein brings the picture presented in §46 into question in §47, by denying the existence of the ultimate elements which are central to it. In preparation for further discussion, in §48 he designs a language-game based on that picture; his point will be that even if the picture were correct, Socrates and the early Wittgenstein were mistaken regarding its consequences. Working with language-game (48), in §49 Wittgenstein argues that objects playing the role of element within a given language-game can, nonetheless, be described within that very language-game; they can even be described by means of the names they themselves give meaning.¹¹ And in §50 he demonstrates that, contra Socrates and his own earlier self, elements (even within a language-game) can also be said to exist. Interestingly, Wittgenstein also notes that the very view which can lead one to believe that elements cannot be said to exist (or to fail to exist) may simultaneously lead

¹⁰ See the final paragraph of this paper for one more reason for thinking that the standard meter is a meter long-

¹¹ This is not to say that association with an object playing the role of element is sufficient, by itself, to determine the meaning of a name. As Wittgenstein stresses here and elsewhere, a background of activities is required. But given this background, a particular object may have a special role in determining the meaning of a particular word.

one to believe that they must exist. But while certain things about a language-game would have been different had its elements not existed, their existence is not metaphysically necessary.

The standard meter is mentioned only in the last of these passages, §50, where an analogy is drawn between the *Tractatus/Theaetetus* claim that elements cannot be said either to exist or not to exist and the claim that the standard meter cannot be said either to be or not to be a meter long. In my view, Wittgenstein makes use of this analogy precisely because most people find the claim about the standard meter obviously false. He is arguing that (anything legitimately called) an element can be said to exist, so given that he says the claims are analogous, we would expect him to hold that the standard meter can be said to be a meter long. Moreover, in §49 he argues for the possibility of describing an object using a term which derives its meaning (in large part) from its association with that very object, so we know that he would object to using this sort of reason for refusing to describe the standard meter as being a meter long. Finally, just as the view of language shared by Socrates and the early Wittgenstein also makes it tempting to think that elements must exist, it can also be tempting to think that a standard must be of the kind for which it plays the role of standard. But just as in the earlier case, there is no metaphysical necessity here. That object which is the standard might have been relevantly different than it is.¹²

IV.

If we are to understand the use to which Wittgenstein intended to put the statement "There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris" it is imperative that we take into account the context in which that statement is found. Of course, the topics of the Investigations are notoriously intertwined, and passages from one part of the book are likely to be relevant to passages from anywhere else. Nonetheless, as indicated in my summary, I will limit my discussion to §50 and the immediately preceding sections.

§50 itself begins with the question: "What does it mean to say that we can attribute neither being nor non-being to elements?" In asking this question Wittgenstein is referring four sections back, to §46, and this is where we will begin. That section consists almost entirely of a quotation from the *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates puts forth a particular view of the world and of language. On this view the world consists entirely of indivisible elements and the objects constructed out of them, and Socrates supposes it to follow that existence cannot be attributed to these basic elements.

If I make no mistake, I have heard some people say this: there is no definition of the primary elements—so to speak—out of which we and everything else are composed; for everything that exists in its own right can only be named, no other determination is possible, neither that it is nor that it is not---. Must as what consists of these primary elements is itself complex, so the names of the elements become descriptive language by being compounded together. For the essence of speech is the composition of names. (§46)

The picture described here should be familiar to anyone who has read Wittgenstein's early work. It is a statement of a central part of the *Tractatus* picture of language.¹³ This is confirmed by the last sentence of §46: "Both Russell's 'individuals' and my 'objects' (*Tractatus* Logico-Philosophicus) were such primary elements." Thus it is against his own earlier self that Wittgenstein is arguing in §§47-50, and it is the Tractarian picture that captivates the interlocutor in these passages. Or, if you prefer, in these passages the interlocutor is the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*.

The later Wittgenstein's first point, in §47, is to criticize a notion central to the *Tractatus/Theaetetus* picture of language: the notion of an element or absolute simple. Being simple is simply the flip side of having components or being complex. But, the later Wittgenstein argues, there is no single type of complexity.

¹² Much of this discussion, in §50, is carried on in terms of a standard patch of sepia, rather than in terms of the standard meter. As far as I can see, Wittgenstein's point in no way hangs on this.

¹³ Objects are simple—" (TLP 2.02) "A name means an object- The object is its meaning-" (TLP 3.203) "The configuration of objects in a situation corresponds to the configuration of simple signs in the propositional sign-" (TLP 3.21)

If I tell someone without any further explanation: "What I see before me now is composite", he will have the right to ask: "What do you mean by 'composite,?' For there are all sorts of things that that can mean!" —The question "Is what you see composite?" makes good sense if it is already established what kind of complexity—that is, which particular use of the word—is in question. (§47)

The point, of course, is that what plays the role of element in one language-game need not play that role in another. Thus, even if it were true that insofar as an object is an element (in a particular language-game) it could not be described (in that language-game), it would not follow that the object could not be described. There would always be other language-games in which the object was not an element, and there would be no reason to think that it couldn't be described in those.

From this we see that even if it were true, in a certain sense, that an element could not be described, this fact would have no metaphysical significance. It would merely be an artifact of a particular language-game. Ultimately, any object you can name can certainly be described in one language- game or another.

Something very similar can be said about the standard meter. Even if it were true that the object which plays the role of standard meter could not (currently) be described as being a meter long, this would not be a fact of any metaphysical import. And, indeed, in §50 Wittgenstein says just this: "But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule." That object which currently plays the role of standard meter could be replaced by another. If this happens the first object would no longer be the standard, and no one doubts that it could then be correctly described as being a meter long. As was mentioned in section I, it is acknowledged by numerous writers, including Fogelin and Baker and Hacker, that it would be possible to describe as a meter long an object which used to be the standard meter, and that Wittgenstein argued for this.

So leaving to one side whether or not there is a sense in which Socrates is right that it is impossible to describe elements, in §47 Wittgenstein demonstrates that he would be wrong in giving this any ultimate significance—because the only elements there are are objects playing a certain role within a language-game, and these could obviously be described elsewhere. In the end, however, Wittgenstein does not grant Socrates or his own earlier self even this much. That is, in the end the later Wittgenstein denies that it is impossible to describe elements, even taking into account that something is an element only within a particular language-game. In the very language- game within which an object plays the role of element, that object can be described. This argument is made in §48 and §49. In §50 he will then go on to show that even the more specific claim that (within a given language- game) elements cannot be described as existing is mistaken.

In §48 and §49 Wittgenstein uses the same method that he used in the first few sections of the Investigations.¹⁴ This method has two parts. (1) Design a language-game on the model of a picture described by another philosopher. (This is also always a model of a picture accepted in the *Tractatus*.) (2) Demonstrate that what that philosopher (and the early Wittgenstein) thought had to follow from this picture does not, in fact, follow. In §2 Wittgenstein designed the slab language-game to fit Augustine's picture of words as labels, and attempted to show, among other things, that ostensive definition is not sufficient for teaching even such a simple language. In §48 he designs a language-game to fit Socrates' picture of the world and language. As we noted, the aspects of the *Tractatus* focused on here are the ideas that there are elements and names referring to them, that complexes are made up of these elements, and that the descriptions of those complexes are straightforward concatenations of the names of the elements. What the later Wittgenstein wants to show, among other things, is that even in a language-game designed according to the Tractarian picture it is possible to describe the elements. Moreover, he wants to show that it is possible to describe the elements using the very words the meanings of which, given the background of the language-game, are determined by association with those elements.

¹⁴ "Let us apply the method of §2 to the account in the *Theaetetus*. Let us consider a language-game for which this account is really valid." (§48)

The elements in the language-game Wittgenstein describes in §48 are unit colored squares, and the complexes are larger squares made up of the elements. He says that all the names in the language-game are names of colored squares, and the sentences are concatenations of these names arranged in a specific order so as to represent complex squares. Thus, "R," "G," "W," and "II" are the names he gives to the red, green, white, and black unit squares respectively, and each letter means what it does because it is associated with squares of this color rather than with squares of that color. Concatenations of names, such as "RRGW," describe complex squares.

One of the things that the reader may find distressing about Wittgenstein's description of language-game (48) is that it is not clear whether he wants its names to be thought of as proper names of particular squares or as predicates. Or, rather, it appears that his names are ambiguous between the two. But when we recognize that (48) is intended as a model of the Tractarian picture of language, this is no longer a problem. This is precisely the ambiguity we find in the *Tractatus*, and so any model of its picture of language should embody the same ambiguity. Of course, that ambiguity is a problem, but that it shows up in §48 is not.¹⁵

With the language-game of §48 set up, Wittgenstein is prepared to discuss the picture of language it models. §49 begins with a question closely related to the one, quoted above, with which §50 begins. In this case, however, the question is asked specifically about the elements of language-game (48). Wittgenstein asks, "But what does it mean to say that we cannot define (that is, describe) these elements, but only name them?" In answer he suggests, "This might mean, for instance, that when in a limiting case a complex consists of only one square, its description is simply the name of the coloured square." As an explanation of what it means to say that the elements cannot be described, this response would be an odd one. It is closer to an account of what it is to describe a single element; "its description is simply the name of the coloured square." (my emphasis) However what Wittgenstein is really offering is an explanation, from his current perspective, of what he might have meant in the *Tractatus* when he said that elements can only be named. On that view, by definition "R" uttered by itself is a name. Thus, whenever this term is uttered by itself, a name is uttered. And so, in the limiting case, the (element) square is named. But, as Wittgenstein now points out, even if the word uttered by itself is a name, it does not really follow from this that what is uttered is not a description.

This case is mentioned again a little further on in §49. Here Wittgenstein makes it even clearer that he believes that the elements of language-game (48) can be described within that language-game. "Ulf A has to describe complexes of coloured squares to B and he uses the word "R" alone, we shall be able to say that the word is a description—a proposition." What he has in mind is something like this: One member of the language-game has the job of describing squares to another who cannot see them. The described squares may be complex, but they may also be simple. When the square to be described is complex the person offering the description utters a sentence made up of at least four words. But when what is to be described is a unit square, the description consists of a single word. Despite the fact that the speaker utters only one word, as in the other cases the utterance is a description. Thus, even if it had been true that a name was uttered whenever one of the words of this language was uttered by itself, this would have been consistent with its being the case that, at the same time, a description was given.

In fact, however, Wittgenstein argues that whether we are to call "R" uttered by itself a description or a name depends on the situation. When used in situations of the sort just described, "R" is a description.

But if [a member of this language-game] is memorizing the words and their meanings, or if he is teaching someone else the use of the words and uttering them in the course of ostensive teaching, we shall not say that they are propositions. In this situation the word "R", for instance, is not a description; it names an element...

and he concludes this sentence, "... but it would be queer to make that a reason for saying that an element can only be named!" That is, in certain circumstances a word is a name, and is properly said to name a specific

¹⁵ Thanks to Jim Hopkins for pointing this out to me.

object. But this in no way tells against the fact that in other circumstances that very word is a description, and describes that very object.

A word can be construed as a name when it is being taught. It is a name insofar as a certain sort of association between that word and a given object is being set up or referred to, rather than used. Of course, the lesson of the discussion surrounding §2 and elsewhere was that, contra the Tractarian view, the relevant sort of association is not merely a matter of a word being the label of an object. Knowing an object's name is not merely a matter of knowing to which object the word is attached. It is also knowing what to do with the word within a language-game, and perhaps also how to use that object. "We may say: nothing has so far been done, when a thing has been named. It has not even got a name except in a language-game." (§49) Nonetheless, within a given language-game an association can be set up between a sound or mark and an object, and the sound or mark is a name insofar as it is associated with a thing in this way. Moreover, although association with an object is not, by itself, sufficient to give a word meaning, given the appropriate background conditions it is the fact that the sound/mark is associated with this object rather than that one, with the red square rather than with the green one, that gives it its specific meaning. Thus, we can say that the object with which a word is associated determines the meaning of that word, in much the same way that we can say that Mrs. O'Leary's cow caused the Chicago fire. The cow couldn't have done it all by herself, but having once acknowledged this, in many contexts of discussion we can take the remaining conditions for granted.

V.

Let us now move on to §50, the passage in which the standard meter is actually mentioned. Because this is the central section, we will go through it pretty much line-by-line.

As I've mentioned, this section begins with a question that refers back to §46, and to the *Tractatus*: "What would it mean to say that we can attribute neither being nor non-being to elements?" Wittgenstein's first response takes into account the perspective of someone who accepts that picture:

—One might say: if everything that we call "being" and "non-being" consists in the existence and non-existence of connexions between elements, it makes no sense to speak of an element's being (non-being); just as when everything that we call "destruction" lies in the separation of elements, it makes no sense to speak of the destruction of an element.

In other words, if we accept that the world consists of basic elements and the things built out of them, then it makes no sense to talk about the destruction of an element; by definition, anything that can come apart would not be an element. And if existence is a matter of being constructed out of elements, then it cannot make sense to talk about an element existing. But, clearly, this is not a picture that Wittgenstein now endorses.

Although he himself does not make explicit his argument regarding the possibility of attributing existence to elements, it is natural to suppose that Wittgenstein would endorse one that parallels the argument regarding description of elements we attributed to him when discussing §47. The central premise in both cases would be the denial of the idea that there are elements in an absolute sense. Once it is admitted that what plays the role of element in one language-game need not play it in another, it is easy to see that even if existence could not be attributed to an object from within a language-game in which it played that role, that would be no reason to deny that existence could be attributed to it in another language-game. Similarly, and as also noted earlier, even if an object, call it "M," could not be said to be a meter long while it was playing the role of standard meter, this fact would carry no metaphysical significance. In another language-game, or in a variation on this one, a different object could be the standard, and then there will be no difficulty in describing M as being a meter long.

The second paragraph of §50 is the one in which the standard meter is mentioned. This paragraph begins: "One would, however, like to say: existence cannot be attributed to an element, for if it did not exist, one could not even name it and so one could say nothing at all of it." From much that he says elsewhere, we already know that the later Wittgenstein does not believe it to be impossible to attribute existence to elements. When he says this is what one would like to say he means that this is what his interlocutor would like to say, or, what comes to the

same thing, that this is what he himself said in the *Tractatus*. The argument went something like this: The very meaning of the word naming an element depends on its actual association with that particular element, so if the element didn't exist there wouldn't be a meaningful word to use to talk about it—and so one could say nothing of it at all.

Wittgenstein continues:

—But let us consider an analogous case. There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris. —But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule. (§50)

Given the interlocutor's (as well as his earlier self's) reason for insisting on the impossibility of attributing existence or non-existence to elements, it appears that she is (and he was) also committed the claim that it is impossible to say of the standard meter either that it is or that it is not a meter long. The interlocutor has (correctly) noted that if a particular element were deleted from a language-game the word that names it would have no meaning. (By "deleted" I do not mean that the object is merely removed or destroyed. Rather we must imagine a world in which everything regarding this language-game is the same, except that this object is lacking. In a world in which you never existed, you have no name.) It is also true that if the actual object which is the standard meter were deleted from our language-game in this way "meter" would have no meaning.¹⁶ Thus, if this is the interlocutor's reason for denying the first possibility, he must also deny the second. But surely, Wittgenstein insists, his interlocutor cannot believe that this would indicate anything special about the object someone just happened to choose for the standard meter. Wittgenstein shows that she should not believe that there is anything special about her so-called elements. Despite his own earlier view on the subject, there is nothing metaphysically important going on here.

We have already seen that the later Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of ultimate elements, and thus it is indisputable that he rejects the claim that there are ultimate elements such that we cannot attribute existence to them. But what if that claim is relativized to a given language-game? Does he believe that, within a given language-game, it is impossible to describe as existing those objects playing the role of elements? Certainly Wittgenstein does not accept the more general claim that within a given language-game the objects playing the role of elements cannot be described. As we saw, that was a central point of §49. When we look at the third and final paragraph of §50 we will find important connections between it and §49 which support the view that Wittgenstein would not grant his interlocutor's prohibition on attributing existence to elements, even within a given language-game. In particular, he would not grant this prohibition within the language-game designed on the *Tractatus* model. Moreover, the later Wittgenstein nowhere says anything to give us reason to suppose that he accepts such a prohibition. Given all of this we also have reason to think that Wittgenstein did not intend to assert the claim that the standard meter cannot be described as being a meter long—even from inside the language-game in which it is the standard.

As just mentioned, there are some important connections between the third paragraph of §50 and §49. One connection that is not of obvious importance is that the objects discussed in both instances are colored objects. Nevertheless, perhaps it is as an attempt to bring his discussion of standards closer to the §§48 and 49 discussion of elements that at the end of the second paragraph Wittgenstein invites his interlocutor and us to imagine a color standard in place of the more ready-to-hand standard meter. "Let us imagine samples of colour being preserved in Paris like the standard metre. We define: "sepia" means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed. Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not." (§50) Again, Wittgenstein writes that a particular standard cannot be said either to be or not to be of the kind for which it is a standard. But, again, we have reason to doubt that he intends what he has written as an assertion of his own position. He is merely replacing the standard meter example with the standard sepia example, and assuming that his interlocutor must take the same attitude towards both. To see this we must

¹⁶ Again, it is not enough to merely *remove* the object. We must be considering a world in which the *language-game* is the *same*, except that it is lacking this object—and nothing has replaced it.

move on to the final paragraph of the section. (Note that from the beginning of this paragraph the discussion is of what takes place within a language-game. Thus, if Wittgenstein is here arguing against the impossibility of attributing existence to elements he is arguing that it is possible, within a language-game, to attribute existence to the objects playing the role of elements.)

We can put it like this: This sample is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation. —And just this goes for an element in language-game (48) when we name it by uttering the word "R": this gives this object a role in our language-game; it is now a means of representation. And to say "If it did not exist, it could have no name" is to say as much and as little as: if this thing did not exist, we could not use it in our language-game.—What looks as if it had to exist, is part of the language. It is a paradigm in our language-game; something with which comparison is made. And this may be an important observation; but it is none the less an observation concerning our language-game—our method of representation. (§50)

What is the it that we can "put like this"? Presumably it is the point behind the previous sentence: "Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not." Although it may sound as if the claim made at the beginning of the paragraph just quoted is that there is some other object that the standard represents, that is an unlikely interpretation. Rather, it is best understood as the claim that the standard is an object which allows the possibility of representation within a languagegame—and therefore cannot itself be represented in that language-game.

But to say, as Wittgenstein does here, that a point can be put in a certain way is neither to assert nor to deny that the point being explained is one's own. So we thus far have no reason to assume either that Wittgenstein accepts that the standard cannot be represented or that he does not.

What follows the first "—," however, gives us reason to doubt that the view he has just been explaining is his own. Here Wittgenstein refers back to language-game (48). As you will recall, language-game (48), modeled on the Tractarian view, was designed to show that elements can be described, and that they can be described in a language-game in which they are playing the role of element. So it is not plausible to suppose that he would invoke this passage in order to say something about how standards cannot be described within the language-games for which they allow. Moreover, in §49 Wittgenstein argued that the elements of (48) could be described using their own names, and there is clearly a parallel between this and the idea that a standard can be described as belonging to the kind for which it is a standard. Thus, when he says, "—And just this goes for an element in language-game (48) when we name it by uttering the word "R": this gives this object a role in our language-game," he is saying, "Well, yes, the standard is a means of representation, and has a special role in the language-game; but (recalling what I said in (48)) it would be queer to make that a reason for saying that a standard can only be a means of representation."¹⁷ So Wittgenstein is granting that his interlocutor is partly right, although she has come to an illegitimate conclusion when she assumes that certain things cannot be said about elements or standards. She is right that the standard is a 'means of representation' and that there is a sense in which without it certain things could not be said. But she is mistaken in concluding that these things cannot be said about the standard itself.

Continuing in this vein, in the next sentence Wittgenstein again grants that his interlocutor is partially correct. It is true, in some sense, that "if an element] did not exist, it could have no name." (Similarly, it is true, in a sense, that if it were not for the standard, "meter" would have no meaning.) This point was conceded above. But from the fact that in a certain counterfactual situation (i.e., if these things did not exist) certain utterances could not be made it does not follow that they cannot be made in the actual situation. In our actual language-games, the things that play the role of elements can be said to exist, and the standard meter can be said to be a meter long.

Recall, also, that what is quoted here, "If it did not exist, it could have no name'," was originally put forth as the sort of thing the interlocutor might give as an explanation of the purported fact that existence cannot be

¹⁷ In this situation the word "R", for instance, is not a description; it *names* an element—but it would be queer to make that a reason for saying that an element can *only* be named!" (§49)

attributed to an element.¹⁸ But notice how odd this explanation is. To say that "if it did not exist, it could have no name" is actually to assert that if it has a name it exists—and no one has denied that an element has a name. We saw a parallel in §49. In that section "its description is simply the name" (my emphasis) was presented as the sort of thing an interlocutor might offer as an explanation of why elements cannot be described. We noted that this would be a very odd explanation, as it presupposes the presence of a description. Thus, within a language-game the following is true: The description of an element can be the same word as its name, and an element can be asserted to exist.

VI.

So here, in a nutshell, are my reasons for thinking that Wittgenstein did not intend to assert the impossibility of describing the standard meter as being a meter long. Firstly, Wittgenstein is usually very sensitive to and respectful of ordinary use of language and critical of philosophers' attempts to 'fix' it, and—as most people agree it seems natural to say that the standard meter is a meter long. Secondly, the claim that the standard meter cannot be said to be a meter long is introduced as analogous to the claim that elements cannot be said to exist, a Tractarian claim the later Wittgenstein clearly rejects. Given that we know he rejects the first, we have some reason to believe he rejects the second. Moreover, thirdly, Wittgenstein does not merely reject his own earlier claim that there are elements to which existence cannot be attributed, he rejects the claim that existence cannot be attributed to an object within the language-game within which it plays the role of element. He does this in a paragraph (§50) in which he continues to assume an analogy between elements and standards. Thus there is every reason to believe that just as he rejects the claim that existence cannot be attributed elements when this claim is relativized to a language-game, so he rejects the claim that the standard meter cannot be said to be a meter long, relativized to our language-game of measuring with a meter-rule. Fourth and finally, considering what was said by the philosophers mentioned in section I, if any reason for thinking that the standard meter cannot be described as a meter long is given in these passages, it is that this object is an instrument of our measuring language-game. But Wittgenstein rejects the notion that the fact that an object playing the role of element is an instrument of a language-game prohibits us from attributing existence to it from within that language-game. So although he says that the standard is an instrument, it is implausible to hold that he believed this constituted a reason for thinking that the standard meter couldn't be said to be a meter long.

Before closing let me briefly address two objections to the suggestion that "meter" can be applied to the standard meter. Most baldly put, the first objection is that something cannot be used to represent itself, and that this is what a person would be doing if she attempted to say of the standard meter that it is a meter long. But this is surely mistaken. As John Malkovitch has demonstrated by playing John Malkovitch in *Being John Malkovitch*, it is possible for something to represent itself.¹⁹ This example is perhaps unfair, because there may be something importantly different about proper names. But it also seems to me that the first creature labeled "stegosaurus" is a stegosaurus, even though all other creatures merit the name only insofar as they are of the same kind as it. It (or its skeleton) is the standard. Maybe this example is importantly disanalogous as well, but an argument would have to be given to show that it is, and I do not know of one.

The second objection is that the only picture that allows one to say that the standard meter is a meter long is one in which the standard directly picks out some other kind of object—abstract or Platonic, perhaps—which is then used to measure it. In addition to postulating the existence of objects Wittgenstein would be suspicious of, and thereby postulating an explanation where we should be describing—this objection continues—this view assumes something like the direct labeling picture Wittgenstein argues against at the beginning of the *Investigations*. The alternative—the objection concludes—is that the standard meter has a role in the language-game of being that against which things are measured. Ultimately it is the only thing against which objects can be compared in order to determine whether or not they are a meter long. On the objector's view, then, to say that

¹⁸ From the second paragraph of §50, "One would, however, like to say: existence cannot be attributed to an element, for if it did not *exist*, one could not even name it and so one could say nothing at all of it."

¹⁹ I owe this example to Jon Barton.

the standard meter is a meter long would be like demonstrating that one knows how tall one is by putting one's hand atop one's head.²⁰

Although I have no doubt Wittgenstein would reject the first picture, I see no reason for believing that the only alternative is the one the objector assumes. Of course, Wittgenstein does say that the standard is an instrument of the language-game, but he does not provide a detailed account of how this instrument is used. And, as previously noted, he also calls the elements of §48 instruments of the language while at the same time arguing that they can be described by means of their names. To say, as he does, that an object is "something with which comparison is made" is not to offer a complete description of its role and I have seen no argument proving that this role must rule out the possibility of saying that the standard meter is a meter long.

Insofar as to say that the standard meter is a meter long is to offer a description of it, we should also be careful to bear in mind Wittgenstein's repeated observation that there are many types of description which serve many different purposes. Thus, to hold that Wittgenstein denied that it is possible to say of the standard meter that it is a meter long is not merely to hold that he would have insisted that "The standard meter is a meter long" fails to serve a specific purpose. It is to hold that he would have denied that the sentence can serve any purpose in virtue of which it could constitute a true (or even a false) description.

In the first section of this paper I mentioned that many interpreters hold that the object which is now the standard meter could be said to be a meter long if it ceased to be the standard, and that Wittgenstein would agree with this. Those who say this do not usually give the impression of intending to say that in such a situation "meter" changes its meaning. If that's right, then unless they are willing to deny that it has any length at all, they must admit that the standard meter is the same length it would be if it were a meter long. It is hard to see how this differs from saying that it is a meter long. The language-game of measuring with a meter-rule may be one that requires a standard against which things are measured, but it is a subtle one, and one which allows this standard to be replaced by another.²¹ As the "retem" example of section II was intended to show, it is also one that can be played by different persons using different standards. Thus, until someone gives a full account of how this language-game works which proves otherwise, I see no reason for denying the obvious truth that the standard meter is a meter long. And until someone gives a full account of Wittgenstein's picture which shows otherwise, I see no reason for thinking he denies it either.²²

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²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, §279.

²¹ I am not certain that a standard is necessarily required. Would beings who were able to judge length with the same accuracy that those with perfect pitch are able to judge pitches need such a standard?

²² Early versions of this paper were read at the Alabama Philosophical Society meetings and at the University of Texas at Austin. My thanks to the audiences of both talks, and to Jon Barton, Robert Fogelin, Joshua Gert, Jim Hopkins and David Levi.