

Sample Microcommentary

Make sure to say what passage you're commenting on, and check that your own name is on your submitted assignment:

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., §2 (“That philosophical concept of meaning...”):

The first option you have is to explain the passage:

Wittgenstein is suggesting a *reductio* of the conception of meaning in the earlier quotation from Augustine, on which the core of understanding a language is knowing which words refer to what objects. (‘Suggesting,’ because he doesn’t fully spell it out, but rather leaves it as an exercise to the reader.) We are supposed to imagine a tribe of people for whom this is *all* the language they have, and Wittgenstein expects us to see that they can’t be living human lives. (The ‘builders’ seem mechanical or robotic.) *We* do live human lives; so the referential model can’t be capturing how *our* languages work.

The second option you have is to explain why you don't understand the passage:

The point of the description of the ‘builders’ is announced to be that their language—which conforms to the Augustinian model that Wittgenstein introduced in the previous section, according to which words are understood as referring expressions—is “more primitive than ours”. But the builders look “more primitive” in the first place because their vocabulary is so small (four words!), not because of how their language *works*. It’s hard to believe that Wittgenstein would have made such a simple mistake, so I feel that I must not be understanding his argument.

Notice, first, that in a good microcommentary you try to explain, in your own words, what's going on in the passage. Don't simply repeat, with some rearranging, the author's own phrasing. If you don't understand what's going on, you have to explain why not, in a way that makes clear where your (good faith) effort broke down. Notice also that making sense of the passage (or even failing to make sense of it) requires reading it in context: both sample microcommentaries are aware of the surrounding text, and use it to try to figure out the paragraph that's being explained.

Happy microcommenting!