
The Mechanism of Meaning: A Pedagogical Sketchbook.

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Improbably enough, the *The Mechanism of Meaning* was first published unfinished, and in German. *Mechanismus der Bedeutung* appeared in 1971 with the parenthetical warning “(work in progress: 1963-1971)”. When it was published in a second edition, in 1979, it was still a work in progress, but in 1988, when it landed between the hard covers of its pinker third incarnation, it had lost its parenthetical warning. What’s going on? Have these two, who have decided not to die, permitted their work in progress to die? It can’t be. The preface to the 1979 edition had already announced that “death is old-fashioned,” and encouraged its readers to construct “other escape-routes” (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 9). [1] Now looking back, it is clear that those other escape-routes include the architectural surrounds diagrammed and built by Arakawa and Gins. *The Mechanism of Meaning* is no longer a work in progress, but not because it has died, it continues otherwise, like everything else. Nothing dies. Becoming new is continuing otherwise.

Just before the *Mechanism of Meaning* appeared for the third time, Arakawa and Gins published a bilingual ode to Blank called *To Not to Die*. So it comes as no surprise that the additional pink pages added to the third *Mechanism of Meaning* invoke Blank as one of three themes woven together in *To Not to Die*: “the fiction of place, blank or forming blank, and space or forming spacetime” (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 103). They elaborate:

For the whole picture, to delineate the critical circumstances once and for all, the non-differentiated, unselected accompaniment must be left unmarked, not distorted into anything other than it is, left blank, that is. ... Part of all doing is blank, and so too all using, No meaning without blank. (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 102-3)

It sounds decisive, and coming at the end of a book called *The Mechanism of Meaning*, it must be important: No meaning without blank. But what is blank? In the middle of the last quotation, safe between square brackets, our authors have left us a few clues:

[Others refer to this unmarked area or event, or the group of these, as gap, "that about which we must remain silent," petites perceptions, "difference," background.] (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 103)

Where do these clues lead us? It's a kind of philosophical game show, what texts are these clues invoking? And how shall we follow? Let's begin by taking them in the order they appear.

The gap is Lyotard's differend, the gap that each phrase spans with what Lyotard calls a link. Here is how Lyotard describes his 1983 book:

[*The Differend*] tries to give an ontological and linguistic (or, better yet, "sentential," "phrastic") status to what ARAKAWA [and Madeline Gins] call "the blank".... It's the emptiness, the nothingness in which the universe presented by a phrase is exposed and which explodes at the moment the phrase occurs and then disappears with it. (Lyotard 1988: 31-32)

In an article on Arakawa and Gins, from the same period, Lyotard recited the master argument of *The Differend*, "you admit the **necessity** of linking, but you [also] grasp the **contingency** of the mode of linking. You have access to blank...Blank is what permits these intermittences of non-sense in which meaning is decided by forgetting non-sense" (Lyotard 1984: 13, my emphases).

We link phrase to phrase, making meanings, closing our eyes to non-sense. Instead of catching it and walking off the court, we return the tennis ball, playing tennis. The mode of linking is always contingent, only there always remains the blank necessity of linking.

The next clue, "That about which we must remain silent," was the mystical heart of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the condition of meaning, the unutterable ground of making sense. The parting shot of that book as a whole: "whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1961: 7). *To Not To Die* had already cited the *Tractatus*' pronouncement "the sense of the world must lie outside the world." (Wittgenstein 1921: 6.41 in Arakawa and Gins 1987: 32) Like blank it is a condition of meaning anything at all, but it is outside the world and that sounds more like the traditional mode of escaping from death by escaping from life. But does the thought of escaping from life have even the aroma of attraction. Gins and Arakawa have always drawn us the other way, not **away from** life but **plunging into** life.

And sure enough, five years later, in *Architectural Body* this Wittgensteinian phrase about the sense of the world lying outside the world, is corrected. There, under the heading of "we know not what upon which the lived-world is contingent" (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xii-xiii), blank is said to lie **not** "beyond or beneath the world" but to be a "complexity of within", a complexity of the contingent (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xiii). The contingent was never enough for lovers of necessity like the author of the *Tractatus*, but for Arakawa and Gins, it is a gift. The contingent is a gift twice over, first because it comes on its own, it is a gift, and second it can be "handled, and reconsidered, and reworked," which is the gift of hope (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xiii). This turn to the contingent, away from the mystical necessity of the *Tractatus*, will tempt some to describe the prize, reversing destiny, in terms derived from Wittgenstein's mature masterpiece, the *Philosophical Investigations*, but that would be a dreadful mistake, and showing why we should refuse that temptation is half of the point of my remarks today.

The third clue, ensconced in those same square brackets, is a pair French words: “*petites perceptions*.” Leibniz thought that every soul, or we could say every stream of cleaving (Gins 1994: 279), perceives the entire universe from its singular point of view. It doesn’t seem that way, because so many of our perceptions are *petites*, that is, too tiny to be noticed, or too familiar, too habitual to rise to the level of awareness. Leibniz’ famous example involves the sound of waves. Here he is:

To give a clearer idea of these minute perceptions which we are unable to pick out from the crowd, I like to use the example of the roaring noise of the sea which impresses itself on us when we are standing on the shore. To hear the noise as we do, we must hear the parts which make up this whole, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave which made it were by itself. (Leibniz 2000: 54)

Leibniz continues:

These minute perceptions, then, are more effective in their results than has been recognized. They constitute that *je ne sais quoi*, those flavors, those images of sensible qualities vivid in the aggregate but confused in parts. (Leibniz 2000: 55)

If there is no meaning without Blank, then there is no meaning without the roaring noise of the universe echoing in our experience unawares. It is almost as if each organism that persons, each stream of cleaving, was, already, but unbeknownst, a **ubiquitous site**.

That’s more than enough. There’s no need to chafe at the other clues, difference whether Saussurean or Derridean will not help with reversing destiny, those two are stuck at the level of the signifier, they will never “break through to the we know not” (Gins and Arakawa 2002: xii), nor will there be any help from Heidegger’s or Dreyfus’ or Searle’s background, anchored as that concept is in practical activity. Those little perceptions, experienced unawares, are the answer, there is no meaning without those **ubiquitous tiny perceptions**.

The **pedagogical** work of the *Mechanism of Meaning* is to bring this ubiquity to our bodies, a sensual semantics. But let's wander back to the mechanism of meaning from the land of landing sites, and the task of generating a site of reversible destiny. Wandering that path will protect us from the wiles of Wittgenstein.

One of the reasons the concept of a **landing site** is so powerful is that it is tactile. When you take the rattling chestnut out of the little box [masu], your fingers land on the chestnut, your fingers awake to the smooth brown of its sliding surface, and landing on the chestnut, your fingers, too, awake. Serres would say that a mobile cogito had taken up residence in my fingers, but cogito or not, my fingers awaken (Serres 2008: 56). And its not just tactility, the rattling wooden sound of the chestnut draws my hearing into the box, waking there, together. If the sound were louder, the sounding chestnut and my hearing would wake up nearer my ear, on the side of my face. Up close, the darkening discolouring chestnut draws me in.

Sometimes Gins and Arakawa build their notion of a landing site, from what they call an "**ordinary room**" (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 32, emphasis in original). But be careful with that ordinary, don't think about Wittgenstein and long for return to the ordinary, accepting fate. Don't. It is not about accepting fate, destiny is reversed the other way 'round, away from the ordinary into the roaring sea.

Habituated to the ordinary room, familiarized, we don't notice the ubiquitous petites landing sites, we notice only a few clumsy landing sites, a couch here, a table there, landing sites which, in the first instance, guide our movements. And since they guide our movements, we are told to think of the landing sites as guiding or engaging bars (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 34). In the background, even in the Heideggerian sense, the plan of the room is silently there, habitually there, guiding us through the landing sites we happen to notice. This background of possible but non-actual perceptual landing sites is made of imaging landing sites.

Quietly they **pre-schematize the schematization** of object provided by the guard rails (see “schematize” in Arakawa and Gins 1994: 34).

This is old terrain for our wanderers. Diagrams have been important to their work ever since Arakawa found those old blueprints behind New York City Hall (Gins 1994: 30). And there is an enormous number of diagrammatic paintings from the mid-60’s, including even a few that diagram rooms (like *Name’s Birthday (a couple)* from 1967 (Arakawa 1991: 122). Before the flowering of their architectural interest, it might have been unclear what trajectory these diagrammatic paintings were on, now it is clear.

To generate a site of reversible destiny one must increase the number of landing sites, without limit. One must **de-schematize the schemata**, undiagram the diagram. Arakawa and Gins describe a computer drawing of this generation this way:

Wherever a guiding or engaging bar has been placed, a perceptual landing site may occur. To effect an increase in the number of possible perceptual landing sites, labyrinth layers made of guiding or engaging bars will be mounted one above another at intervals of one foot....Here then are the beginnings of a tentative constructed plan for a site of reversible destiny. (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 35)

The connection to Leibniz is now plain. **Breaking the habitual**, the familiar, is a way to bring awareness of more and more landing sites, until, all the ubiquitous tiny landing sites lead us away from our regimented identities, dead to the world, until the ubiquitous tiny perceptions draw us into life. By now Madeline and Arakawa have imagined architectural procedures aplenty for doing this, but in 1994, the list began with two, they are introduced in this striking paragraph, which I will interrupt, just to keep us off balance.

A person meets surroundings, the sum of what is concurrently perceptually available, armed with a socio-cultural matrix of the familiar, derived from all prior meetings with surroundings. (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 8)

Ordinary landing sites are the landing sites that we have become accustomed to in our practical life with things. We notice what is mostly relevant, image unaware what is mostly reliable, and ignore vast swaths of our perceptual worlds. If we could get all of this together we'd have made a ubiquitous site. They put it this way:

Having the site of a person be inclusive not only of all that constitutes the locating and the articulating of a person at rest or on the move, but also the entire shift and drift of surrounding phenomena, makes of it a ubiquitous site (within a locally circumscribed area). (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 8)

The familiar site of the ordinary is a cutting from this site of ubiquitous tiny perceptions. Continuing on: These two,

The socio-historical matrix of the familiar and the ubiquitous site are congruent. Every person proceeds by continually turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, that is, by forever bringing surroundings into a socio-historical context or matrix of the familiar. (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 8)

We will remain trapped in our identities, our life plans, so long as we do not break these habits, so long as we do not force ourselves onto our stomachs, feeling the smell of the carpet up our noses. But how? The first two architectural procedures show us how:

Two methods of subverting this habitual and deadening process are: [first] to cause an overload of the familiar by putting surroundings forward in a manner so **concentrated** that they wax unfamiliar; and [second] to have the body be so greatly and persistently thrown **off balance** that the majority of its efforts have to go entirely towards the righting of itself, leaving no energy for routine assembling of the socio-historical matrix of the familiar or, for that matter, for "the being of a person" (Arakawa and Gins 1994: 8, my emphases).

And just what such a site turns from, the rough ground of our perceptual and linguistic practices, is what the mature Wittgenstein yearns for.

It is easy to see why Wittgenstein's *Investigations* was felt to be a model for *The Mechanism of Meaning*. Neither *Mechanism* nor Wittgenstein's book offer theories of anything. The *Investigations* gives commands and orders. Imagine this. Do that. Don't think, look. He asks crazy questions like "Can I say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go out for a walk.'" (Wittgenstein 1976: 18) And the panels of the *Mechanism* make the same kinds of demands on us. Smell this. (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 35) Say one think two (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 43). Decide which three are extra (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 76). Please think only of the dot not of the x's (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 10). It is true that there are many more funny things, jokes, in *Mechanism* than there are in the *Investigations*, but it is also true that, in conversation, Wittgenstein told Norman Malcolm that he could imagine a book on philosophy consisting of nothing but jokes (Malcolm 1962: 28). And he tells us that the depth of philosophy is the same as the depth of what he calls a grammatical joke (Wittgenstein 1976: §111). But there is a world of difference between the enjoyments of *Mechanism* and the intense struggles of the *Investigations*.

Wittgenstein gives, as an example of a grammatical joke, Lewis Carroll's: "we called him tortoise because he taught us" (Baker and Hacker 1980: 522-3). The depth of a grammatical joke, Wittgenstein tells us, is **lost** if we take them to be about the arbitrariness of language (Baker and Hacker 1980: 523). He suggests rather that what is deep about grammatical jokes is that they reveal the "limits of language" (Wittgenstein 1979: 68). In a conversation about Heidegger, he is reported to have said:

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is bound to be nonsense [Unsinn]. Nevertheless we run up against the limits of language (Wittgenstein 1929-31: 68).

The limits of language are not revealed by the mere fact that, as Saussure would say, signs are arbitrary. They are revealed when we discover that there are some things we can't think. The articulated structure of our thinking, the articulated

division between the contingent and the necessary, is neither simply necessary nor contingent but rather our **fate, our irreversible destiny**. This comes out in such a remark as: "If someone says 'If our language had not this grammar, it could not express these facts,' it should be asked what 'could' means here" (Wittgenstein 1976: 497). And we are meant to feel that where "could" takes its force from grammar, it is nonsense to think of the there being possibilities from which this grammar excludes us. "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either" (Wittgenstein 1961: 5.61).

On this account what makes for the comedy of grammatical jokes is roughly what makes for a certain kind of laughter in Kant. Kant writes:

Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd...Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing [nichts]. (Kant 1987: §54)

This is as far as possible from the comedy of *Mechanism* which confronts us not with nothingness but with exuberance. Wittgenstein thinks that a philosophical book could consist entirely of jokes, because he thinks jokes mark the limits of language, the autonomy of grammar, the other side of which is simply gibberish. The laughter induced by the panels of *mechanism* reveal so much more than nothing: they reveal the energetic life of ubiquitous meaning. For Arakawa and Gins, there is, we could say, no gibberish, at all.

The issue between these two books is confused because there is a sense in which both Wittgenstein and Gins and Arakawa share the same enemy. In his 1884 book on the *Foundations of Arithmetic* Frege asked the simple question "what is the number one?" Later, in the 1930's, Wittgenstein told his students that questions like Frege's

...produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something. (Wittgenstein 1958: 1)

We don't know what to do. Frege tells us that of course we each associate an overlapping but idiosyncratic cloud of thoughts and ideas with the word "one",

but that, in that case, we would never really understand each other. Frege puts it this way:

...if everyone was allowed to understand by this name whatever he liked, then the same proposition about the number one would mean different things to different people; such propositions would have no common content. (Frege 1997: 84)

This sentence embodies the original sin of analytic philosophy of language: from the fact that we seem to understand each other, it concludes that there is some identical content common to you and to me. Of course there is no such common content in the psychological world nor in the material world, so Frege turns to metaphysics: inventing a third realm, a platonic realm for meanings to inhabit.

The denial of that third realm is what the mature Wittgenstein and Arakawa and Gins share, but it stops there. What divides Wittgenstein from Gins and Arakawa is that Wittgenstein still thinks that when we understand each other there is something common that we both share. It is not psychological experience, nor is it Frege's third realm of Platonic meanings, but he still refuses to give up the idea of common content, it is just that what is common is now the grammar of our life with language. [2]

Gins and Arakawa, on the other hand, want us to face the fact that we can order pizza without sharing something in common. To face the fact that understanding one another doesn't require having something in common. Wittgenstein knows that we can use the word "game" while there is nothing in common to all games, but doesn't realize that two people can communicate more or less successfully without there being something – psychological or platonical or grammatical – that they both possess. Giving up the last vestige of common content is the royal road back from anti-psychologism to sensual semantics.

But Wittgenstein holds back. He wants to return us from metaphysics to the rough ground of the every day. Accepting the grammar of our life with language, and since we find it difficult to believe that accepting the grammar of our lives would be **enough**, Cavell can describe philosophy as the "education of

grownups” (Cavell 1979: 125). The education of grownups is the effort to bring grownups to believe that, as Wallace Stevens said the human alone may suffice. [3] **Mortality** itself may suffice.

The difference between Arakawa and Gins and Wittgenstein is this. For Wittgenstein there is nothing holding up the grammar of language and we must be educated to accept the grammar just as it is. For Arakawa and Gins the grammar of language is a cutting from a sensual ubiquitous site, where the word sensual breaths in the fresh sensual power of words, no less than the erotic sensual power of skin.

Listen to Wittgenstein:

Now one can ostensibly define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on. The definition of the number two “that is called ‘two’” –pointing to two nuts–is perfectly exact. (Wittgenstein 1976: §28)

This is possible for Wittgenstein, even though ostensive definitions can be misinterpreted in every case, because sometimes they are not. And it is such general facts of nature that scaffold our language. Again: You can direct someone to the store with an arrow, even though, as Wittgenstein puts it, “every explanation of how he should follow the arrow is in the position of another arrow” (Wittgenstein 1958: 97). [4] This is what the education of grownups is to get us to accept: our life with language. And this is precisely what *the mechanism of meaning* tries to open up, to break through.

We already have the language for describing this Wittgensteinian phenomenon. In the land of semantic sense, the ordinary leaves out the ubiquitous, and Wittgenstein’s return to the ordinary from Frege’s third realm is a return to the habitual matrix of meaning, which is precisely the target of Arakawa and Gins’ undoing.

Wittgenstein's grammar leaves out so much. A line is just a line, so you think. But Gins and Arakawa laugh in exuberance, from above, when they draw up plans for a panel about 6 feet wide and 10 feet tall. There seem to be 9 lines on the canvas, but the lines, though all lines of the same length and width are not the same: one is a pencil line, the next is a plant line made by a slit in the canvas behind which are plants, the third is a body line, behind a slit there is a nude, the fourth is a mouse or ant line, perhaps a plank with a series of mice or a series of ants walking along it, and there is a water line, and an oil line, and a line of various intensities. In the face of such exuberance, we come to realize that you may call them all lines, and it may be good for some purposes to do so, but they are all different, singular, unique. At another place we come across a single dot and underneath they mark the words: "these are two or more dots which were unable to be separated" (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 17). Amusing demonstrations that the semantic landing sites of Wittgenstein's everyday language (Wittgenstein 1976: §116) are simply habitual hidings of a ubiquitous site of sensual excitement.

The *Mechanism of Meaning* launches a pedagogy in reverse leading us away from Wittgenstein's habitual every day to the excitement of ubiquitous sites of sensuality.

And the connection to Klee is made by arrows, Klee tells us it is a question of life and death: "This is the question of life and death; and the decision rests with the small arrow." (Klee 1925: 53). Imagine a circle, the purest mobile form, generated by a moving radius. Where the radius shrinks, the arrow pointing inward, the circle "dies suddenly in that static centre" (Klee 1968: 53). Where the radius grows, the arrow pointing outward the circle becomes gradually liberated from the centre. Reversing Destiny.

Now turn to the pink cover of the third edition of *Mechanism*. It reproduces *Beneath Untitled No. 3* from 1986. (Arakawa 1991: 196) On the lower left, a generating series of rectangles. Starting with a seed pair, each pair comes to be included in the lower right of a larger pair of rectangles each precisely twice the

size of the original pair. The stacking rectangles head off to the left stopping at the left edge of the canvas. The drama comes from the three quarters of the canvas which is empty, occupied only by arrows pointing off to the right, and two stray curves. When thinking of Klee these arrows point towards life, away from the dead rectilinear center. And at the bottom of the original panel you would have read the words, stencilled in capital letters: THE ENTIRE BODY WAS PERCEPTION. That is the way to enjoy a ubiquitous site of sensuality.

And Klee insinuates that spiralling out is the way to escape tragedy. Tragedy, for Klee, is the contrast between man's physical limitations and his ideological capacity to move through space. This is man's tragic limitation, a limitation to the ordinary room, to the language of everyday life, habitual practical life. Klee finds the solution to kinetic infinity in cosmic curves, freeing themselves more and more from the earth, until finally becoming colour, the spectral colour wheel where all arrows are superfluous (Klee 1968: 59, 61). Klee concludes "the question is no longer 'to move there' but to be 'everywhere' and consequently also 'there' (Klee 1968: 61). The ubiquitous site of kinetic infinity.

The *Mechanism of Meaning* is a machine for awaking us to the glorious ubiquitous site of sense, ambiguous zones of a lemon (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 21). Try to recall Wallace Stevens' "thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird" with its Wittgensteinian seriousness

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. (Stevens 1972: 20)

and now compare the ambiguous zones of a lemon (Arakawa and Gins 1988: 21)

dream of a lemon
area of a lemon
hidden lemon
subject: lemon
illusion of a lemon

memory of a lemon
image of a lemon
before or pre- lemon
painting of a lemon
sliced lemon
animal's lemon
cut-out of a lemon
after lemon
past lemon
lemon
another translation of a lemon
still lemon
misapprehension of a lemon
drawing of a lemon
model of a lemon
this is a lemon
actual lemon
impression of a lemon
moving transitional lemon
almost lemon
reflection of a lemon
photo of a lemon

and you, you just thought they were sour.

Notes

[1] MM3 = Arakawa and Madeline Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning*, 3rd edition, NY: Abbeville, 1988.

[2] I discuss and criticize Wittgenstein's commitment to common content in a work in progress called "Feeling Words."

[3] In "Chocorua to its Neighbor" Wallace Stevens writes:

To say more than human things with human voice,
That cannot be; to say human things with more
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth

Of human things, that is acutest speech.
(Stevens 1972: 244)

His "Of Modern Poetry" begins with these words: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice." (Stevens 1967: 174). In his "Sunday Morning" he tells us that "Death is the mother of beauty" (Stevens 1967: 7).

[4] Tony Ferrizzi reminded me that this remark recalls Lewis Carroll's considerations in "What The Tortoise Said To Achilles" (Carroll 1895). And he induced me to speak of Nietzsche's laughter as coming from above, free of all resentment and beyond good and evil: bird wisdom's giddy companion.

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