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Wittgenstein's Essentialism

ROGER POUIVET

Abstract Wittgenstein is often described as strongly anti-essentialist. The famous passage about "games" in his *Philosophical Investigations* is generally read as a declaration of war against essentialism. But when Wittgenstein says that "essence is expressed in grammar", how can we attribute to him the view that the notion of essence makes no sense? How could essence be simply a metaphysical toy, not to be taken seriously, if grammar - which is certainly taken very seriously in Wittgenstein's philosophy! - expresses it? I must recognize that a lot of good commentators understood this formula as a critic of the very notion of "essence". The formula is sometimes supposed to mean that essence is not at all what metaphysicians call "essence". But what do they are supposed to call "essence"? Against the received interpretation, I want first protest that the notions of definition and essence do not appear at all in the *Philosophical Investigations*' passage about games. One could answer that they are implicit. But not at all, I think. This passage is clearly about *explanation*. Wittgenstein does not ask "How to define a game?", or "Can we give the essence of games?". He is examining the question to know how can we explain to someone what is a game. He does not say that we cannot give a definition, but that a definition would not be of efficient use. We can give a lot of definitions of games and of numbers. Wittgenstein does not say that giving definitions is a stupid activity or that all definitions would inevitably be bad or crazy. Simply, most of definitions are not useful at all to explain to someone what a word means. So, in this famous passage that some Neo-Wittgensteinians interpreted as strongly anti-essentialist, Wittgenstein fights against the notion of "proper original signification", not especially against the notion of essence. And I think that it would be disputable to identify the two

or to authorize oneself from this passage to say that Wittgenstein rejects the true notion of essence. "Essence is expressed by grammar" perhaps means that meaning is not an ideal or mental object that speakers must have in mind when they speak about something, or that philosophers would be expert to discover. Meaning is related to use means that such an ideal or mental object is a myth. But I wonder why we had to consider that it says that the notion of "essence" is a myth. To be expressed by grammar is not exactly to be a myth that therapeutic philosophy would happily eradicate.

1. The falsehoods of idealism and the stupidities of empiricist realism

At the very beginning of his paper "The Problem with Wittgenstein"¹, Pascal Engel says:

No one can deny that there is a problem between Wittgenstein and analytic philosophers. To put it mildly, there are tensions between Wittgenstein's and Wittgensteinian styled reflections and the views and practice of a lot of contemporary analytic philosophers, such that they often seem to be strange bedfellows, when they are bedfellows at all.

I will comment on the tensions between the Wittgensteinian styled reflections and and practice of analytic philosophers. But I will try to show why on the dominant interpretation about him, according to which Wittgenstein would be anti-essentialist and he would give reason to be so as much as him, is disputable. Pascal Engel speaks about Wittgensteinians who do not hesitate, when they think it fit, to defend theses, and he distinguishes them from Wittgensteinian Quietists. Surely, what follows will situate me in the first group! And if I am right in what follows, if Wittgenstein could be an essentialist, he has only a very weak family resemblance with Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's essentialism? Is it a joke? He says: "essence is expressed by grammar". This formula is often quoted as if its sense is clear. It is in fact enigmatic. What does it exactly means? I think that its sense indicates a middle way between the falsehoods of idealism and the stupidities of empiricist realism. "It is enormously difficult to steer in the narrow channel here:

¹ P. Engel, "The Problem with Wittgenstein", *Rivista di Estica, Homaggio a Diego Marconi*, 2007.

to avoid the falsehood of idealism and the stupidities of empiricist realism"², says Elizabeth Anscombe. Let us try to find our way in between, if there is one. But Anscombe is right: on such topic, it is enormously difficult not to be wrong and not to be silly, and we are even in danger to be both. Wittgenstein tried hard to find the middle way, and this is why he interests me, and is not so closed to some received interpretation of his philosophy.

2. The received interpretation and its critic

I must recognize that a lot of good commentators understood the formula "essence is expressed by grammar" as a critic of the very notion of "essence". The formula is sometimes supposed to mean that essence is not at all what metaphysicians call "essence". But what do they are supposed to call "essence"? Locke said that essence in the "proper original signification" of the word, it is "the very being of any thing, whereby it is, what it is"³. In short, the essence of something, X, is what X is, or what it is to be X. In another locution, X's essence is the very *identity* of X.

So, by grasping the essence of something, you have at your disposal, necessary and sufficient conditions for X to be what it is. And Wittgenstein is supposed to have shown that in fact you have not such conditions. This is the received interpretation of the famous §66 in the *Philosophical Investigations*. And even if you never read this book, you know that empirical concepts has been showed by Wittgenstein to be predicate of family resemblance. Metaphysics is dead and Wittgenstein definitively buried the Aristotelian notions of concept and essence. For, we are perfectly able to use the word "game" even if we are unable to give necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a game. So, meaning of the word "game" is not related to essence, the very identity of game, but to uses of this word in different language games. We have no essence by similarities between many uses of the word "game".

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temper-

² G.E.M. Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism", From Parmenides to Wittgenstein, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, p. 115.

³ See J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, III, III, 15.

ament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: “games” form a family.”⁴

Well, if “games” form a family, the metaphysical notion of essence is supposed not practicable.

Against this received interpretation, I want first protest that the notions of definition and essence do not appear at all in this passage. One could answer that they are implicit. But not at all, I think. This passage is clearly about *explanation*. Wittgenstein does not ask “How to define a game?”, or “Can we give the essence of games?”. He is examining the question to know how can we explain to someone what is a game. He does not say that we cannot give a definition, but that a definition would not be of efficient use. We can give a lot of definitions of games and of numbers.⁵ Wittgenstein does not say that giving definitions is a stupid activity or that all definitions would inevitably be bad or crazy. Simply, most of definitions are not useful at all to explain to someone what a word means.

Wittgenstein rejects the idea that to be useful a concept must be determined by a system of rules, and that the understanding of a word (or a sentence) is based on or supposes to use defined rules. For, even if we have such rules, they could be interpreted in many ways. This is the Platonist illusion: believing that there is something behind our use of words, something that would justify philosophically our linguistic uses and practices. Meaning would be the rule of the right use. Not at all, says this famous passage on games in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. But it does not only challenge Platonist stance. Philosophers gave other status to this notion of meaning as a rule: the notion of idea in the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy played in part this role, and the notion of mental state in contemporary philosophy can play the same. It is the general philosophical tendency to identify meaning to an ideal or mental object, which could be grasp (especially by philosophers) and would serve to determine, as a sort of rule, what we are speaking about when we use a term. Geach called it the “Socratic fallacy”⁶.

So, in this famous passage that some Neo-Wittgensteinians interpreted as strongly anti-essentialist, Wittgenstein fights against the notion of “proper original signification”, not especially against the notion of essence. And I

⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 3rd ., 1967, I, 67.

⁵ For numbers, see *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 68.

⁶ P. Geach, “Plato’s *Euthyphro*”, *Logic Matters*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1972.

think that it would be disputable to identify the two or to authorize oneself from this passage to say that Wittgenstein rejects the true notion of essence. "Essence is expressed by grammar" perhaps means that meaning is not an ideal or mental object that speakers must have in mind when they speak about something, or that philosophers would be expert to discover. Meaning is related to use means that such an ideal or mental object is a myth. But I wonder why we had to consider that it says that the notion of "essence" is a myth. To be expressed by grammar is not exactly to be a myth that therapeutic philosophy would happily eradicate.

3. Some absurd questions

As Elizabeth Anscombe suggests, that the formula "essence is expressed by grammar" is related to the absurdity of certain sentences as "Where does this pencil uncle live?", "What is the shape of dust?", "What is a rainbow made of?", "How many legs has a tree?", "What does a chair feel?", "Do bacteria think?".⁷

In fact, she's in partly wrong. It would be possible to answer these questions. For example, "What is the shape of dust?" could be the beginning of a poem. Imagine this one:

"What is the shape of dust?

This is the way I feel my love

This is the way I need your glove

During the night, during the day,

Trembling, crying, I must."

I do not suggest that my first and only poem in English is aesthetically good, but that it would be possible to ask, poetically, this question "What is the shape of dust?", and even to give, poetically, an answer (what follows this question in my poem). There is a language game where a question like "What is the shape of dust?" is in use. "How many legs has a tree?" is also the kind of question you could ask to a child, and he could answer: "Well, poor tree,

⁷ Anscombe, "Human Essence", *Human Life, Action, and Ethics*, ed. by M. Geach & L. Gormally, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005.

it has no legs and so it cannot run", and even be sorrow for a moment about this tree.

But Elizabeth Anscombe is right for the essential. To say that "Essence is expressed by grammar" means: "Look at the way some questions would be considered as absurd, except in special circumstances, in poems, in conversations with kids. To grasp the essence of the thing one refers in this question is to realize that such questions make no sense. It is because you possess the essence of the thing one refers to, that the question appears crazy."

When you ask, for example, "Do bacteria think?", this is a sin against what Wittgenstein calls "grammar", but not if you ask "Do human beings think?". This last question makes sense. And to say that the first question is a sin against grammar and that the last question makes sense, that is not to make a remark inside the domain of biology, or in the domain of psychology. This observation is fully a grammatical one – it is about the grammar of the verb "to think". But *at the same time*, and without entering into the domains of biology and psychology, this remark says something about what bacteria *are* and what human beings *are*. Our human ability to grasp the essence of bacteria and the essence of human beings is nothing else and more than to have the disposition to consider that the question "Do bacteria think?" makes no sense, and that the question "Do human beings think?" makes sense. For example, you could say: "Well, of course, human beings think, for man is a rational animal". This answer would be a grammatical one, because finally it says that "Do X think?" makes no sense if X does not symbolize "human beings", "angels", "God", and also, at the limit and in certain circumstances when compared to lower animals, "dog", "rabbit". But definitively it makes no sense concerning "bacteria" or "woodlouse". By answering this way, you apply some rules belonging to what Wittgenstein calls "grammar", but you also indicate what are the essence of human beings and the essence of woodlice.

To grasp essences of things around us is not a specific philosophical activity. Even a child grasps the essence of human beings and woodlice by remarking that "Do human beings think?" makes sense and "Do woodlice think?" makes not. And a child does it even if he cannot use correctly the word "essence" in its metaphysical sense.

Sometimes, and perhaps often, men are highly irrational; some men do not develop the capacity to use spoken language; human babies are unable to reason; passionate lovers seem crazy. But it does not change anything to the fact that "Do woodlice think?" makes not sense and "Do human beings think?" makes one. And nobody would say that her baby is for the moment a woodlouse or close to it, because she does not think. Nobody would say that

these lovers are closed to woodlice because they seem not to think at all about the present and the future. Even if a baby does not speak and is clearly unable to have a rational behaviour, even if your good friend Jack, terribly in love, makes incredibly stupid things, the baby is already a human being and Jack still one. Why? For they have an essence or a nature. And everybody knows this, not only metaphysicians. Metaphysicians are only those who remark that we are able to grasp essences, or contest that we do it or can do it.

4. Linguistic idealism, dolphins and pain

Here, someone can object that it is a little bit strange to embark Wittgenstein in the defense of an apparently naive or commonsensical notion of reality and essence. What I mean by "naive or commonsensical realism" is the thesis that there is some differentiation in the world before we came to experience it. A lot of modern philosophers, following Hume and Kant, and developing sometimes strongly anti-realist accounts about reality and language, characterizes themselves by the thesis that there is no differentiation independently of the way we experience it. I would like to suggest that if they insist so strongly on the notion of "experience", the first and final word for a lot of modern philosophers, it is because they think that everything is inside this experience. And some of them think that this experience is itself mainly language-laden. For example, Hilary Putnam says:

We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a "conceptual scheme". To talk of "facts" without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word "fact" no more has its use fixed by the world itself than does the word "exist" or the word "object".⁸

Very often today, philosophers who think this way authorize themselves from Wittgenstein, to say that everything is inside language. So "Essence is expressed by grammar" would mean the linguistic nature of essence. Reality

⁸ H. Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988, p. 114. Note that the proliferation of "... " is a good indication that you are in the realm of antirealism. To speak about truth is metaphysical naivety; to speak about "truth" is anti-realistic or even deconstructionist enlightenment.

would not exist as a “thing in itself”, independently of our linguistic activity. Reality and essence is only mirroring the way our language represents it.

But Wittgenstein’s formula is not necessarily linguistic idealism, even at its best, and even if it resembles a lot to it. At least, I think it is possible to give a sense to Wittgenstein’s formula without embracing linguistic idealism or a conception dangerously close to it.

But could we reintroduce the notion of “essence” and of “nature of things” without losing the therapeutic effect of Wittgenstein’s philosophy? If grammar is a way to metaphysical knowledge, what difference there is between, from one side, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and from another supposed very different side, Wittgenstein? Well, perhaps not a lot, and this is a conviction I have since some years that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is inside a Thomistic tradition in philosophy.⁹ To say “essence is expressed by grammar” is not at all for me a way out of this tradition.

I go back to the idea that “Do human beings think?” makes sense, and “Do woodlice think?” makes no sense. Let us examine the difference as a grammatical one. We will discover that it has also, at the same time, a metaphysical one. For this, let us introduce dolphins and ask “Do dolphins think?” Not to answer these questions as a zoologist would do, but simply to ask what it metaphysically means that the first question makes sense and not the second.

Let us first read this passage by Alasdair McIntyre:

Although our differences from all other species are certainly of crucial importance, it is also important that both initially in our earliest childhood activities and to some significant extent thereafter we comport ourselves towards the world in much the same way as other intelligent animals. In transcending some of their limitations we never separate ourselves entirely from what we share with them. Indeed our ability to transcend those limitations depends in part upon certain of those animal characteristics, among them the nature of our identity.¹⁰

The way we speak about some animals, saying that they think, makes sense. But it does not mean that we have the same nature. Our way of speaking and especially asking about things register fine-grained ontological differences: it makes sense to say that human beings think, and to be shocked if someone

⁹ See my *After Wittgenstein, saint Thomas*, South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 2007.

¹⁰ A. McIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago: Open Court, 199, p. 8.

says that dolphins do not think for they are only animals, and also to consider that "Do woodlice think?" makes no sense. In the great chain of beings, dolphins and human beings, even if they do not have the same nature, are closer than woodlice and human beings. Conversely, what makes so disgusting – I do not find another word to characterize it – Descartes' insistence that non-human animals not only lacks thoughts and intelligence, but also genuine perceptions and feelings? Simply that, if someone beat a dog in front of you, it would be difficult to maintain that the question "Do animals suffer?" makes no sense, or that true philosophy (as Malebranche suggested) would permit us to correct this false impression that such a question makes sense.

"Essence is expressed by grammar" does not mean that essence is *created* by grammar. Wittgenstein's formula, even if it is enigmatic, is quite far from the cosmic-porridge view. According to it, there would be an indeterminate stuff, the cosmic porridge itself, and our concepts and our words would cut into it *at libitum*. Putnam – or a Putnam-temporal-slice – for example endorsed this kind of view: "We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description"¹¹. Goodman would say that the notion of this cosmic porridge makes no sense, for we cut and re-cut not the same stuff, but inside already artificial schemes, re-schematizing them. Both Putnam and Goodman are agree that realism, for which there is some essential differentiation in the world before we came to experience it, is metaphysical bull-shit. Well, but if essence is expressed by grammar, it is likely there before we speak about it. And when we speak we are not simply cutting into the cosmic-porridge or into previous schematization. By refusing sense to "Do woodlice think?", we indicate a metaphysical sensibility, by making sense both to "Do dolphins think?" and "Do human beings think?" too, even if it does not mean of course that dolphins and human beings share some nature. But there are closer than human beings and woodlice, and the question of the dolphins' thought makes sense, when the question of the thought of woodlice makes not.

"If we assent to 'Essence is expressed by grammar', we may very likely say 'The words for what I am talking about *have to have* this grammar'"¹², says Elizabeth Anscombe. One Wittgensteinian example of this account would be that the language for talking about sensation *must have* first-third person asymmetry. This is a feature of our language. But it also means something about the *nature* of those beings that have sensations, especially human be-

¹¹ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 52.

¹² "The Question of Linguistic Idealism, p. 112, my italics.

ings. This is the same reasoning than for question like “Do human beings?” and “Do dolphins thin?”, “Do woodlice think?”. Inside grammar, we speak about the nature of things, not only about words and the way we use them. Attention for uses and for practices does not mean that reality is evanescent and that things have no natures or essences.

Wittgenstein rejects “Platonism” if it consists in saying that the grammar of our language must correspond to an independent reality. No doubt, he rejects the mirror account of language. But we, and Wittgenstein like us, want to be assured that what we say to be actually exists and is not mere projection of the way we are speaking. If I say that human beings are rational animals, I do say that if a human being does not speak or is irrational, however he is a rational animal. For rationality is his essence. This is expressed in language and it concerns the way we are using some words. But even if to have the concept of “human being” consists for example in applying rightly “human beings” even to irrational persons, without be impressed by the irrational behaviour, it does not mean that the case for the nature of human beings is a product of that grammar.

“You learned the *concept* pain when you learned language”¹³ says Wittgenstein. Does it mean that pain is a product of a word? No, it means that it is not experiencing pain that gives you the meaning of the word “pain”. For the word applies to that experience, but also to another one, yours and another one experience. And so, the term cannot find its meaning in a private experience.

Essence of pain is expressed by grammar. But it does not mean that the notion of essence of pain makes not sense. It means that it is not something that we could grasp without mastering language and the right use of “pain”.

5. On riding a horse

Elziabeth Anscombe says also:

If there never had been human beings around talking about horses, that is not the slightest reason to say there wouldn't have been horses. These essences, then, which are expressed by grammar, are not created by grammar. It must be misunderstanding of ‘essence’ to think otherwise: to think, for example, that though there doubt-

¹³ *Philosophical Investigations*, I, 384.

less would have been horses, the essence expressed by "horse" would not have existed but for human and thought.¹⁴

Could we be in the situation where according some "general facts of nature", human beings did not have the concept "horse", but they were horses around them.¹⁵ Wittgenstein seems to say that these human beings devoid of the concept "horse" would not *miss* something that we, with this concept, realize. We are tempted to interpret this affirmation in an anti-realistic sense. "Horse" would be a concept of our own, without correspondence with anything that exists independently of the projection of this concept on reality. But Wittgenstein could mean something very different. These human beings without the concept "horse" could not miss anything if they had *another way*, in their own language, to speak about horses. For example, as Anscombe suggests, they could have a verb meaning horse-presence, but without the concept "horse". So, not to miss something when you have not the concept "horse", does not mean at all that horses have no essence. It is possible not to miss something when you have not the concept "horse" and that there is some differentiation in the world before we came to experience it. To pass from Wittgenstein's motto, "essence is expressed by grammar", to anti-essentialism, seems clearly now, I hope so, to be *anti-realist wishful thinking*. Such an interpretation embarks Wittgenstein in an anti-metaphysical fight he seems not to have been at all a strong partisan. He is simply disguised in a Post-modern philosopher he was not.

Let us suppose that someone says: "Do you see this horse?" Wittgenstein suggests that the intelligibility of such a question is not related to the existence of an ideal entity that would give a meaning to the word or to the concept "horse", and it is no related to an image or a representation in the mind. He rejects the kind of theory of meaning that flourishes during the Seventeenth Century, when the notion of "idea" begun to be central (Descartes, Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley, Hume). I think that Wittgenstein is philosophically impressive for the way he has been able to criticize this very strong paradigm in philosophy which still influences a lot of current philosophy (and peculiarly cognitive sciences).

I think that we can understand Wittgenstein's account another way. When one explains Wittgenstein, it is very difficult not to simply quote or paraphrase Wittgenstein, two operations which explain generally nothing... So I prefer to reconstruct what I take to be a Wittgensteinian account of the meaning of

¹⁴ "The Question of Linguistic Idealism", p. 114.

¹⁵ See *Philosophical Investigations*, II, xii.

a word, and to show why the notion of “Wittgenstein’s essentialism” is not completely absurd, even if it is not orthodox.

- By saying “horse”, I do not refer to anything else than this thing in front of me I ask someone if he sees it. I am not asking him about an idea, a mental reality, an intentional object, a noem, or I don’t know what (the kind of “objects” philosophers like, but which you are unable to find out of the philosophical class), but about *this*.
- By saying “horse”, I do not say “Black Jack”. I do not indicate the *name* of this horse, but *this*. And by doing it, I indicate what it is, its *essence*, shared by all horses, and among them this one.
- It is by the grammar expressing the essence that the word I am using expressed a kind of animal, and that I mean exactly what I mean by asking the question.
- By asking “Do you see this horse?”, I do not speak about the essence, and I do not mean it.
- The essence is *through what* I understand, think, mean, something, here a horse am I asking someone if he sees it.
- I master the use of the word “horse”. It shows that *I know what is a horse*. (This could be a mule, not a horse. What shows that I know what a horse is, is that I could say to the person who asks me “Do you see this horse?” – “This is not a horse, it is a mule!” It would be silly to say that I have simply show that I am mastering two words “horse” and “mule”, and not that I know what is a horse and what is a mule, even that I know t better than my interlocutor.)
- If my interlocutor answers me “Well, yes. And have you seen this other one?”, the essence (of a kind of things) is present in our conversation. (It would also be the case if I answer: “This one is not a horse, my dear, but a mule”. To know an essence, it is to be able to do such distinctions.)
- If I say “The farmer made this horse during the night”, my interlocutor could look at me by wondering what I mean. Surely, the question would be to know if I am truly mastering the word “horse” use. But there is also a problem concerning if I know what is a “horse”, if I possess the essence of “cabality”.

- Finally, it can be useful to quote Elizabeth Anscombe:

If, then, seeing a donkey, he supposes it too is a horse, he might say "But isn't it the same as you pointed to before?" showing that the identity in question is identity of kind. 'Pointing twice the same' is an expression that does not yet determine what counts as that: the question has only a determinate answer when we know what identity, what method of counting, is relevant. A horse has been counted and another horse comes along; if the procedure is to say 'we've counted that one', but to assign a *new* number to, say, a giraffe (a giraffe not having been counted before) – then it appears that one is counting kinds. But what one is counting is in any case out there before one, and not in either case a 'creature of mind'.¹⁶

To know the essence of something is closely related to the ability to count things, for example kinds of animals in a zoo. (It is clear for me that the visit to the zoo with children is a metaphysical moment: "What exists in the Creation?" – "It exists this, and this, and this, and that...")

To say that essence is expressed by grammar means: to count kinds is different from counting individuals. For example, there could be here many horses, but it means that by saying "This is an horse, and this is an other one, and still an other one", I indicate that these things are the same. My mastering of the word "horse" in this case, means something about the kind of generic identity these things have, and so the kind of things they are. To do this is grasping the essence of horse. By grasping this essence, I am not accessing to Platonic Forms that make all the horse-copies of Horse (or cabality), or a general idea of cabality. I am simply able to characterize something as an horse, it means the same than other things which are horses.

That the meaning of expressions depends upon linguistic practice (that includes a lot of non linguistic elements, for example certain moves, like to look in some direction when you are asked "Do you see this horse?"), this does not mean that human ability to recognize things for what they are makes no sense. And so essence can be expressed by grammar without losing its metaphysical value to be through what we grasp things as they are. Essence is not an ethereal thing, ideal, mental, out of language. It is related to our linguistic use, but this one is not purely verbal. There is a way in between the stupidities of realism and the falsehoods of idealism. I am not sure that it is so narrow as it seems.

¹⁶ "The Question of Linguistic Idealism", p. 116.

6. From Wittgenstein to Aristotle

If the formula “essence is expressed by grammar” can be understood the way I propose, it seems to me that the meaning of this phrase is not so far from what Aristotle says in the well-known chapter 2 of the *Categories*. This is the passage:

Of things themselves some are predicable of a subject, and are never present in a subject. Thus “man” is predicable of the individual man, and is never present in a subject. By being “present in a subject”, I do not mean present as parts are present in a whole, but being incapable of existence apart from the said subject. Some things, again, are present in a subject, but are never predicable of a subject. For instance, a certain point of grammatical knowledge is present in the mind, but is not predicable of any subject; or again, a certain whiteness may be present in the body (for color requires a material basis), yet it is never predicable of anything. Other things, again, are both predicable of a subject and present in a subject. Thus while knowledge is present in the human mind, it is predicable of grammar. There is, lastly, a class of things which are neither present in a subject nor predicable of a subject, such as the individual man or the individual horse. But, to speak more generally, that which is individual and has the character of a unit is never predicable of a subject. Yet in some cases there is nothing to prevent such being present in a subject. Thus a certain point of grammatical knowledge is present in a subject.

This is surely among the most commented passage in all the history of philosophy. (I let aside the question to know if this passage represents a first account in Aristotle’s philosophical development, superseded by his doctrine in *Metaphysics*.) It celebrates the wedding of metaphysics with the doctrine of predication. The very notion of “theory of predication” seems at odd with the idea of language games. Is it not a theoretical study of language cut from our uses and practices, exactly what Wittgenstein presented as a fundamental philosophical error? But in other sense, what is a theory of predication except what Wittgenstein calls “grammar”? If we examine the chapter 2 of *Categories*, is it so far from a reflection on language games? Some of you will answer: “Oh, yes, very far. It does not represent at all what are linguistic practices! It is metaphysics, exactly what Wittgenstein rejects!” But others may be tempted to recognize that Aristotle is simply trying to examine *what we say*

about things; for him, this is a way to determine what really exists. His method is to follow what we say to be or not to be predicable of a subject and to be present or not in a subject. I am not a scholar in ancient philosophy. I don't know if Aristotle's text is very corrupted or not. But I would bet that a phrase have been lost in this passage. The beginning surely was what Aristotle said at his students: "Look and see what we say about things! For if you look at them you will see that we speak about substances and say that they have ways of beings, and other properties, like to be colored, to be in certain places, to endure, and so on! Don't turn yourself to Forms, which are supposed to be supreme realities imitated by empirical things and by meanings of the words we use to represent them in language. Don't speak about participation of empirical and relative things to transcendent absolute one. Don't use a dubious metaphor. Don't try to determine this way what particular things have in common. Examine simply how we speak about things."

Aristotle proposes a kind of immediate and commonsensical ontology that appears when we examine our way to speak about things. I agree, this is not Wittgenstein's way to speak. He is ontologically abstinent. When you wrote *the Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, metaphysically you are like a repented alcoholic. You promise not to drink even a drop of metaphysical alcohol. But if you have always be able to drink, without becoming addicted, a glass of good wine – I mean of good metaphysics –, you have no reason to go to the Alcoholics Anonymous or to be metaphysical abstinent. If you have never to rely too heavily on metaphysics, pretending that you can discover supreme realities or ideal meanings, if you simply say that by saying there is a class of things which are neither present in a subject nor predicable of (say of) a subject, such as the individual man or the individual horse, you have really no reason to be abstinent. So I propose a non-abstinent interpretation of Wittgenstein's formula "essence is expressed by grammar". Grammar tells us what there is, and essence of things.

Interpretations of this passage in *Categories* go from one extreme to another. At one, we find the great German scholar Friedrich Tredelenburg (and the French linguist Émile Benvéniste). Thought cannot be separated from language. Categories, and among them the category of substance who indicate what something is, gives the thing nature, are simply grammatical characterizations. Call it the linguistic interpretation. It says that predication, and so grammar, constitutes categories, and so essences. Another great German scholar, Hermann Bonitz, situated himself at the other extreme (and he was followed by Brentano at the beginning of his career). Aristotelian categories are the genres of being, the many meanings of being. Categories, and so

essences, are foundations of predications. A non-abstinent Wittgensteinian interpretation of Aristotle would say that truth about this passage is in between the falsehood of idealism (Tredelenburg?) and the stupidities of empiricist realism (Bonitz?). You cannot go directly to essences without examining grammar (predication), but grammar (predication) is not the last word. World is the last word, it means what exists and what are things that exist, their essences, their identities.

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It could be objected that Wittgenstein is not so interesting if he simply says the same than Aristotle. But you remember what Peter Strawson says in the preface of *Individuals*:

If there are no new truths to be discovered, there are old truths to be rediscovered. For though the central subject-matter of descriptive metaphysics does not change, the critical and analytical idiom of philosophy changes constantly. Permanent relationships are described in an impermanent idiom, which reflects both the age's climate of thought and the individual philosopher's personal style of thinking.¹⁷

Wittgenstein reflected the age's climate of thought, and he has unquestionably a personal style of thinking. He rediscovered, sometimes chaotically and in his own style, old truths. The equilibrium he tries to find between linguistic idealism and naïve realism is, I think, the same than the one proposed by Aristotle in *Categories*, chapter 2. If everything does not depend to our linguistic scheme, it does not mean that we are committed to the contrary proposition that nothing depends on it. So it is both possible to insist on language games and practices, and to say that things have essences. It means that one can say: "essence is expressed by grammar".

¹⁷ P. Strawson, London: Methuen, 1959, p. 10-11.