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# Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy

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## Abstract

In this paper, we explicate the method of Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy (IOLP). The term was coined by John Cook to describe the unique philosophical approach of Frank Ebersole. We argue that (i) IOLP is an overlooked yet valuable philosophical method grounded in our everyday experiences and concerns; and (ii) as such, Frank Ebersole is an important but neglected figure in the history of ordinary language philosophy.

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## I | INTRODUCTION

John Cook suggests that there are three varieties of ordinary language philosophy: standard, metaphysical, and investigative.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the first is question-begging and the second untenably ratchets ordinary language into preconceived philosophical theories, leaving the third as the only viable approach. Yet if ordinary language philosophy more broadly is now considered a marginal approach, Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy (IOLP) is almost unnoticed. Cook identifies just one notable architect – Frank Ebersole – and few, even less well-known, followers. One of those followers, Don Levi, developed Cook's account but argues that Ebersole is faithful not to ordinary language exactly, but to human situations.<sup>2</sup> Developing Levi's interpretation, in this paper, we propose that IOLP is an overlooked yet valuable philosophical method grounded in our everyday experiences and concerns. In Section II, we briefly sketch the two varieties of ordinary language philosophy Cook deems deficient. In Section III, we outline the characteristics of an Ebersolean

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<sup>1</sup>Cook (1999).

<sup>2</sup>Levi (2004).

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approach which Cook supports and terms IOLP. In Section IV, we explicate the method of IOLP using classic Ebersole and modern examples.

## II | COOK'S DEFICIENT VARIETIES OF ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

Developing his somewhat idiosyncratic reading of Wittgenstein put forward in *Wittgenstein's Metaphysics*, in *Wittgenstein, Empiricism, and Language*, Cook aimed to support his central contention that Wittgenstein was, first and foremost, a hard-core empiricist.<sup>3</sup> It is safe to say that this exegesis has not gained mainstream acceptance.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, as a consequence of uncovering what he argued were misunderstandings and misreadings of Wittgenstein,<sup>5</sup> Cook came to define three philosophical methods of ordinary language philosophy we previously introduced: standard, metaphysical, and investigative. For our purposes, we have no interest in defending or critiquing the claims made by Cook about Wittgenstein, nor defending or critiquing Cook's characterisation and critique of the first and second methods. Instead, we are interested in explicating the third method, which we have found productive in our own philosophical inquiries. Before so doing, however, we briefly sketch Cook's characterisation and critique of standard and metaphysical ordinary language philosophy, which provides the background to his promotion of an Ebersolean investigative approach.<sup>6</sup>

### II.1 | Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy

Standard Ordinary Language Philosophy (SOLP) is the method Cook associates with "Malcolm's pseudo-Moore."<sup>7</sup> Simply, as Cook has it, SOLP rests on the claim that philosophical statements which violate ordinary language are false. Therefore, any philosophical position which is judged to violate ordinary language can be deemed false prior to an examination of supporting arguments. In practice, SOLP involves asking if what a philosopher says "sounds funny" or has a "ring of oddity" about it when compared with how people ordinarily talk to one another.<sup>8</sup> So, for example, if a philosopher says that we cannot touch a rock, or that in some situations we cannot "know that another person has certain

<sup>3</sup>Cook (1999).

<sup>4</sup>Zalabardo (2002).

<sup>5</sup>For critical reviews of Cook's reading of Wittgenstein advanced in three books, see Hertzberg (1998), Dwyer (1999), Richter (2001), and Hutchinson and Read (2008).

<sup>6</sup>To reiterate, our purpose in what follows is to elucidate the method of IOLP; we do not endorse Cook's attribution of the methods of SOLP and MOLP to those he associates with each. Our point of agreement with Cook is found in our endorsement of Cook's claim that Ebersole's work exemplifies IOLP.

<sup>7</sup>Cook (1999, p. 107).

<sup>8</sup>Cook (1999, p. 107).

thoughts or feelings”, then something is wrong, even if we cannot put our finger on it.<sup>9</sup> Cook argues that there is a simple and terminal critique of SOLP: if someone dismisses a philosophical claim as false on the grounds that it violates ordinary language, then they are guilty of begging the question as to whether the views represented in ordinary language are true. Cook thus dismisses SOLP as a viable approach to philosophical inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

## II.II | Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy

Metaphysical Ordinary Language Philosophy (MOLP) is the oldest of Cook’s three varieties. In explicating MOLP, Cook foregrounds the fact that philosophers have often recognised that their theories conflict with what people say to one another in ordinary life. However, whereas in SOLP one considers such conflict as evidence that philosophising has gone wrong, in MOLP one takes a different approach. When confronted by the conflict between philosophical theory and ordinary language, practitioners of MOLP propose that although their theory “conflicts with a literal interpretation of the plain man’s words, [it] is not in conflict with the plain man’s actual *meaning*, which is determined by the practical application of those words.”<sup>11</sup> Grounded in this idea, Cook proposes that MOLP has two main elements: (i) philosophers use it to reconcile their philosophical theory to how we ordinarily talk to one another, even if they seem in conflict; and (ii) philosophers claim that such conflict only arises because one is taken in by misleading forms of words in our language.<sup>12</sup> For example, when Berkeley’s theory of causation conflicts with how we talk about causation in everyday life – my hands are warmed by the fire, my feet made wet by the waves – he famously defends it by taking what a modern philosopher might now call a fictionalist stance, arguing that we make do with many turns of phrase we know to be literally false.<sup>13</sup> As with SOLP, Cook argues that there is a straightforward critique of MOLP, insofar as “it is a strategy available to philosophers of almost any persuasion.”<sup>14</sup> It is practised by philosophers who start their inquiries in bad faith, with a preconceived

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<sup>9</sup>Malcolm (1951, p. 340).

<sup>10</sup>More recently, Nat Hansen (2014, 2020) has developed the notion underpinning SOLP into what he terms a modest branch of the critical project in ordinary language philosophy, particularly as seen in the work of Avner Baz (2012). Hansen suggests that one does not have to say that anything which violates ordinary language is false or nonsense, but merely that one should challenge philosophically significant expressions that ignore how people actually talk to one another.

<sup>11</sup>Cook (1999, p. 141).

<sup>12</sup>Cook argues that Augustine, Leibniz, Berkeley, Reid, and perhaps most contentiously Wittgenstein all exhibit the characteristics of MOLP in their work. The attribution of this method to Wittgenstein in particular has been widely dismissed as based on misreading and cherry picking.

<sup>13</sup>Berkeley (1988).

<sup>14</sup>Cook (1999, p. 149).

philosophical theory. Whenever a conflict arises between their theory and ordinary language, they merely place the blame for the conflict on some feature of our language which they claim is misleading. Disagreements can thus “never be resolved because [philosophers] pay no attention to language until it is too late.”<sup>15</sup>

Cook argues that the critiques of SOLP and MOLP have led to a modern view of ordinary language philosophy as contemptible. There is, of course, longstanding debate on the worth of ordinary language philosophy, but that is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper. Rather, in the following sections, we focus on Cook’s third, investigative, variety of ordinary language philosophy, which he claims has none of the deficiencies of SOLP or MOLP.

### III | EBERSOLE’S APPROACH

According to Cook, IOLP “may be the only sort of philosophy that will ever produce viable results.”<sup>16</sup> He further argues that the reason it has gone unnoticed for so long is that philosophers have not recognised the manifest differences between the various methods of ordinary language philosophy. These are bold claims which are difficult to interrogate. However, as we have little interest in the critical project of refuting the views of other philosophers, we shall leave the claims as they are. What is without debate, though, is that very few philosophers have ever practised the method. In fact, IOLP is really a way to describe the unique method of one philosopher: Frank Ebersole.<sup>17</sup>

Ebersole never used the label of IOLP to describe his own philosophical method. Nevertheless, he was aware that his method was unique, as he noted in a reluctantly written methodological postscript to two volumes of his essays in the philosophy of language:

it is hard to make this point without seeming pretentious. But it seems to me that this approach to philosophy is without precedent. I cannot think of the work of any well-known philosopher with which I can make useful comparisons and contrasts. I can assure you my essays are not like the work of the usual or ordinary ‘ordinary’ language philosopher.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Cook (1999, p. 149).

<sup>16</sup>Cook (1999, p. 150).

<sup>17</sup>Beyond Ebersole, whom Cook identifies as the main architect, it is difficult to find any philosopher who practices IOLP. Its few promoters – John Cook, Don Levi, and Fred Mosedale – have not really practised it themselves, apart from in illustrating how Ebersole worked. Levi (2004) suggests in a footnote that OK Bouwsma practised it, but then immediately notes that Bouwsma’s approach is in fact different, which we agree with; although closely related to Ebersole’s approach, Bouwsma is less focussed on the construction of convincing, everyday situations (he is also much funnier).

<sup>18</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 326).

So, what are the characteristics of this unique Ebersolean approach that Cook terms IOLP? We argue that there are four key characteristics: (1) investigations are prompted by things you are tempted to think; (2) the issue under investigation must be personalised; (3) the investigation should proceed by the construction of and reflection on detailed and convincing examples; and (4) throughout the investigation you must endeavour to avoid condescension and polemic.

We can easily see how these characteristics differ from those underpinning SOLP and MOLP. First, by starting an investigation with things you are tempted to think – particularly things that seem appealing but which lead you to say things you do not want to say – IOLP is an explicitly *constructive* process of inquiry. This is in contrast to the critical character of SOLP, or the defensive character of MOLP. In IOLP, you do not start with another philosopher’s position and seek to undermine it by showing it to be in conflict with ordinary language. Nor do you start with your own preconceived philosophical framework and resolve to retain it. Rather, you start with an honest problem and set out to explore it with an open attitude.<sup>19</sup> So, for example, when setting out to investigate the issue of *feeling pain*, Ebersole does not start with a survey and critique of existing positions, but starts thus:

We may think something like this. If I feel a pain, there is something there to feel. A pain is something there to feel. So maybe one of the reasons we think of pains as though they were entities or objects or beings is that we think they are among the things we feel. The things we feel are things. We think this way because we have a certain picture of feeling. We think of feeling as a mental reaching across or through the body.<sup>20</sup>

In servicing the aim to investigate things you are tempted to think, Ebersole, as quickly as possible, tries to “get a problem for philosophical investigation or inquiry isolated from history and from the doctrines of philosophers and get it ‘personalized.’”<sup>21</sup> A key strategy in personalising a philosophical problem is to keep the discussion in your own terms and avoid the terminology philosophers have previously developed. This does not mean that when reflecting on a philosophical investigation you cannot evaluate

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<sup>19</sup>Mosedale (2010).

<sup>20</sup>Ebersole (2001a, p. 125).

<sup>21</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 324).

how it relates to existing frameworks; however, these must not drive or shape the investigation.<sup>22</sup>

In trying to avoid existing philosophical frameworks and keep the discussion on his own terms, Ebersole's method consists almost entirely of the construction of and reflection on examples. By examples, he means "bits of stories, involving scenes or situations in which a person will properly and sensibly say something or think something."<sup>23</sup> For example:

1. An old man sits all day on the porch rocking in his rocking chair. All day long the neighbours have their radio on, turned full volume. I know the old man is nearly deaf and he seems neither bothered nor entertained by the blasting of the radio. Perhaps he cannot hear it. One morning program always begins with *Colonel Bogie March*, and at this time the old man changes the rhythm of his rocking, and he seems to beat time with his hand. I am curious and I ask him, "Why do you always beat time to that march?"<sup>24</sup>
2. While on a camping trip Charlie became lost in the mountains and was missing for nearly two weeks. After days of searching, a rescue team found him and brought him back to town. That was yesterday. Charlie was weak from exposure and sick because he had cut his right hand and the wound had become gangrenous. Of course, the rescue team rushed him to the hospital, and a staff doctor, after giving him a brief examination, said his hand would have to be amputated immediately.<sup>25</sup>
3. While hiking with a friend, I limp to a halt and sit on a log holding my knee. "What's wrong?" "I have a terrible pain in the knee." (I certainly do not say, "I feel a terrible pain in the knee.")<sup>26</sup>
4. George and Charley live in a small town in the Midwest, and early every day they go for a long walk together here and there around the town. They go in rain or snow, hot sun or high wind. They have become familiar with every lawn, garden, tree, telephone pole, and fireplug throughout the town. This day, as they pass a fireplug they have passed a

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<sup>22</sup>In explicating the relationship between Ebersole and Wittgenstein, Mosedale (2010, p. 140) argues that both philosophers thought that "philosophy, when properly done, can release one from problems of philosophy". As such, Mosedale argues that both Ebersole and Wittgenstein saw philosophy as therapeutic. Although this characterisation does highlight some important features of Ebersolean philosophy, in our view it focuses too much on loosening the hold of misleading philosophical pictures, which in IOLP is not an explicit aim.

<sup>23</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 325).

<sup>24</sup>Ebersole (2001d, p. 370).

<sup>25</sup>Ebersole (2002c, p. 259).

<sup>26</sup>Ebersole (2001a, p. 127).

thousand times before, George points to the fireplug and says, out of the blue, “That’s a fireplug.”<sup>27</sup>

Ebersole considers his approach to be some variant of ordinary language philosophy “because the examples needed are of an ‘ordinary’ kind – involving familiar surroundings, people, occurrences, actions, and issues.”<sup>28</sup> Fred Mosedale conceived this as the “speech context,”<sup>29</sup> but Don Levi suggests that Ebersole’s use of examples takes him further from ordinary language philosophy than the notion of speech context implies. As Levi notes:

[Ebersole’s] approach requires that he construct examples that are detailed enough for it to be clear what the difference is between what goes on when we do things and what we do, so in this sense he is faithful not to ordinary language but to the facts about human situations, as revealed by what people say and mean in those situations.<sup>30</sup>

In framing IOLP as a constructive method focused on the development of and reflection on convincing everyday human situations, Ebersole leaves little room for the condescension and polemic that is inherent to the critical or defensive methods of SOLP or MOLP. IOLP is, instead, an open and fallibilistic method that is perhaps, in tone if not practice, closer to something like Deweyan pragmatism<sup>31</sup> or the studies of linguistic practice undertaken by Ethnomethodologists and early Conversation Analysts<sup>32</sup> than what is generally referred to as ordinary language philosophy. As Ebersole himself notes, “I try to put down the philosophical urge to array all the many philosophers before me, refute them one by one, and declare myself the

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<sup>27</sup>Ebersole (2002d, p. 288).

<sup>28</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 328).

<sup>29</sup>Mosedale (2000, p. 39).

<sup>30</sup>Levi (2004, p. 311).

<sup>31</sup>Dewey (1931). IOLP also shares with Deweyan pragmatism (and, increasingly, much non-representational philosophy of cognitive science) a focus on the importance of situations (conceived as organism-environment dynamic systems).

<sup>32</sup>See Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1992). What differentiates Garfinkel and Sacks from most contextualist or pragmatic accounts of language is (i) their rejection of attempts to formalise use (such as one finds in Speech Act theory – something Ebersole agrees with) and (ii) their radical account of context as actively-produced *contexture*; i.e. the contexture or situation is co-produced, interactionally, by the participants to the conversation (this has parallels with Wittgenstein’s language-games). So, for example, Sacks shows the extent to which participants to a conversation co-constitute the contexture or situation in which the conversation unfolds, and the words have sense for the speakers, by those speakers interactionally accomplishing a set of simple systematic features of conversations; see Garfinkel and Sacks (1970).



winner.”<sup>33</sup> With this in mind, we now turn to explicate the method of IOLP, using classic Ebersole and modern examples of its use.

## IV | Doing Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy

We noted previously that Ebersole’s sole methodological essay was written reluctantly. Indeed, although that essay arguably contains the clearest extant exposition of what IOLP entails, Ebersole states that he does “not want to give the impression that I have a list of rules I follow or try to follow.”<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, even the rule-reluctant Ebersole accepts that what he describes as “more-or-less-rules” or “something-like-guides” are partly responsible for his successful philosophical investigations.<sup>35</sup> It is thus in the spirit of Ebersole’s something-like-guides that we here attempt to outline and explicate the method of IOLP. Grounded in the characteristics we outlined in Section 3, we propose that there are four stages of the method, although these should not, of course, be taken as prescriptive:

1. Identify the issue that informs the process of investigation.
2. Construct detailed and convincing examples of everyday situations in which the issue under investigation might realistically occur.
3. Comment on your examples in relation to the issue under investigation, other examples you discuss, and existing philosophical accounts.
4. Assemble the examples and your comments into a coherent narrative.

### IV.I | Stage 1: Identify the issue that informs the process of investigation

The first stage in IOLP could, at a glance, seem self-evident. However, in our view, this is an important stage to consider because different kinds of issues are more or less suitable for the method. As we have noted, investigations in IOLP are particularly prompted by ways of thinking or assumptions that seem appealing but which lead you to say things you do not want to say. In other words, they are prompted by live issues that trouble or unsettle you.<sup>36</sup> For example, the difference between an action and a bodily movement<sup>37</sup>;

<sup>33</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 325).

<sup>34</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 325).

<sup>35</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 325).

<sup>36</sup>One could contrast this with self-set philosophers’ problems that garner very narrow interest and have scant consequence, or issues to do with minor points of philosophical interpretation.

<sup>37</sup>Ebersole (2001d).

whether seeing a star is like other cases where it turns out that we have not seen what we thought we saw<sup>38</sup>; the comparison between perception and dreaming<sup>39</sup>; the difference between medical and ethical modes of thought;<sup>40</sup> and the sense and usefulness of the placebo effect concept in research and clinical practice.<sup>41</sup> Within the scope of investigating live issues that trouble or unsettle you, the aim of IOLP is not merely deflationary (of metaphysics) but to arrive at potentially important local and practical insights regarding the issue under investigation.<sup>42</sup>

#### **IV. II | Stage 2: Construct detailed and convincing examples of everyday situations in which the issue under investigation might realistically occur**

Once a suitable issue for investigation is settled on, the next stage is to construct detailed and convincing examples of everyday situations in which it might realistically occur. As we have previously noted, Ebersole conceived this as a process of *personalising* the issue under investigation. Before explicating this process, it is important to note that this approach is not driven by the thought that previous philosophical work is necessarily unhelpful; Ebersole explicitly avoids giving the impression that he looks down on other philosophers. Rather, the process of personalisation through example construction is vital to hold back the overwhelming desire to theorise because, as Ebersole notes, “I know from past experience that these philosophical theories that rush in not only make me distort the facts, they make me blind to the very facts they have led me to distort.”<sup>43</sup>

An important feature of centring philosophical investigation on example construction is that, given most of the philosophical work occurs in what you say to make an example convincing, you do not rely on intuitions about what people would say but on *imagination* to devise detailed situations. First, try to imagine yourself partially comprising a situation, saying what you think should be said. Then, try to imagine how what you think should be said would be understood by someone else partially comprising the situation. To compensate for you not actually partially comprising the situation, it must be detailed enough to make it seem convincing that someone would say and mean this or that to someone else in that context.<sup>44</sup> Keep experimenting with examples until they

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<sup>38</sup>Ebersole (2001b).

<sup>39</sup>Ebersole (2001c).

<sup>40</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021).

<sup>41</sup>Hardman (2022).

<sup>42</sup>Levi (2004).

<sup>43</sup>Ebersole (2002b, p. 325).

<sup>44</sup>Levi (2004).

seem convincing to you, but always remain faithful to human situations as revealed by what people say, do, and mean. Through this *process* of example development, the hope is that you gain initial insight about the issue under investigation which you can develop.<sup>45</sup> This is a key point: the process of developing and trying out examples is the objective, not merely a dispensable means to an end. Developing, refining, weighing, revising, discarding, and developing further examples is the method and the argument. To help explicate this process, we explore two examples: first, a classic Ebersole investigation of the difference between an action and a bodily movement,<sup>46</sup> and second, our modern investigation of the difference between medical and ethical modes of thought.<sup>47</sup>

In the first investigation, Ebersole starts by asking the reader to consider two answers to the simple question, “What are you doing?” (1) “I’m still trying to think of that word for last night’s crossword puzzle: the one for 24-across.” (2) “I’m sharpening the barb on this fish hook.”<sup>48</sup> In so doing, Ebersole sets up a common distinction between a mental action and a bodily action, noting that the latter, unlike the former, involves some movement of the body. Ebersole then notes that, although bodily movements seem simple to understand, it is a puzzle to say what in addition to a bodily movement is involved in an action. Over the course of the essay, he goes through a range of examples that seem to suggest different answers to the puzzle. First, he focuses on games, such as the movement of a piece on a chessboard, concluding that rules and conventions are required to understand an action and, therefore, a bodily movement becomes an action in certain circumstances. However, on exploring how a father and child might actually talk about chess moves, Ebersole uncovers that this definition does not hold, insofar as many movements we would ordinarily call an action are not grounded in specific rules; all that the game examples bring to the fore is that actions take place in a social background.

At this stage, Ebersole sees no other way forward than to explore a range of things we think of as bodily movements, which he does by imagining a range of (eleven) examples. By constructing convincing and detailed situations, Ebersole

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<sup>45</sup>Although the method of IOLP is focussed on developing imaginary examples, there is no epistemological reason to exclude empirical examples in this stage of the method. However, if empirical examples are used, they must be used with the epistemic aim of aiding the imagination of convincing, everyday examples, rather than considered privileged “data”. The explicit inclusion of empirical examples, with the epistemic aim of aiding the imagination, can help to dissolve the boundary between philosophy and the social sciences while sidestepping some of the problems with experimental philosophy as currently conceived. Although this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, we aim to discuss it in the development of a new social scientific methodology we term Situation Analysis.

<sup>46</sup>Ebersole (2001d).

<sup>47</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021).

<sup>48</sup>Ebersole (2001d, p. 356).

is able to work his way through the philosophical puzzle. It is not possible to restate all eleven of Ebersole's examples in full here, but we will summarise them into three categories (a–c):

- a. Those pieces of behaviour that we refer to as movement which, on further reflection, we see are actions that we, for one reason or another, might on occasion see fit to refer to as movements (cf. Ebersole's example of the country girl who arrives in the city and answers a job advertisement for a dancer and is asked to watch a demonstration of the sort of dance she will be expected to perform. When she sees the dance, she responds: "I simply can-not perform those bodily movements!").
- b. Involuntary movements, such as tics, twitches, externally forced movements, and so on. While these are more clearly movement (rather than actions described as a movement, as in class a) they are not the sort of movement we have in mind when we think of that which is essential to actions. (cf. Ebersole's example of the drummer whose concluding long rapid drum roll is the result of muscle spasms).
- c. The movements of an appendage, where we are simply unclear as to whether it is correct, in the case of this creature or appendage, to call the movement action. For example, robots, coral, alien lifeforms in science fiction, and dismembered limbs that move (cf. Ebersole's example of the animated but dismembered limbs in horror stories).

To give you a flavour of the specific examples, we will reproduce just three here:

1. A girl just from the country has answered the advertisement of a city place for a "girl dancer." She tells the manager that she has had some experience and asks about the job. He says, "We want a belly dancer." She does not know what that is. The manager calls one of the waitresses, who used to be a belly dancer, and the waitress gives a demonstration. The country girl says, "I simply could not make those bodily movements." She is morally offended. Making those bodily movements is something she will not do. So these bodily movements are not the things that enter into bodily actions: they *are* actions. And as actions, they get the country girl's censure.<sup>49</sup>
2. Imagine a drummer whose violent and rapid beat set his arm muscles into uncontrolled spasmodic action. He may execute a final long rapid roll in this manner, and then quickly leave the stage to take antispasmodic pills and to relax. This would be a rare and unusual type of action. Nothing of

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<sup>49</sup>Ebersole (2001d, p. 367).

this kind enters into all the simple actions involved in walking, pointing, eating sitting, writing, climbing, in which we engage throughout the day.<sup>50</sup>

3. When telling a scary story around the campfire, I may say, “The hairy arm moved toward me out of the darkness...” As this story unfolds, I shall be horrified but not surprised to learn that the arm was not attached to a body, “The hairy arm moved...” This is a way of giving the arm a frightening agency. Nothing like detached members is to be involved in the bodily movements that enter into human actions.<sup>51</sup>

In the second investigation, we pose to the reader two answers to a similarly simple question, “What are you thinking about doc?”: (1) “Whether Mary has pneumonia.” (2) “Whether Jim should tell his children about his diagnosis of autosomal dominant polycystic kidney disease.”<sup>52</sup> In so doing, we set up the common picture of clinical situations made more complicated by the addition of an additional ethical component. Throughout the article, we then use a range of examples to work through the veracity of this picture. For example:

1. Mal has a follow-up appointment with his oncologist, Dr Powell. He has recently been diagnosed with thyroid cancer, which has spread from his thyroid gland to other parts of his neck and nearby lymph nodes. Mal is in his mid-70s and otherwise healthy and active for his age.  
 “How are you holding up Mal?” asks Dr Powell.  
 “Alright doc, you know. Just want to talk through the treatment options today really.”  
 “Sure. As we discussed, the first thing we need to do is remove the gland and some lymph nodes. We will then employ radiation therapy after the surgery.”  
 “Right, I see, yep. I’ve been doing a bit of reading on this doc, about some alternative treatments.”  
 “Right, yes, sure. Some of those treatments can be really useful to cope with side effects. A couple of my patients have really benefited from acupuncture, for example. I think that could be a good idea Mal.”  
 “No, sorry doc. I don’t mean that. A friend of mine knew someone who had exactly what I have and cured it using natural medicines, without all this dangerous radiation. I’m getting on as it is doc – I don’t want my last years spent laid up in a hospital bed getting zapped.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Ebersole (2001d, p. 368).

<sup>51</sup>Ebersole (2001d, p. 369). See also Hutchinson (2019).

<sup>52</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021, p. 1).

<sup>53</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021, p. 2).

2. Shami is in her mid-60s and booked an appointment to see her doctor, Dr Gopal. Shami has been forgetting things recently and is worried about what this might mean, especially as her late father suffered from dementia. After a short examination and discussion – all they have time for in this consultation – Shami wants to talk more about what the prognosis could be and what this might mean for her. However, Dr Gopal deflects this discussion, instead focussing on the evidence that “only about 5 percent of people with mild cognitive impairment such as you seem to have will progress to dementia each year. And about 60 percent of people do not see their cognitive function decline further – some may even improve.”<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that, in presenting examples that were used in finished essays and articles, we do not capture the full *process* of example construction so central to IOLP. As we noted above, it is the process of developing the examples where the philosophical work is undertaken. These examples are the final versions, chosen and presented to the reader in a way to best communicate the relevant philosophical insight. As we will later explore, this process of assembling examples and comments into a coherent narrative is a separate stage of the method. In this current stage, one focuses solely on working through and experimenting with many examples to help alight on insights into the issue under investigation: in IOLP, the very working thought of the examples *is* the bulk of the philosophical work.

Although presenting final, published examples does not fully capture the process of example construction in IOLP, we can nevertheless see in these examples a key difference between IOLP and most other philosophical methods. In IOLP, the construction of examples is used to develop new insight and understanding. In most other philosophical methods, examples are used merely to elucidate an existing point. Consider the famous donkey stories proposed by Austin to help distinguish between an accident and a mistake.<sup>55</sup> This is the kind of example used by a philosopher who already has a distinction in mind. Austin starts off thinking he knows exactly what the distinction is between an accident and a mistake and wants to persuade us he is right with a mildly amusing example.<sup>56</sup> This is directly opposite to IOLP, in which you try to effect naivete and imagine lots of convincing examples so as to get a better understanding of what’s being said and done. Furthermore, the examples in IOLP are not employed, as they are in experimental social psychology or experimental

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<sup>54</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021, p. 2).

<sup>55</sup>Austin (1970, p. 185).

<sup>56</sup>As Hansen and Chemla (2015, p. 425) note, Austin is in any case largely interested in “drawing subtle distinctions between the meaning of certain phrases” rather than, as in IOLP, exploring live issues that trouble or unsettle us. Moreover, as they also note, Austin often provides significant gloss on his examples, which can have the effect of obscuring rather than illuminating the phenomena he aims to uncover.

philosophy, as empirical data or evidence, but are instead treated as aids to the imagination – ways of bringing to light unseen aspects and meaning relations, drawing attention to particulars which might otherwise have been overlooked.

Last, examples used in IOLP are generally convincing, detailed accounts of everyday settings. This, we suggest, is because everyday examples are better suited to working through problems, whereas fantastical examples (common in philosophy) offer more scope by which to provide support for an existing point.<sup>57</sup> However, although detailed accounts of everyday settings tend to be better suited to working through problems, Ebersole does, on occasion, use fantastical examples in this way, albeit with questionable impact. For example, in the investigation of the difference between an action and a bodily movement outlined above, Ebersole resorts to describing a chess game played with the help of earthquakes.<sup>58</sup> In another investigation of the same issue, Ebersole imagines an incredibly unlikely situation whereby he records an entertainer who does not speak English making sounds identical to English words, before the entertainer subsequently emigrates to the United States and learns English, offering an identical recording to be compared with the first.<sup>59</sup> Whatever kinds of examples are employed, we can see how tempting it is for philosophers to fit examples to their existing arguments and how, in IOLP, much attention must be made to avoid this.

#### **IV.III | Stage 3: Comment on your examples in relation to the issue under investigation, other examples you discuss, and existing philosophical accounts**

Although most of the philosophical work in IOLP occurs in the construction of examples your readers and interlocutors find convincing, it is important to be clear about what those examples lead you to think about the issue under investigation. This is the focus of Stage 3, in which you outline what your examples have led you to think, and potentially compare and contrast those insights with existing accounts. To help explicate this stage, we return to the two examples introduced in Stage 2.

In Ebersole's investigation of the difference between an action and a bodily movement, he deploys an array of everyday examples – some of which we have reproduced – to work through the issue. However, he does not merely let these examples talk for themselves. As Levi notes, although Ebersole relies heavily on examples – and makes them detailed enough so they can do the work he wants them to do – “he is not content to let the examples do all the work. On the contrary. He has a remarkable sense of where he is when he comments on an

<sup>57</sup>Philosophy is of course littered with many such famous examples or thought experiments that merely serve to elucidate an existing point: Twin Earth, Chinese Room, etc.

<sup>58</sup>Ebersole (2001d).

<sup>59</sup>Ebersole (2002e).

example, where he is in relation to the issue he is exploring, where he is in relation to other examples he has been or will be discussing.”<sup>60</sup> Eventually, having worked through many examples and rejected a number of further explanations, Ebersole alights on a favourable picture that he communicates to the reader. Bodily movements and actions are merely different ways in which to describe something; the former from a physiological point of view, and the latter from a human, socio-cultural point of view.<sup>61</sup>

In our second example of the investigation of the difference between medical and ethical modes of thought, there is a similar process of explication. After showing through examples that medical and ethical modes of thought cannot be separated by the old classification of fact and value, we note that “the blurring of medical and ethical modes of thought has made it more difficult to analyse clearly what is distinctively medical” and that “it can be difficult to know how to proceed except to look at some more situations we think of as clinical.”<sup>62</sup> In a similar fashion to Ebersole’s investigation of action, we note that medical and ethical modes of thought are difficult to disentangle, and perhaps the best way to think about them is not, as is commonly held, as different in kind, but merely different aspects one takes in considering a clinical situation. We further discuss the consequences of this conception of medical ethics, noting that, if accepted, it could lead to a markedly different approach to the teaching of ethics in medical schools than is commonplace.

To explicate this stage of IOLP, we have developed our account of two previously provided examples of the method. However, in so doing we accept that it is difficult to communicate the worth of the method through methodological explication alone, without the experience of how the examples of the issue under investigation are provided and commented on in the original articles. For, as Levi notes, the insights of IOLP can only be appreciated by seeing how they are arrived at.<sup>63</sup> This notion leads to the final stage of the method.

#### **IV.IV | Stage 4: Assemble the examples and your comments into a coherent narrative**

In outlining Stages 2 and 3 of the method of IOLP, we hopefully make clear that its central methodological feature is that philosophical insights are created through (i) imagining lots of convincing examples so as to get a better understanding of what’s being said and done and (ii) then commenting on those examples to develop such insights. However, the process of the philosopher

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<sup>60</sup>Levi (2004, p. 318).

<sup>61</sup>Ebersole (2001d).

<sup>62</sup>Hardman & Hutchinson (2021, p. 2).

<sup>63</sup>Levi (2004).



arriving at insights is not the same as that of the *reader* arriving at them. This idea underpins the importance of Stage 4 in the method.

Once you have conducted the process of arriving at insights through stages 2 and 3, you have to decide on the best way to communicate them. As in the Ebersolean example, it often works well to start your write-up with the very picture you were tempted to think that prompted the investigation. However, other examples of IOLP start with a common picture held by a community or group; for example, in a recent investigation of the sense and usefulness of the placebo effect concept in research and clinical practice, the article starts with the common picture of the placebo effect as the psychological effect of an inert substance.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, depending on the proposed audience for the investigation, there may be more or less value in comparing and contrasting insights on the issue under investigation with existing philosophical or other relevant accounts. For example, in the above study of the placebo effect, the insights gained from IOLP are contrasted with conflicting recent recommendations by a panel of experts.<sup>65</sup> The value in thinking carefully about how to present insights from IOLP to the reader is emphasised in some of Ebersole's later essays – such as *Meaning and Use*<sup>66</sup> – which are longer and in which the insights are presented with less clarity. Constructing an article or essay so as to let the reader see how the insights of the investigation unfold is, we suggest, as important as coming to those insights in the first place.

## V | CONCLUSION

The term Investigative Ordinary Language Philosophy was coined by John Cook to describe the unique philosophical method of Frank Ebersole. We have found this method very productive in our own philosophical inquiries and lament that it is not more widely used. In explicating the method, we thus hope that we can both promote its use and promote the importance of Frank Ebersole in the history of ordinary language philosophy.

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<sup>64</sup>Hardman (2022).

<sup>65</sup>Hardman (2022).

<sup>66</sup>Ebersole (2002a).

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