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A Thought Experiment in the Wild

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Abstract: This article aims to complicate the opposition between "thick description" and "thin" thought experiments by constructing a thought experiment of its own. It compares the use of examples—thick and thin—in the work of Malinowski and Wittgenstein, who came to extremely similar conclusions about the importance of context to meaning, the former around a decade before the latter. By imagining the—by no means implausible—possibility that Wittgenstein read Malinowski, the article asks how it might change anthropological views about thickness and thinness if it turned out that one of the major philosophical sources of our disciplinary preference for "thick description" as a generalized prescription for ethnography took some inspiration for such ideas from Malinowksi's more modest and restricted empiricism.

Keywords: Malinowski, meaning as use, thick description, thought experiments, Wittgenstein

> "How misleading Frazer's explanations are becomes clear, I think, from the fact that one could very well invent primitive practices oneself, and it would only be by chance if they were not actually found somewhere. That is, the principle according to which these practices are ordered is a much more general one than [it appears] in Frazer's explanation, and it exists in our own soul, so that we could think up all the possibilities ourselves."
>
> —Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*

This article challenges the distinction between the thick ethnographic description and the abbreviated, decontextualized philosophical thought experiment through a thought experiment of its own.

Wittgenstein (rather than Ryle, who in fact coined the phrase) is arguably the philosopher *par excellence* of thick description, yet it is not entirely implausible to imagine that he arrived at some of his most distinctive views

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via a "thin" and hence generalizable reading of a thick and highly contextualized and specifically located ethnographic case from Malinowski. By reading Wittgenstein and Malinowski together, we see the ways in which ethnography transforms into thought experiment and thought experiments become justifications for ethnography both within and across their work. Such blurring—even if only in the subjunctive form—suggests the value of an undogmatic approach to the comparable virtues of contextualization and abstraction.

First, though, our thought experiment: imagine yourself set down in a small village in Austria in the Schneeberg mountains, called Puchberg, in 1923. Its inhabitants are farmers for the most part, but the man in whom you are primarily interested is a schoolteacher who lives in a tiny, one-room house furnished only by a bed, a washstand, and a table and chair, and who eats nothing but coarse bread and butter for his meals. The man lives more or less as a hermit, surfacing occasionally only to play piano duets with the school music teacher and a local coalminer who possesses a surprisingly good voice. He regards the rest of Puchberg's population as, in his own words, three-quarters human and one-quarter animal.

In March of that year, the schoolteacher receives a book in the post, one of many he is sent. You notice that this one he reads carefully though, paying particular attention to the appendix, on the pages of which he scribbles many furious notes, hiding them furtively from anyone nearby.

A little later, you chance upon him writing a letter, and you deduce from the name of the addressee that it is the editor of the book the man has been reading so carefully. Over his shoulder, you see that the schoolteacher is chastising the editor for not having "caught," as he puts it, the problems the book is concerned with as he should have.

Later still, you happen upon him writing another letter, to a third person, in which the schoolteacher is even more caustic: "Is it not a miserable book?!", you see that he has written of the text. You are surprised, given the avidity with which you have seen the schoolteacher devour this so-called "miserable" book, particularly that appendix with the interesting title: "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages." You ask yourself if you have correctly understood the meaning of the word "miserable," concluding that perhaps features specific to the context at issue are necessary to grasp the full import of what is being said. A decade or so later, you are surprised to find the schoolteacher of Puchberg roaming the halls of your university back home, declaring more or less the very same thing to all and sundry.

The schoolteacher of Puchberg is Wittgenstein, and the author of "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" is Malinowski. We might call this exercise of imagination a thought experiment—the mode of philosophical reasoning of which trolley problems form a subset—insofar as everything described is factually correct, if biographers and intellectual historians are to

be believed, with the exception of the description of Wittgenstein avidly reading Malinowski's appendix to *The Meaning of Meaning* by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (1923). We have no idea whether Wittgenstein read Malinowski, though it is perfectly likely he did given that we do have evidence that he read the book containing it, evidence including the letter he wrote to Ogden declaring the book "not to have caught" the problem of meaning in the same way Wittgenstein thought himself to have done in his *Tractatus*, and the second letter mentioned, this one to Bertrand Russell, in which he declares the book "miserable" and adds that "philosophy can't possibly be that easy."

I am not the first to speculate on the possibility that Wittgenstein might have read Malinowski, unsurprisingly given the extraordinary overlap in argument between Malinowski's appendix and the view of language Wittgenstein would come to adopt over the decade following its publication. In a letter to the Times Literary Supplement in 1995, Raymond Firth, Malinowski's pupil and successor at the London School of Economics, declared it possible but unlikely. Ernest Gellner, meanwhile, dedicated his last book, *Language and Solitude*, to the relationship between the thought of Wittgenstein and Malinowski, and their common origins in the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire (1998).

Why such interest in the possible overlap between the two men, beyond the fact of their vast influence on their respective and cognate disciplines? The reason the question arises for Gellner is precisely that Malinowski's chapter on meaning in primitive language appears at least in some ways to anticipate the basic thrust of Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language: the same insight our imaginary ethnographer came to in observing Wittgenstein, namely that meaning inheres in the specifics of contexts, not in an abstract relationship between signs and objects.

Unlike Gellner, my interest is not so much in the similarity of Wittgenstein's and Malinowski's respective claims about language as it is in the similarities and differences in how they arrive at such claims. This is because the thought experiment of imagining Wittgenstein reading (and learning from) Malinowski is in some ways a thought experiment about a thought experiment: Malinowski couches the evidence in his appendix, as he often did in his writing, in precisely the subjunctive mood with which I began here: "Imagine yourself suddenly transported on to a coral atoll in the Pacific. Let us assume further that there is an ideal interpreter at hand." Wittgenstein will go on to do the same hundreds if not thousands of times across the *Philosophical Investigations*, once he has adopted his later view of language: "Let us imagine a language meant to serve for communication between a builder A an assistant b . . . we could imagine that the language was . . . even the whole language of a tribe."

So, the imaginary Wittgenstein of our own thought experiment might well be excused for reading the argument of Malinowski's appendix as itself experimental, and therefore treating its results in the way in which we are wont to

treat the results of experiments more broadly: as generalizable. And this is why we might find the real Wittgenstein, thirteen years or so later, writing the famous critique of the Augustinian view of language learning as ostensive definition in the opening of what would become the *Philosophical Investigations*, echoing almost exactly Malinowski's point and even invoking an imaginary primitive tribe in doing so. So, in our thought experiment, the imaginary Wittgenstein gets his imaginary primitive tribe from Malinowski's imaginary Pacific island.

Except, obviously, Malinowski's Pacific island was not imaginary. While Malinowski does indeed give an almost word for word iteration of the "meaning is use" formulation that would later make Wittgenstein famous,[1] he does so—rhetorically, at the very least—not on the basis of a general claim derived from a thought experiment about an imaginary Pacific atoll, but from a specific claim about an actual context, that of the Trobriand Islands.

In other words, despite the subjunctive mood of imagination (the "what if," in Lillehammer's terms—this volume) with which Malinowski opens this and other texts, it is of course readable as largely a straightforward example of a set of descriptive ethnographic claims based on observations about a certain place. It is true that—like many other such anthropological claims—the scope of Malinowski's arguments is somewhat broader than just the Trobriand Islands, and broader even than the "Primitive Languages" of his title. He lists some instances of what he calls "modern examples" that he might have used to make the same points about language. But as he goes on to say later, in characteristic empiricist and somewhat falsely modest style, he disclaims any desire to "tackle this subject in an abstract and general manner, and with any philosophical ambition." Rather, he wishes only to approach the problem of meaning through "the narrow avenue of Ethnographic empiricism." And as Gellner makes very clear, the specific claims about meaning as use that Malinowski makes are not in any sense at all intended to refute the idea that language can be what he calls a "means of thinking," as well as a "mode of action."

So in the imaginary thought experiment with which we began, a transformation of sorts has occurred: what begins as an ethnographic case—actual, real, concrete, particular, and the basis for a set of equally concrete and specific claims—gets transformed in our imaginary Wittgenstein's reading into a thought experiment—Malinowski's real Trobriand conversation and the particular claims he makes about it become Wittgenstein's imagined "primitive tribe" and the very general claims he derives from them. The contents of the claims are more or less the same, but their scope and the manner of their derivation are very different.

To further complicate matters, of course, Wittgenstein will go on in his later work to tell us that the job of philosophy is to simply look and see at particular cases, just as Malinowski was doing in the Trobriands. His philosophical

writing will go from barely touching on cases or examples, to consisting of almost nothing but such cases or examples, although they will often, as here, be fictitious, sometimes fanciful and absurd, and he himself will be clear that he is uninterested in their actuality. As the epigraph above, written at the same time as Wittgenstein was developing his later views on language, makes clear, the idea of taking what anthropologists might assume to be particular and ethnographically specific claims and turning them into general ones—or, indeed, inventing imaginary tribes to exemplify them—was perfectly in keeping with Wittgenstein's approach to examples, ethnographic and otherwise, and the predominance of such cases and examples will go on to define the later philosophy that so much resembles Malinowski's appendix.

Finally, to take us back full circle to anthropology, it will be this later Wittgensteinian insistence on the importance of looking at and seeing the specificity of particular contexts that will form at least one of the major philosophical backbones of post-1960s anthropology, and today substantially inform the anthropological commonplace highlighted in the introduction to this special section, namely that philosophical thought experiments like the trolley problem fail precisely because of their thinness, their inability to capture the textures of the everyday, the specific, situated, and interactive nature of, for example, ethical considerations, in the case of the trolley problem.

So, we could see the thought experiment of this article as a story of misreadings. What begins, in Malinowski, as an ethnographic description from which to draw some specific and restricted conclusions, is misread by our imaginary Wittgenstein as itself a thought experiment from which to deduce decontextualized and general conclusions—some of which will then go on to serve as instruments to critique generalization and decontextualization themselves.

Despite Wittgenstein's own frequent use of entirely fictious and often absurd thought experiments, some of those unrestricted and general conclusions are then read by a later generation of anthropologists as a major justification of the ethnographic tradition, and as one source of the idea that thin and abstract thought experiments are an improper basis from which to understand social life.

While the ironies may be diverting, seeing the transformations in our thought experiment as misreadings would be to reinforce the notion of a hard boundary between the ethnographic case (stereotypically thick, rich, detailed, specific, concrete, and context-based) and the thought experiment (stereotypically—at least to anthropologists—thin, abstract, individualizing, decontextualized, and generalizable in its results) (cf. Candea 2018: 292–296).

However, the fact—or at least the imagined fact—of the transformations themselves suggests a far greater degree of permeability. If the schoolteacher of Puchberg became the philosopher of the fictious exemplar by reading an

ethnographic account about real people, and the empiricist of Krakow was also the inadvertent source of a philosophical tradition replete with imaginary tribes who look nothing like the Trobrianders or any other real people because resembling reality was not their purpose, then maybe the line between the ethnographic case, in all its particularity, and the thought experiment, and its abstract generality, is not so hard and fast after all.

We can already see this blurring in Wittgenstein, as his concern for the specificity of examples, even if not for their nature, is among a number of reasons why it is easy for him to become in many ways the philosopher *par excellence* of the ethnographic tradition; and in truth Malinowski is very obviously disingenuous in his empiricist modesty: he very clearly *does* intend that his "narrow Ethnographic empiricism" be seen to contribute to the wider questions raised in Ogden's and Richards's volume, and indeed he frames his material so as to make that contribution, not simply to convey some curious details about language in the Trobriands (cf. Strathern 1987). Wittgenstein's reading of Malinowski in our thought experiment as having himself written a thought experiment is a perfectly plausible one—as it would be of much anthropological writing—even if Malinowski's thought experiment actually took place in the wild.

If indeed this experimental genealogy has any relation to reality, then in some ways the distinction between ethnography and philosophical thought experiments has at least part of its origins precisely in its own blurring, in the transformation of one form to another.

We can see the same blurring in the various fractal acts of imagination asked of the reader in this article: there is Wittgenstein's claim in the epigraph that one could "invent primitive practices oneself" to illustrate a general rule; Malinowski's injunction that his reader "imagine yourself transported"; and the "what if" (Lillehammer, this issue) question I have posed about the latter's influence on the former. We may never know if that influence is (Malinowskian) fact or (Wittgensteinian) invention but asking which it is—and exactly what difference it makes—may temper our ways of thinking rigidly about the distinction between the abstracted and contextualized.

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Note

1. "The meaning of a word must always be gathered, not from a passive contemplation of this word, but from an analysis of its functions, with reference to the given culture" (Malinowski 1923: 309).

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