Philosophy as reflective conceptual clarification

How the conception can be derived from key places in TLP and PI

The following presentation was 'proposed' to me by the Chatbot Beta of academia.edu under the descriptive title >Formal concepts and meaning-explanations – a bridge from TLP 4.112 sqq. to PI para.560<. It recombines things I've already said elsewhere in different texts without exhibiting or even having seen some of the connections that Beta presents here in a formally surveyable way. I would not have chosen this way of presentation myself, but I do fully approve it.

Abstract

The *Tractatus* distinguishes formal concepts from concepts represented by propositional functions. Their expression is a variable; their form is already given with an instance. The *Philosophical Investigations* directs us to explanations of meaning when clarifying the use of "meaning" (§560). I argue that these insights can be connected without attributing to the later Wittgenstein the earlier doctrine of logical form. Formal concepts supply a contrast between specifying a representational role and reporting a property; meaning-explanations make such contrasts accessible within ordinary linguistic practice. The connection requires an additional premise: some everyday categorial expressions articulate possibilities of understanding already operative in particular uses. That premise is a constructive extension, not a consequence of either primary passage alone. Worked cases concerning objects, persons and doing show both its use and its limits. The resulting conception of philosophy is reflective conceptual clarification: an attempt to make our understanding surveyable without converting its organizing expressions into a further inventory of entities.

1. The question and the proposed answer

In *Reflexivity of Language and philosophical Reflection*, I connected two insights of Wittgenstein. The first concerns the relation between meaning and explanation of meaning in PI §560. The second concerns formal concepts in TLP 4.122–4.128. Their connection was intended to explain why philosophy, understood as reflective conceptual clarification, continues possibilities already present in ordinary language. Meaning-explanation is one such possibility. The explicit clarification of categories is another. The short essay stated the connection but did not sufficiently separate the textual claims from the philosophical development proposed on their basis (Lange 2026, pp. 1–3; hereafter R).

The separation matters. The claim that the meaning of a word is what its explanation explains does not establish that everyday categories are Tractarian formal concepts. Conversely, the claim that a formal concept is expressed by a variable does not establish that

ordinary explanations of meaning constitute a reflexive structure. Neither text supplies the missing inference.

I shall defend a qualified bridge. The *Tractatus* identifies a difference between an ordinary predication and a formal role exhibited in the use of signs. The *Investigations* makes ordinary explanations available for clarifying what expressions do. If certain everyday categorial expressions make explicit roles and contrasts already operative in particular uses, those expressions can be clarified through meaning-explanations without being understood as names for additional things or predicates of an ultimate genus. This conditional requires examination of the particular expressions. It does not license a category-system in advance.

The argument develops the programme of *An Abstract of Philosophy* and *After Wittgenstein* (Lange 2021/2023, §§0, 2–3, 6–7; hereafter A; Lange 2022, Parts II–III; hereafter W). It is an argument for philosophy after Wittgenstein in the sense of proceeding with selected insights of his, not an assertion that every part of the programme is already his. In particular, the priority accorded to a connected overview of common understanding over the dissolution of individual philosophical problems is my re-accentuation of his conception (W, pp. 103–108).

2. What the early text establishes

2.1 Internal properties and the distinction of functions

TLP 4.122 introduces formal properties and relations in connection with a confusion between internal and external relations. At 4.123 a property is internal when it is unthinkable that its object should not possess it. The point is not that observation has disclosed an exceptionally persistent characteristic. Its absence is excluded by the relevant form of representation. According to 4.124–4.125, such properties and relations are exhibited through the propositions presenting the relevant possibilities; they are not further facts asserted alongside those propositions.

This leads at 4.126 to formal concepts. That something falls under one is shown by its sign in its symbolic employment. A name shows that it signifies an object; a numerical sign that it signifies a number. Unlike an *eigentlicher Begriff*—a “proper concept” in the early English translation—a formal concept is not represented by a propositional function. Its

expression is a propositional variable with a characteristic feature held constant. The variable signifies the formal concept; its values signify what falls under it (4.127–4.1271).

The operative contrast is thus not between a narrow predicate and a very wide predicate. “Object” in the relevant use does not express the most inclusive empirical characteristic. At 4.1272 its appropriate sign is the variable name *x*. Treating “object” as an ordinary concept-word produces pseudo-propositions. “There are objects” is not of the same kind as “There are books.” This is a claim internal to the Tractarian account of meaningful representation. It should not be presented as a context-free prohibition on the everyday sentence “There are objects on the table,” where a restricted, material use can be at work.

2.2 What is already given with an instance

TLP 4.12721 states: “The formal concept is already given with an object, which falls under it” (Ogden/Ramsey text). Its immediate consequence concerns primitive ideas: one cannot introduce both the relevant objects and their formal concept as independent primitives. A particular function is not introduced first, wholly devoid of function-form, with that form supplied by an independent subsequent introduction.

Two distinctions prevent an overreading. First, the form of a sign in its use is not an additional ingredient alongside its particular content. Second, a speaker’s practical mastery of particular expressions is not the same as the ability to formulate an explicit account of their form. The second distinction is useful for my programme, but it is not stated as a theory of ordinary acquisition at 4.12721. Nor does that remark say that knowing one chair gives a speaker explicit knowledge of the whole domain of objects.

The same restraint is needed about non-emptiness. Where an instance is given, its formal concept is not empty. It does not follow that every expression which a philosopher chooses to write as a variable has actual instances. The passage does not license an inference from a sign’s availability to the existence of persons, fictional beings or any other purported domain. TLP 4.1274, which calls the question of the existence of a formal concept nonsensical, makes the early text still less suitable as an ordinary existential proof.

2.3 What “anumerical” does and does not explain

TLP 4.128 says that logical forms are *zahllos*, rendered “anumerical” in the early English translation. The following sentence denies privileged numbers in logic and

consequently philosophical monism or dualism. In this context, “anumerical” should not be replaced without argument by “infinitely many.” Nor does the remark itself establish that the explicit formation of everyday categories is optional.

My earlier essay associated optional explicit formation with 4.128 (R, p. 3). The more secure reconstruction derives the non-independence of formal concepts from 4.12721 and supplies, separately, a distinction between practical mastery and explicit formulation. It leaves 4.128 to constrain attempts to count logical forms into a metaphysical doctrine. This constraint will matter when considering my language of an object/person dualism.

These early remarks already bear on ordinary wording: 4.1272 expressly discusses the right and wrong uses of words such as “object” and “number.” It would therefore be too strong to say that formal concepts have no application beyond artificial languages. What requires extension is the treatment of person, doing and other everyday categories by analogy with the technical account, and especially the use of their clarification to organize common understanding.

3. What PI §560 contributes

PI §560 reads in the German text:

> “Die Bedeutung des Wortes ist das, was die Erklärung der Bedeutung erklärt.” D.h.: willst du den Gebrauch des Worts “Bedeutung” verstehen, so sieh nach, was man “Erklärung der Bedeutung” nennt.

A working translation is: “The meaning of the word is what the explanation of meaning explains.” That is: if you want to understand the use of the word “meaning,” look at what is called “explanation of meaning.” This translation is supplied here from the checked German text; it is not presented as the wording of a particular published English edition.

The second sentence fixes the direction of the remark. It instructs us how to clarify “meaning”; it does not define a hidden object which every explanation must somehow reach. The surrounding remarks resist that picture. At §559 a word’s function is to show itself in the course of the calculus, rather than reside as a concealed body behind the sentence. At §561 the common word “is” does not by itself establish a single meaning shared by its uses as copula and identity sign. The recurrence of a word is no guarantee of unity of function.

In R I illustrated meaning-explanation with “heteronomy,” explained by dependence on the law- or rule-giving of another. In a suitable context the explanation can replace the word without changing what is given to be understood. This is a useful limiting case, but §560 does not state a universal substitutability principle. A demonstration of a colour sample cannot always occupy the syntactic place of a colour adjective; an explanation by examples is not a synonym. Functional equivalence for a particular explanatory purpose is weaker than replacement in every context.

The *Investigations* gives positive reasons for the weaker reading. In §§28–31 the point of an ostensive explanation depends on an already prepared role in language. Section 29 explicitly allows categorial words—“number,” “colour,” “length”—to indicate the place at which a word is being introduced, while denying that such words invariably have to occur. Section 75 connects knowledge of a concept with the explanations one could give, including examples and possible extensions. These passages give a more direct route from §560 to categorial clarification than the isolated slogan does.

Meaning-explanations can have a normative function. They say how an expression is to be understood and can be invoked in correction. But this does not make every explanation a stipulated definition, every account of usage infallible, or all competence explicit rule-knowledge. PI §§201–202 deny that following a rule consists in an endless series of interpretations; §§6 and 208 locate instruction also in training and examples. The reflexivity needed here is therefore practical: within an already functioning language we can explain expressions and correct misunderstandings. It is not the claim that language constructs itself out of self-explanatory definitions.

In R I opposed this normative function to explanations being “simply metalinguistic in the technical sense” (p. 1). The defensible point is that semantic explanation can function within the practice whose use it clarifies. It need not require ascent to a separate, merely observational discipline. A stronger denial that such explanations can be metalinguistic would be unnecessary: an explanation can mention a word and still guide its use. PI §§120–121 support the absence of a compulsory hierarchy of philosophical languages, not the abolition of distinctions between use and mention.

4. The bridge and its additional premises

The bridge can now be stated without treating a historical connection as a deduction from two quotations. The following are its exact commitments.

P1 — Early formal-role premise. In the Tractarian analysis, formal membership is exhibited in symbolic role, not represented as the satisfaction of an ordinary propositional function (4.126–4.1272).

P2 — Early co-givenness premise. Given an instance under a formal concept, the relevant form is already given; it is not an independent primitive added to that instance (4.12721).

P3 — Later explanatory premise. To clarify the use of "meaning," examine what is called an explanation of meaning (§560); such explanations need not all have the same form (§§28–31, 75).

P4 — Practical-normative premise. Within a linguistic practice, some meaning-explanations articulate standards of application and correction. They presuppose capacities to act with words and are not universally replaceable definitions (Lange's reading, supported by PI §§29–31, 54, 201–202, 208).

P5 — Mastery/articulation premise. Mastering particular expressions can include practical command of a contrast without possession of an explicit category-word or philosophical account of that contrast. This is a bridging premise, not the wording of 4.12721 or §560.

P6 — Everyday-categorial premise. Some uses of everyday categorial expressions articulate such contrasts and ranges of intelligible application rather than report an independently discovered characteristic common to all their instances. This is the constructive extension to be tested in examples.

P7 — Comparison premise. The Tractarian variable supplies an object of comparison for those uses. The comparison does not transfer the complete logical syntax, the ontology of simples, or the prohibition on saying formal membership into everyday grammar (PI §§130–131; W, pp. 111–112).

P8 — Local adequacy premise. A proposed categorial explanation is acceptable only insofar as the use-distinctions it draws can be displayed in applications and correction;

its authority cannot come merely from the category-list or notation chosen by the philosopher.

C1 — Qualified bridge. From P1–P2 and P5–P8, everyday categorial clarification can be understood by analogy with the articulation of a formal role already operative in instances. From P3–P4, that articulation can take the form of ordinary meaning-explanations functioning within the practice clarified.

P9 — Philosophical continuation premise. Such explanations can be assembled beyond the immediate misunderstanding which occasions one of them, for the purpose of a connected overview of our understanding (R, pp. 1–3; A, §0; W, pp. 106–108).

C2 — Constructive conclusion. From C1 and P9, reflective conceptual clarification is a possible continuation of ordinary explanatory practices. Neither the exclusiveness of that conception of philosophy nor the completeness of any particular system of categories follows.

This is an argument with separately defensible premises, not a proof that early and late Wittgenstein held one unchanged doctrine. P1–P2 describe the earlier account. P3 is a direct later instruction; P4 is an interpretation of its practical setting. P5–P9 state the philosophical work which must be done in connecting and extending them. In particular, P6 cannot be established by calling an expression a variable. The worked cases must show what this comparison earns.

5. Object: a material classification and a formal role

In R the everyday examples are chair, apple, rod and computer (pp. 2–3). A similarly uses bed, table, chair and computer (§0, pp. 4–5). Consider a speaker who can identify a chair, distinguish it from a table, and comply with “Move that chair.” The use is already organized: one can identify what is to be moved and predicate something of it. A further word “object” need not first be supplied to make those particular uses possible. This illustrates P5. It is not evidence that a chair is a simple Tractarian object.

Now consider R’s contrast between a material object and the object of a discussion. “The chair is a wooden object” can classify something materially. “The object of this discussion is the proposed change of rule” indicates what the discussion concerns. A request to move the latter two metres to the left ordinarily fails to continue that use. The explanation “what the discussion is about” displays the relevant role; pointing again at the chair would not

explain it.

The worked comparison has two results. First, the function of “object” cannot be read off from its grammatical appearance as a noun. Second, a formal use must not be confused with the thesis that every object of discussion is a material thing. The clarification removes that confusion by contrasting contexts, not by identifying an invisible object which is the true bearer of both uses.

A further restriction is required. R says that the material object and the object of discussion belong under the same formal concept. That can be retained as a proposal to abstract to “what is referred to or discussed.” But it does not independently establish one uniform Tractarian value-domain. One can discuss a claim, a person or an action, and the grammatical roles of the relevant expressions remain different. PI §561 warns against deriving a unity of meaning from a common word. “Object of discussion” therefore illustrates the failure of a material interpretation more directly than it proves a single unrestricted object-category.

The strongest point of the example survives this restriction. A philosophical explanation can distinguish a formal or topic-indicating role from a material predicate. Such an explanation continues familiar corrective practice: “By ‘object’ here I mean what we are discussing, not a piece of furniture.” That is the conjunction of formal-role analysis and meaning-explanation asserted by C1.

6. Person: someone, address and self-correction

A and W draw attention to the contrast between “something” and “someone,” with “object” and “person” as corresponding nouns (A, §3, pp. 9–11; W, pp. 104–105, 118–119). The contrast gives a way of asking what kind of response an utterance calls for. “Someone is waiting outside” permits “Who?” and, in an appropriate case, addressing the individual. “Something is blocking the door” permits “What?” and the identification of an obstruction. The words direct the inquiry differently.

This difference is not lost because a single-sorted calculus can represent both by quantification over one domain with different predicates. The proposed clarification concerns the articulation of everyday understanding, not the expressive impossibility of representing

persons in formal logic. Equally, “someone is waiting” is already a meaningful assertion. It does not become meaningful only when a name is substituted for the indefinite pronoun. Here the analogy of pronouns with open variables must stop.

My material account of a person is a speaking, acting and essentially self-evaluating animal. Its distinctive example concerns personal names. A name can be used to refer to someone and to address that person. Suppose I call “Peter!” and Peter asks “Do you mean me?” I can answer “No, the other Peter.” The exchange displays both the name’s address-function and a possibility of correcting its application. The scene is constructed here from the discussion of personal names in A, §3 and W, pp. 110, 119; it is not a quoted vignette from those works. PI §27 independently draws attention to calling the bearer of a personal name, while §40 separates the bearer’s death from the continued meaningfulness of the name.

The passage from address to personhood nevertheless requires care. A disposition to answer is not a requirement that every addressed individual answer now. Nor does naming alone entail the capacity to answer: PI §27 itself mentions naming dolls and speaking to them. My argument needs reciprocal address as part of the practice of speaking with persons, not a logical entailment from possession of a personal name. The clarification concerns paradigmatic competent participation. It does not decide the status of infants, persons temporarily unconscious, or people whose ability to speak has been lost. A definition that excluded them would need a separate argument and would depart from ordinary person-ascription.

The same caution applies to self-evaluation. In A the capacity to correct slips and errors supports the characterization of persons as self-evaluating. The immediate result is modest: competent linguistic participation includes some capacity to distinguish how one has spoken from how one should have spoken. The further thought that persons evaluate their whole lives is an extension, not something proved by a corrected name.

Finally, my stronger assertion that something and someone form mutually exclusive domains must be restricted (W, pp. 105, 118). “There is something I must tell you about Peter” is compatible with Peter’s being a person; a person can be the object of a discussion. These examples are counterchecks supplied here. The person/non-person contrast can organize a particular inquiry without forbidding every broader use of “something” or “object.” An ordinary-language contrast does not by itself prove an exhaustive ontological dualism.

This restriction also avoids appealing to 4.128 in support of precisely the kind of numerical metaphysics that remark rejects.

Thus the person-example supports P6 as a distinction of explanatory roles, not as a proof of two disjoint ultimate kinds of being. It also makes P4 concrete: correction takes place between participants and concerns how their words are to be understood.

7. Doing: activity, bounded action and what happens to us

The third case is especially useful because it is not reducible to a choice between "something" and "someone." W distinguishes doing in general from its forms, activity and action (pp. 130–132). Its examples include swimming and swimming to the other side of a river, building and building a particular wall or house. A develops the latter contrast and connects it with the temporally structured distinction between processes and events (§7, pp. 15–16).

Take one particular crossing, by swimming, of one particular river. While the swimmer is halfway across, "She is swimming to the other side" can be true although "She has swum to the other side" is not yet true of that crossing. Completion of the crossing ends that bounded performance. By contrast, she can have been swimming and still be swimming; the activity-description does not itself specify an endpoint. The choice of description therefore changes what counts as its completion. A practice of calling a movement an action is already organized by such differences before a speaker has formulated an account of process and event.

The example must be handled at the level of descriptions and the same performance. It does not establish that activities and actions are two non-overlapping collections of bodily movements. The swimmer who has reached the opposite bank may continue swimming there. What she no longer continues is that same completed crossing. This is the reason why I correct Aristotle's "building" example by specifying a particular house. A builder may have built and still be building, but not still be bringing that same house to completion in the same respect after it is complete.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Θ6, 1048b18–35, supplies the present/perfect contrast in the accessible Tredennick translation. The terminology there is motion and actualization; my "activity/action" and the attribution to *praxis/poiesis* are not a literal reproduction of that

passage. The draft borrows the diagnostic contrast in completion, not a claim that Aristotle's entire classification or Greek terminology is thereby settled.

A second strand concerns reasons. In W, doing is behaviour for which something can be said from the doer's perspective. Playing the piano supplies the example of an activity whose reason need not be an independently achieved result: the person can say that she can play and likes playing (pp. 130–131). Suppose she is asked why she is playing and answers "Because I enjoy it." That answer makes the activity intelligible without specifying a further task whose completion ends it. This mini-dialogue develops W's example; it is not a quotation.

The distinction between a reason and a cause must remain visible. A question about why a person continues practising can ask what counts in favour of doing so; a question about why a piano key sticks may ask about its mechanism. The contrast does not require that every reason be uttered or that an agent's avowal be beyond correction. It indicates what an explanation of doing is trying to make intelligible.

I reserve doing or action "in the full sense" for language-using persons, while acknowledging the ordinary application of action-verbs to foxes and mice (A, §§2, 6; W, pp. 117, 126, 131). That reservation is a substantive restriction of vocabulary. The bridge does not prove that animals lack agency, and the ordinary animal examples prevent a ban on every non-human use of "action." What it supports is the distinctive explanatory possibility of asking a person for reasons and receiving an answer.

The final contrast is with what happens to us: *Widerfahrnisse*. Being injured or unexpectedly fortunate is not automatically a doing because it admits temporal description. Life itself contains such happenings. Birth and death mark its temporal limits; they do not make life a task completed by achieving death. The inference from "a life has an end" to "death is its purpose" exchanges temporal termination for an action's intended result. A meaning-explanation which distinguishes those uses prevents the error without discovering a further entity called the category of life (A, §7; W, pp. 112–113, 128–132).

8. Objections and the status of the construction

8.1 Does the bridge merely replace showing by saying?

An objection from the *Tractatus* is immediate. If formal membership cannot be

asserted, how can an explanation say what a formal concept means? It cannot do so while retaining the complete early restriction. That restriction is not one of the bridge's conclusions. The proposal takes from the early work a contrast between articulating representational form and reporting an empirical characteristic. It then redescribes selected contrasts in the setting of later explanation-practices. This is a transformation, not a demonstration that early ineffability and later grammatical description are identical.

There is also a retrospective reason not to project §560 directly backwards. TLP 3.263 permits elucidations of primitive signs but says that these presuppose their meanings; 4.026 nevertheless says the meanings of simple signs must be explained to us. These passages prevent the sweeping statement that explanation has no place in the early work. What changes in the present reconstruction is the explanatory setting and its authority, not the first appearance of the word "explanation." W's sharper account of the early restriction is an interpretation of its systematic commitments, not a quotation of an explicit universal ban (pp. 40–41).

8.2 Is "formal" now merely a flattering word for "general"?

It would be if its only test were breadth. The object case instead turns on material classification versus topic-role; the person case on forms of inquiry and reciprocal address; the doing case on completion and the point of asking for reasons. Each has to be shown in particular applications. These differences do not collapse into one formal calculus. The shared comparison is that an expression can articulate how particular uses are organized rather than add another observed characteristic to them.

The standard is comparative and defeasible. W itself says ordinary formal uses need not have the type-homogeneity of variables in formal notation (pp. 111–112). It also distinguishes the fully formal use of "person" from its material aspects. The "formal concept" designation is useful only while the differences from its technical model remain explicit. A material genus is not transformed into a category merely by moving it upwards in a taxonomy.

8.3 Does systematic clarification regulate language against Wittgenstein?

PI §109 subordinates philosophical description to the problems that give it its purpose; §§124 and 132 resist reforming actual usage and deny that there is one uniquely correct order to be imposed. My proposal to make overview the organizing aim exceeds the methodological priority stated there. W acknowledges the re-accentuation: individual problems become

considerations in justifying a conceptual account (pp. 106–108).

There is nonetheless a distinction between revising ordinary practice and arranging its contrasts for a philosophical purpose. PI §122 treats surveyable representation as basic, and §132 allows an order for a purpose among several possible orders. The construction is acceptable on those terms only if it remains an arrangement, not a verdict that all ordinary utterances must conform to it. P8 is therefore a constraint on the philosophy, not a demand addressed to ordinary speakers. Where a proposed distinction fails a counterexample, the philosophical account must be qualified.

A final limitation concerns "without pragmatic restrictions" in R (pp. 1–2). Philosophical explanation may range beyond the immediate practical occasion of a misunderstanding. It does not thereby escape all interests or purposes: the interest in surveyability remains. Nor does ordinary language's capacity for explaining its expressions imply that every expression admits a final explanation, that every disagreement can be settled, or that language can justify its practice from nowhere.

9. Conclusion

The bridge between TLP 4.122–4.128 and PI §560 is not an unnoticed identity of doctrines. The early account distinguishes formal role from ordinary predication and denies that form is independently added to its instances. The later remark directs the clarification of "meaning" towards actual explanations. To connect them requires the further thought that some everyday categorial uses make explicit contrasts already operative in particular understanding.

Object, person and doing make that thought assessable. "Object" need not name a material thing; addressing someone differs from identifying an obstruction; the completion of a particular crossing differs from the continuation of swimming. Meaning-explanations can make these contrasts explicit. Their success depends on the uses they clarify, not on the number of categories listed or on the authority of a supposed hidden logical structure.

On this basis philosophy can continue ordinary explanation in a connected practice of reflective conceptual clarification. The practical capacity precedes its philosophical articulation. The articulation remains answerable to that capacity, while being able to correct

misunderstandings arising from its forms of expression. This is the constructive conclusion defended here. A completed and exclusive system of philosophy would require an argument beyond it.

References and textual conventions

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Aristotle. *Metaphysics* Θ6, 1048b18–35. Checked in Hugh Tredennick's English translation as reproduced by Perseus, whose bibliographic notice identifies *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vols. 17–18 (1933, 1989). Greek terminology and manuscript transmission have not been independently collated. [Passage](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0052:book%3D9:section%3D1048b).

Editorial limits

Primary online passages were checked on 13 November 2026. These are digital reproductions, not a critical-edition collation. *Eigentliche Begriffe* is rendered “proper concepts” when reporting the early text; Lange’s contrasting expression “material concepts” is retained for his broader programme. *Gegenstand* is translated “object,” but neither ordinary material things nor persons are thereby identified with Tractarian simples. “Reflexive structure” denotes a capacity for explanation and correction, not a mathematically specified reflexive relation. The analogy between an equivalence relation’s reflexivity and linguistic self-explanation is not used as an argumentative premise.

Lange’s quotations from *Philosophical Grammar* IV.55 and *The Big Typescript* provide background in the supplied texts. The relevant published editions were not directly checked here; an attempted direct retrieval of the Ts-213 transcription was unavailable. No central premise depends on certifying those quotations. R, p. 2, gives “4.112 c” for the early internal/external-relations distinction; the checked passage is 4.122. Full source statuses, qualifications and example provenance appear in the accompanying premise-to-source map and examples appendix.

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