III

Language Learning and Meaning

THE PROBLEM of language-learning, of how we come to master our native language, is a continuing central concern in Wittgenstein's later work. Again and again he inquires "How did we *learn* the meaning of this word . . . ? From what sort of examples? In what language-games?"[1] But he is not interested in these matters for their own sake; he uses them to investigate the nature of what the child learns: language, concepts, meaning. And these, in turn, illuminate human life and thought, and our world. In this chapter we shall explore one of the most fundamental features of language-learning and meaning that Wittgenstein stresses: their piecemeal, conglomerate quality. Like the training by examples which "point beyond" themselves, learning one's native language is what I shall call a "learning from cases." And the concepts and meanings one learns are consequently also composite, assembled out of cases. The significance of these ideas may be approximated (though also in each case somewhat distorted) by looking at three nonlinguistic examples: the contrast between common-law and Roman-law systems; Michael Oakeshott's contrast between habitual, inarticulate morality and didactic morality based on explicit principles; and Thomas Kuhn's contrast between science seen as the activity of scientists and science seen as a body of achieved knowledge.

The contrast between common-law and Roman-law systems is perhaps the most familiar. Legal systems which originated under Roman domination derive from a single, authoritative, systematic legal code, drafted for and promulgated by a ruler and altered only by legislation. Roman-law judges are supposed to decide cases with reference to this code, supplemented where necessary by the commentaries and opinions of legal experts as to what the code means. They need not read or consult each others' decisions. Common law, by contrast, is not derived from any compre-

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), par. 77.

hensive legal code; and though it may be altered by legislation, the great bulk of it does not originate in legislation. It originates in judicial cases, in particular decisions of particular judges, in accord with the principle of *stare decisis* which requires consistency and continuity, so that earlier decisions become binding precedent for later cases. The elaboration of principles in the common law is accomplished less by the commentaries of legal scholars than by the actual decisions rendered by judges in particular disputes.

Common-law courts do not normally give advisory opinions, considering principles in the abstract; their decisions are always reached in the context of some specific, real dispute. As a consequence, in studying the common law, it is often difficult to be sure just which features of a case were the decisive ones. Unlike hypothetical examples we invent, real legal cases have an infinite complexity of "features" that might be relevant. Participants, judges, students, have to determine what the relevant features are. The characteristic reasoning of common-law courts is what one commentator has called "reasoning by example."[2] Of course, common-law courts do write opinions and are expected to be consistent; so principles of common law do exist also. But the way those principles are articulated, and used, and learned, is different from the way the precepts of Roman law are articulated, used, and learned. The articulation of principles by a common-law court, like the court's statement about which features of a case were decisive, is always subject to further articulation and revision in later cases, in ways that could not have been foreseen. Facts in a case that were never explicitly mentioned in the decision settling it may turn out in retrospect, in the light of a later case, to be quite crucial. An articulation of principle that seemed fully adequate at the time may turn out, in the light of later, unanticipated cases, to be an improper formulation. Sometimes we get the disturbing impression that, as one commentator has said, in the common law "the rules change from case to case and are remade with each case."[3] One might say that the principles always remain in some sense derivative, dependent on the particular cases from which they are abstracted. That is why the common law is so often taught by the "case method," so that students learn not merely the principles but also the concrete content of the particular decisions in which these principles were fashioned. The abstract principles are given their full meaning and content, are fleshed out, by the details of the cases in which they arose; and only someone who can go back to the cases in all their original richness and complexity will know how to apply the principles consistently in new cases.

The distinction between Roman-law and common-law systems is paralleled by the distinction Michael Oakeshott draws between two forms,

[2] Edgar Bodenheimer, "A Neglected Theory of Legal Reasoning," *Journal of Legal Education*, 21 (1969), 373.

[3] Edward H. Levi, *Introduction to Legal Reasoning* (1949), p. 2, cited *ibid.*

as he calls them, of the moral life, each with its characteristic way of being learned.[4] The one form of moral life, he says, is reflective, rationalistic, principled, and articulate; its practitioners can say what they are doing and why, state the principles on which they act. The child is instructed in its principles systematically. In its other form, "the moral life is *a habit of affection and behavior*, not a habit of reflective *thought* but a habit of *affection* and *conduct*. . . . There is on the occasion, nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which we have been brought up."[5] This being brought up in a tradition is very different than learning from explicit, systematic principles or rules; and Oakeshott himself compares it to the way a child learns language. "We acquire habits of conduct, not by constructing a way of living upon rules or precepts learned by heart and subsequently practiced, but by living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner: we acquire habits of conduct in the same way as we acquire our native language. . . . What we learn here is what may be learned without the formulation of its rules."[6]

Focusing on the first, the explicitly principled form of morality, we are likely to say that morality is the system of rules we teach our children; focusing on the second, the inarticulate form, we are likely to say that morality is an activity or a way of conducting oneself. For it is not merely that the one form is taught by means of rules and the other by means of practice; the two forms are *constituted* in correspondingly different ways. The first kind of morality is deductive; its principles exist prior to its practice, and define that practice. The second kind is built up out of the practice itself. It is one of those activities which "emerge naively, like games that children invent for themselves." It appears, "not in response to a premeditated achievement, but as a direction of attention pursued without premonition of what it will lead to. . . . For a direction of attention, as it is pursued, may hollow out a character for itself and become specified in a 'practice.' "[7]

This kind of activity also has principles or rules, but they are abstracted from the practice and emerge out of it. As in language, Oakeshott says, so in inarticulate habitual morality: "what is learnt (or some of it) can be formulated in rules and precepts"; but the rules "are mere abridgements of the activity itself; they do not exist in advance of the activity."[8] This means, first, that the rules get their real content and meaning from the activity, are fleshed out by it. In a similar way, a constitutional or ideological principle is meaningful in the political life of a nation only to the extent that it is lived and practiced; and *what* it means, its content, is defined precisely by *how* it is lived and practiced. In that sense, "the

[4] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), esp. "The Tower of Babel" and "Political Education."
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 135.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 101.

freedom of an Englishman is not something exemplified in the procedure of *habeas corpus*, it *is*, at that point, the availability of that procedure."[9] And this means, second, that learning the rules or principles intellectually is not equivalent to mastering the practice; for *that* would require knowing how to use and apply them in all the inarticulate detail of the practice. Thus, for example, a cookbook is of use only to someone who already knows how to cook. "It is the stepchild not the parent of the activity" of cooking.[10]

A third parallel to Oakeshott's discussion of morality and the difference between Roman-law and common-law systems may be found in Kuhn's influential study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[11] Though we often, and justifiably, think of science as a systematic body of acquired knowledge, Kuhn argues that to the practicing scientist it looks much more like an activity; and so the historian of science does well to regard it as an activity, too. Though school children are taught science in terms of its accumulated, systematic principles, scientists themselves learn their profession primarily through studying what Kuhn calls "paradigms" of scientific achievement. By paradigms, Kuhn says he means "universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners."[12] They are concrete achievements in actual scientific practice, serving as "models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research."[13] They are not articulated explications of principles or rules or theory, but unanalyzed bundles of scientific practice, including "law, theory, application, and instrumentation together."[14]

Studying paradigms "is what mainly prepares the student for membership in the particular scientific community with which he will later practice. Because he there joins men who learned the bases of their field from the same concrete models, his subsequent practice will seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals. Men whose research is based on shared paradigms are committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice."[15]

Kuhn recognized that the term "paradigm" is in at least one way misleading. "In its established usage, a paradigm is an accepted model or pattern. . . . In grammar, for example, '*amo, amas, amat*' is a paradigm because it displays the pattern to be used in conjugating a large number of other Latin verbs, e.g., in producing '*laudo, laudas, laudat*.' In this

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 121.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 119; compare also p.101.
[11] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Compare Oakeshott, *op. cit.*, pp. 119, 213, 215.
[12] Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. x.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 10; compare "Postscript—1969," pp. 174–210.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 11. Kuhn is ambivalent on this last point, as subsequent quoted passages indicate.

standard application, the paradigm functions by permitting the replication of examples any one of which could in principle serve to replace it. In a science, on the other hand, a paradigm is rarely an object for replication. Instead, like an accepted judicial decision in the common law, it is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions."[16] It is an example, in short, that "points beyond itself," that needs to be applied to always new and different problems. For instance, a paradigm developed in studying one set of phenomena may be "ambiguous in its application to other closely related ones. Then experiments are necessary to choose among the alternative ways of applying the paradigm to the new area of interest."[17]

Like Oakeshott, Kuhn is anxious to make the point that learning from paradigms (in this open-ended sense) has different effects than learning from explicit rules or principles which someone else has abstracted for you. He, too, says that "rules . . . derive from paradigms, but paradigms can guide research even in the absence of rules."[18] It is relatively easy to determine what the shared paradigms of a mature scientific community are, but that is not yet a determination of the community's shared *rules*. The latter "demands a second step and one of a somewhat different kind. When undertaking it, the historian must compare the community's paradigms with each other and with its current research reports. In doing so, his object is to discover what isolable elements, explicit or implicit, the members of that community may have *abstracted* from their more global paradigms and deployed as rules in their research."[19] The scientists themselves apparently can "agree in their *identification* of a paradigm without agreeing on, or even attempting to produce, a full *interpretation* or *rationalization* of it. Lack of a standard interpretation or of an agreed reduction to rules will not prevent a paradigm from guiding research. . . . Indeed, the existence of a paradigm need not even imply that any full set of rules exists."[20]

Finally, as in our earlier examples, the principles or rules abstracted gain their significance and content only from the cases, the activity, on which they are based. The very concepts in which the principles are formulated derive their meaning from the paradigms in which they originate. The verbal definitions of such concepts, as Kuhn says, "have little scientific content when considered by themselves. . . . The scientific concepts to which they point gain full significance only when related, within a text or other systematic presentation, to other scientific concepts, to manipulative procedures, and to paradigm applications."[21]

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 142; compare p. 47.

Common law, habitual morality, science as an activity, all display important features illuminating how we learn our native language, and what it is we learn. They are all activities which do have principles, rules, general theories; but either the principles remain completely inarticulate and implicit, or they are abstracted *ad hoc* when they are needed and remain always secondary to the concrete instances from which they are drawn. In none of our examples are the principles laid down in a systematic, deductive way at the outset, by some authority or in accord with some conscious plan; rather, they accrue gradually through practice, subject to the exigencies of practice. Thus, their real meaning and full significance is completed only by the concrete cases from which they derive, and is accessible only to someone familiar with those cases, with the practice. These principles, and the corresponding practice, are both *learned from* and *constituted by* particular cases.

All this is equally true of the way a child learns its native language. But our examples are also likely to be misleading in certain respects. For they suggest that there is an alternative way of learning and constituting those activities: the didactic morality of articulated principles, the systematic code of Roman law. But in learning to speak no such alternative is available. No natural language is or could be didactically laid down by a legislator, nor could any child be taught its native language as a body of articulated rules. The child must grow and learn simultaneously, and what it learns neither needs to be nor can be fully articulated. At least until it is mature enough to ask for and understand definitions, the child simply encounters words. Mostly, it encounters them in situations where no one is trying to teach it anything; in this respect our whole discussion in the previous chapter was misleading. The child simply lives among persons who talk. For the most part, as Ziff says, "one is not taught one's native language, one learns it."[22]

Most of the time, the child does not encounter words in isolation either; here, too, the previous chapter misleads. Perhaps we tend to think of learning language as a matter of learning isolated words, because children speak isolated words long before they combine them into more complex utterances; or perhaps we are misled by thinking only of those occasions when we deliberately try to teach a word to the child.[23] But the child

[22] Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 35.

[23] Eric Lenneberg, "The Capacity for Language Acquisition," in Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz, eds., *The Structure of Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 593–4: "All children go through identical phases in the process of acquiring speech. First, they have a few words or phrases, never longer than three syllables, that refer [sic] to objects, persons, or complex situations. At this stage they may have a repertoire of fifty short utterances that are somewhat stereotyped

normally encounters not isolated words but whole utterances, in complex verbal contexts and worldly situations. What it learns about language, it learns from these contexts, verbal and worldly, and not from rules or principles or formulae. No two situations a child experiences are exactly alike; each has an unlimited number of possible "features" which might be singled out as semantically relevant. No one tells the child what is relevant, because no one is able to do so. The child may or may not notice any or all of the objects and people present, feelings (its own and other people's), actions (before, during, and after speech), relationships, and, of course, the spoken words. Wittgenstein says the child learns a word "under certain circumstances, which, however, [it] does not learn to describe," for "a description of those circumstances is not needed." In order to be able to use a word correctly, one "would *not* have to be able to describe its use."[24] And if an adult were asked to describe a word's use explicitly, he might well "give a quite inadequate description. (Like most people, if they tried to describe the use of money correctly). (They are not prepared for such a task)."[25]

Of course, we must not construe the child's learning as a matter of intentional inductive inquiry, as if the child were a small adult doing research on the "code" that is our language. The child need not formulate a hypothesis in order to speak, nor can it yet formulate a hypothesis. It is simply moved to do something that feels appropriate to the situation, because something about the situation seems familiar. Placed in the chair where yesterday we played pat-a-cake, the child claps its hands. Standing before the bathroom mirror, it begins to "shave" like father. In a certain situation, it makes a sound that was made there before.[26] First of all children imitate us, try to be like us and do what we do. Thus, they often repeat our utterances with a startlingly accurate imitation of our intonation and gestures. No doubt the word must already "mean something to" the child, or it would not be repeated in this situation; but the child need not think about its reasons, and need not "know what the word means."

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and are never combined one with the other. All attempts to make the child string up the words that he is known to use singly will fail until he reaches a certain stage of maturation. When this is attained, the combining of words seems to be quite automatic, that is, he will surprise the parents by suddenly putting two words together that may not have been given him for repetition, in fact, that may often sound queer enough to make it quite unlikely that anyone in the child's environment has ever spoken these words in just that sequence. 'Eat cup' may mean [sic?] 'the dog is eating out of the cup' or 'is the dog eating the cup?' and so on. Whatever was meant by this utterance (which was actually heard), it is a sequence of words that nobody had used in the particular situation in which the words were spoken. As the child grows older, longer phrases are composed of individual vocabularly items which had been in the child's repertoire for many months, sometimes years."

[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pars. 114–115.

[25] *Ibid.*, par. 525.

[26] See particularly Torgny T. Segerstedt, *Die Macht des Wortes* (Zürich: Pan-Verlag, 1947), pp. 35–60.

Consider another example of actual language-learning, in this case involving a three-and-a-half-year-old friend of mine. It is quite characteristic for children about that age to startle us from time to time by suddenly saying something far beyond their usual vocabulary, sounding incongruously grown-up. My friend came into her parents' bedroom in the morning, dragging her blanket. Told to take the blanket back and put it on her bed, she said, "I simply can't function in the morning without my blanket." At first her parents were astonished; they had no idea that a word like "function" was in the child's vocabulary. But then they recognized the expression as one the mother characteristically uses about her morning coffee, and everything seemed clear: the child had merely "picked up" the expression. Moreover, she "picked it up" well enough to use it correctly on this (almost?) appropriate occasion. Or should we say rather that something in the configuration of the situation reminded her of those other situations, involving mother and coffee, and she just found herself saying the words? Does the child at this moment know what a function is, what "function" means? The question has no clear answer; one wants to say yes and no. The child clearly knows something about the word, knows how to do at least one thing with it competently. But she cannot yet use it in other linguistic environments than "simply can't . . . without"; and if we asked her what it means she could not tell us.

With this example, we are no longer tempted at all to say that the child learned whatever it learned about the meaning of "function" from an adult's pointing out a function to it. Clearly it was the child itself that "looked at language and looked at the world and looked back and forth," as Ziff puts it, without deliberate adult inducement. And the language it looked at was not a word in isolation but a whole phrase, learned to some extent as a unit.[27] And the "world" it looked at was not just a collection of objects, one of which was being labeled or referred to. The world included people, and their feelings and actions, and consequences. What recurred was a context somehow familiar because a person (mother, child) was about to be deprived of something (coffee, blanket) and said something which altered the situation so that the person was not deprived after all. But if we say that the child recognizes recurrent factors in speech situations, that again is liable to be misunderstood to mean that the word is the name of the situation, rather than of an object. Thus we think of "bye-bye" as the child's label for situations of departure, and "no-no" as its term for referring to forbidden objects (we even join in, telling the child, "That's a 'no-no' "). But words need not be labels here at all, but like signals in a game, the appropriate thing to do under these circum-

[27] Clearly, much depends on the phrase "to some extent." For the phrase "simply can't_____without my . . ." forms a relatively fixed verbal environment for "function" at this point, but the child easily substituted "blanket" for "coffee" as the occasion required. Compare Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and tr. by Eugenia Haufmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966), pp. 87, 127–128; and Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, par. 150.

stances. "I simply can't function without . . ." is not the name of a situation, but an appropriate utterance to be said in that situation. If the child has learned the meaning of words by induction here, the induction was not about "what counts as an x" but about "when one says x."

To be sure, this is an account only of the early stages in language-learning. Once the child has begun to speak, its mastery of language is furthered by its own efforts and our responses. But our responses, too, can be misunderstood; no one tells the child what counts as a response, what as encouragement, what as correction. The child simply moves from cases in which it hears the word used to cases in which it utters the word. If there are authorities in this process, it is because the child takes them as authorities. "If what can be said in a language is not determined by rules, nor its understanding secured through universals, and if there are always *new* contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, objects, perceptions to be recorded and shared," as Cavell says, then "though 'in a sense' we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over, and we keep finding new potencies in words and new ways in which objects are conceptualized."[28]

As the child begins to master considerable portions of its native language, the systematic nature of language becomes a powerful aid to learning. New cases encountered can be assimilated to and fit into familiar patterns, and the accumulated store of familiar cases grows larger. (Chomsky has argued persuasively that at least some linguistic transformation patterns are inborn and occur in every human language, so that they need not be learned at all. For our purposes, it does not matter whether he is right in this interesting hypothesis.) Even if the child encounters a wholly new concept, the verbal context may be familiar enough to convey some idea of the meaning. Ziff speaks in this connection of "the principle of composition," roughly, a rule of economy or simplicity in trying to pair an utterance with those aspects of the circumstances in which it is uttered that are relevant to its meaning.[29] This again sounds more like scientific research than like a child learning to talk, but Ziff's basic point is valid.

We have said that the child learns the meanings of words from encountering these words in use, in verbal and worldly contexts. But not all of these examples it encounters will be suitable for learning: not every context is one in which a word can be correctly learned.[30] The child nears "the cat is on the mat," but in fact no animal is sitting on any small rug nearby; rather, a logico-grammatical discussion is under way. Or perhaps the speaker makes a mistake, pointing to a plastic cup and saying "that

[28] Stanley Cavell, "The Claim to Rationality" (unpublished dissertation, Harvard University), p. 219.

[29] Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, pp. 61–66.

[30] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 201. The entire controversy in the philosophical literature over the validity of arguments from "paradigm cases" is founded on this problem about learning our native language. See, for example, the debate between A. G. N. Flew and J. W. N. Watkins in *Analysis* 18 (December 1957), 25–42.

is a glass." Or perhaps he tells the child a lie, or speaks in metaphor, or makes a joke, or reads a quotation, or speaks ironically. Adults can usually recognize "standard" deviations like quotation, poetry, irony, from certain characteristic and largely conventional "markers" by which they are distinguished.[31] But the child has yet to master those markers. How does it distinguish "valid" examples?

The simple answer is that the child has no way of separating the "valid" from the "invalid" examples that it encounters, but the principle of composition is of significant help in eliminating deviations. Though there may be no cat on any mat when the child hears "the cat is on the mat," that sentence is structurally much like countless others encountered in other environments ("the dog is on the rug," "the cat is on the bed," "the cat is on the prowl," and so on). Moreover, though the environmental conditions for saying "the glass is half full" may be exactly the same as those for saying "the glass is half empty," those for saying "keep pouring until it is half full" are significantly different from those for saying "keep pouring until it is half empty"; and though we may say "fill it half full," we are not likely to say "fill it half empty."[32] Such problems of learning seem puzzling only as long as we think of each word or expression as a label for some visible phenomenon that should (ideally) be present to be named. But the child can learn a great deal about, say, rain, even if we make a mistake and say "it's raining" when in fact it is not raining. It can, for example, learn that rain requires the wearing of slickers and boots, will be good for the crops, means cancellation of the picnic. And perhaps if a mistake has been made, the child will later learn that "it isn't raining after all."[33]

Of course, sometimes the child will in fact learn wrong, draw the wrong conclusions about a word and make spurious connections among patterns. Each of us has at least one treasured example of such a mistake he once made as a child. Mine concerned the word "*nebbach*," a Yiddish word which had found its way into my parents' otherwise almost completely German vocabulary. "*Nebbach*" in fact means something like "unfortunately," and functions as an interjection ("I saw George and, *nebbach*, he's looking terrible"). Somehow I developed the idea that it was connected with the German words "*neben*" and "*nebenbei*," which mean "next to" or "beside," and I concluded that "*nebbach*" meant something like "by the way," "by the bye" or "incidentally" ("I saw George and, incidentally, he's looking terrible"). And I understood and used the word that way until well into my adolescence, when one day I used it in a particularly incongruous context, on an occasion when my mother happened to have the time to listen and to question me. Then, of course, she corrected me and I found out what "*nebbach*" really means. The point is,

[31] Ziff, *Semantic Analysis*, pp. 72–74.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 154.
[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

first, that children can mislearn; second, that such mislearning is likely to be reinforced by some spurious correlation or pattern of exactly the same sort that helps them to learn correctly in other instances; and third, that children can sometimes get along nicely for years with their incorrect understanding.

Eventually we become able to ask for and understand explanations, and to look up definitions in a dictionary. We become able to abstract rules, principles, definitions, explicitly for ourselves when we need them. Wittgenstein says, "we talk, we utter words, and only *later* get a picture of their life."[34] And the picture, the principle, the definitions, we abstract is always in a way tentative, subject to revision or replacement after further experience, as is true in all learning from cases.

MEANING

All that has been said about how we learn our native language is intended primarily to clarify the nature of language itself, of meaning, and of conceptual thought. For what we learn from cases is all we know, and we do eventually know meanings and concepts. As with the common law, habitual morality, science as activity: not just the learning, but the very substance of the enterprise is constituted of cases, conglomerate. The meanings of words are not merely learned from cases of their use; they are generated by, changed by, fleshed out and given content by, their use in various cases. The child learns the meaning of "function" from hearing it used, or using it, in expressions like "I simply can't function without . . ." on appropriate occasions. And the adults, who know what "function" means, do not know anything different in kind from what the child knows; they have only encountered more cases. We may be inclined to suppose that you cannot understand an expression like "I simply can't function without . . ." until you know what "function" means. But Wittgenstein suggests that, quite the other way around, the meaning is built up out of such expressions.

"What 'determining the length' means is not learned by learning what *length* and *determining* are; the meaning of the word 'length' is learnt by learning, among other things, what it is to determine length."[35] And, one might add, learning this in various contexts; for, of course, "determining length" is a very different activity for the length of a life, the length of a term paper, and the length of a room. Wittgenstein says that we are inclined to think of "measuring the distance to the sun" as if it *could* also

[34] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 209; compare Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 250: "The formalization of meaning relies therefore *from the start* on the practice of unformalized meaning."

[35] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 225.

be measured by a ruler.[36] For many purposes this does no harm. It does harm if the analogy leads us into contradictions, confusions, paradoxes; if we begin to feel that distance (length) is the sort of thing which can *in principle* be measured by a ruler wherever it occurs. But why should we suppose that? Is the length of a room (or the distance from wall to wall) a more definitive, more privileged instance of "length" than other instances? We learn the meaning of length from a great variety—a whole family—of cases. The question "How do we measure length," with its family of instances, helps us to understand what length *is*. What length is may be *abstracted* from the uses of "measuring length" together with the uses of "being longer than," together with the uses of "having changed in length," and so on. And each of these expressions will have a variety of uses, differing for lives, term papers, or rooms.

This does not mean that the word "length" is vague or loose, lacks meaning, or cannot be defined. We can define it, and, of course, as Cavell points out, "for *some* sorts of precision, for some purposes, we will need definitions."[37] But the definitions are based on, and secondary to, cases; and they do not interfere with the creative openness of natural language. We *can* give one of our concepts rigid limits, use one of our words for a rigidly limited concept, but Wittgenstein says we can also use it "so that the extension of the concept is *not* closed by a frontier."[38] And that is how we ordinarily use the concepts in our natural language, as distinct, say, from the concepts of mathematics. It is difficult to find and tell the boundary of an ordinary concept because it has none. "We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn . . . we can *draw* a boundary—for a special purpose."[39] But when we do that, though we "are free" to draw the boundary as we like, it "will never entirely coincide with the actual usage, as this usage has no sharp boundary."[40] If someone else tried to draw a sharp boundary, "I could not acknowledge it as the one that I too always wanted to draw, or had drawn in my mind. For I did not want to draw one at all."[41]

Cavell says, "We learn the use of 'feed the kitty,' 'feed the lion,' 'feed the swans,' and one day one of us says 'feed the meter,' or 'feed in the film,' or 'feed the machine,' or 'feed his pride,' or 'feed wire,' and we understand, we are not troubled."[42] The passage can serve equally well to show how language is learned, or what language is like: how meanings

[36] Wittgenstein, *Foundations of Mathematics*, tr. by. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), p. 67.

[37] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 219.

[38] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 68.

[39] *Ibid.*, par. 69; my italics.

[40] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 19.

[41] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 76.

[42] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 220.

are composed, how adults operate with language, how language grows and changes.[43] Each involves a kind of projection from a series of familiar, paradigmatic cases into new and unprecedented ones; yet, in each, not just any projection will be acceptable, and the permissible routes of projection are deeply controlled.

It is tempting to say that this is the whole point about natural language, what natural language is *for*. Why do we not confine words to the precise context in which they originate, or in which we first encounter them? Why do we not use a new and different word each time we encounter a new context? But each context is new. The result would not be a language at all; for how could one "learn" the "meanings" of "words" which were used once only and then discarded, like paper tissues? Surely the point in talking is precisely to connect new, unfamiliar situations to old, familiar ones, whether it be to aid our own understanding or to inform someone else or to further some activity or to express some feeling. And language can make such connections for us only if concepts are projectible, but projectible in regularized ways, ways that really do make relevant connections. Cavell says, "what Wittgenstein ultimately wishes to show is that it *makes no sense* at all to give a general explanation for the generality of language, because it makes no sense at all to suppose words in general might *not* recur, that we might possess a name for a thing (say 'chair' or 'feeding') and yet be willing to call *nothing* (else) 'the same thing.' "[44] As Wittgenstein says, "concepts are not for use on a single occasion" only.[45]

The individual must draw his own conclusions, abstract his own definitions from the cases he encounters; it is all up to him. And yet, it is not all up to him, for there is such a thing as making a mistake, learning wrong. Children do that, and then we correct them. But even as adults we sometimes find out that we do not know the meaning of a word we thought we knew. Actually, one must distinguish at least three levels here, since it is always conceivable that the adult "correcting" a child could himself be mistaken about correct usage or the meaning of a word. We must distinguish the child (or, more broadly, any speaker), the adult (or, more broadly, any hearer) who might potentially correct him, and what we generally call "the English language." The language has regularities or rules, so that it makes sense to call some usages correct or normal or ordinary, others odd or incorrect. Yet English, like any natural language, is not a closed, finished system, "everywhere circumscribed by rules." We are always able to say new things, to project old concepts into new situations; at the same time, not just any projection will do. Projections are controlled at all three of the levels mentioned: not just any will occur to us, will be understood or accepted by the person we address, will be in accord with the regularities of the English language.

[43] Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
[44] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 233; compare p. 228.
[45] Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, par. 568.

Cavell says that language "is tolerant in the way steel is; its concepts are tempered. While it is true that we must use the same word in, project a word into, various contexts (must be willing to call some contexts the *same*), it is equally true that what will *count* as a legitimate projection is deeply controlled. You can 'feed peanuts to the monkey' and 'feed pennies to a meter,' but you cannot feed a monkey by stuffing pennies in its mouth, and if you mash peanuts into a coin slot you won't *be* feeding the meter. Would you be feeding a lion if you put a bushel of carrots in his cage? That he in fact does not eat them would not be enough to show that you weren't; he *may* not eat his *meat*. But in the *latter* case 'may not eat' means 'isn't hungry then' or 'refuses to eat it.' And not every case of 'not eating' is 'refusing food.' The swan who glides past the Easter egg on the shore, or over a school of minnows, or under the pitch-fork of meat the keeper is carrying for the lion cage, is not refusing to eat the egg, the fish or the meat. What will be, or count as, 'being fed' is related to what will count as 'refusing to eat,' and thence related to 'refusing to mate,' 'refusing to obey,' etc."[46]

All this is most directly applied to the meaning of a word when Wittgenstein turns to what he calls "the great question that lies behind all these considerations." That is the question of "the nature of language," and he explores it by again making use of his analogy between language and games. Wittgenstein imagines a critic complaining that he has "nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language." The early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* might have accepted the critic's question as perfectly legitimate, and answered that the essence of language is its capacity to picture the world. But in the *Investigations* he rejects the idea that language has that kind of an essence: "I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language.' "[47]

To explain this idea, Wittgenstein turns to the question of what the word "game" means, trying to show that the meaning is not some single, characteristic feature that all games have in common: "Don't say: 'There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games" '—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. —For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that . . . Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games much that is common is retained, but much is lost. —Are they all

[46] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 223.
[47] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 65.

'amusing'? Compare chess with naughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear."[48]

Thus, we might explain to someone what a game is by describing various games to him, and then we might add (inducing him to go on) "This *and similar things* are called 'games.' "[49] And in teaching him by the presentation of examples this way, we would not be telling him less than we know ourselves, for there *is* no essential characteristic of game-ness. What we find when we examine examples of games is not a shared essence, but "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail."[50] One might say, the relationship among the cases is nontransitive: case A resembles case B this way, case B resembles case C a different way, case C resembles case D in yet a third way, case E is like cases A and D, but not like B and C, and so on. "We extend our concept . . . as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres."[51]

Wittgenstein calls this kind of network of partially overlapping similarities "family resemblances," for they overlap and crisscross in the same way as "the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc."[52] Games, he says, "form a family." And instances of what we would call "language," or the use of language, form a family. Perhaps no member of the family will have all of the family characteristics; perhaps some of the characteristics are even mutually inconsistent, so that no one member *can* have them all. To recognize a member of the family as a relative, one need not be able to *say* just how he resembles, reminds us of, the others, though one might be able to say if one tried. Cavell puts it this way: "There is a Karamazov essence, but you won't find it if you look for *a* quality (look, that is, with the wrong 'picture' of a quality in mind)." You find it by learning to recognize instances, "that *that* is what 'an intellectual Karamazov' is, and *that* is what 'a spiritual Karamazov' is, and *that* is what 'Karamazov authority' is."[53]

[48] *Ibid.*, par. 66.
[49] *Ibid.*, par. 69.
[50] *Ibid.*, par. 66; compare par. 75.
[51] *Ibid.*, par. 67.
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 233.

This notion of "family resemblance" has been perhaps as widely adopted and hailed as any other insight in Wittgenstein's work; yet I think its point is almost always partly misunderstood, because Wittgenstein's analogies are deceptive. First, they falsely suggest a physical objectivity to the relevant features that does not in fact exist. One can see each separate fiber in a rope, see where one leaves off and another begins. One can establish the biological basis for family membership and family resemblance; characteristic features are controlled by chromosome patterns, and so on. But in language it is seldom so clear which features count, and a concept must always be projectible into new situations. Second, the analogies still suggest, or at least allow, a label-and-object interpretation. They allow us to think that if all games do not share a single common feature, at least groups of games share partly overlapping clusters of features.[54] But the real point is not features of games at all, but features of the situations in which we talk about games—not how to recognize a game, but when to say "game."

MENTAL ACTIVITIES

This becomes much clearer in those long sections of the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein explores concepts like "understanding," "intending," "meaning," "expecting," "reading"—verbals which we might want to say refer to mental activities. His treatment of these concepts is extraordinarily dense and complex, and he constantly shifts from one to another. Still, the basic pattern of the argument is discernible. If words were simply labels for phenomena, then verbs would be labels for actions or states of being. Some would refer to physical activities or states, which one might be able to depict in an illustration. But others, like "understand" or "expect," could not be illustrated that way. If we are nevertheless convinced that these verbs must refer to something, we will postulate or assume an invisible, mental, inner, private activity or state, accessible only to introspection.[55] (We may feel reinforced in this assumption by the facts of brain physiology. Surely, we may feel, whenever we read or understand or mean we are using our brains, which must mean that some physiological process is going on there. So we think vaguely that that process must be what the word refers to.) Wittgenstein endeavors again and again, to wean

[54] See, for example, Renford Bambrough, "Universals and Family Resemblances," in George Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 186–204. Perhaps this temptation would have been slightly lessened if the English "game" were as intimately tied to a significant and wide-ranging verb ("gaming," after all, is quite restricted) as the German "*Spiel*" is to "*spielen*." The passage quoted at n. 48, above, more accurately reflects ordinary usage in German than in English for the same reason.

[55] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 125. The point forms the main theme of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), where he calls it "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" (pp. 15–16). Though Ryle's treatment is much easier to understand, Wittgenstein's ranges further.

us from this habit of thought. He shows us that the inner or mental process is a postulate and not an observed fact; though a characteristic inner process or feeling may be present in *some* instances of understanding, reading, expecting, it is not present in *all* instances. Part of the difficulty turns out to arise from the fact that these words are not (or not merely) labels for referring to *anything*. They are used in other language games as well, and those uses also help to shape their meaning. In addition, as we shall see in the next chapter, their meaning is dependent on the context of their use.

Take "understanding": what happens when someone suddenly understands? Wittgenstein again has recourse here to the language games in which one person writes down a series of numbers and the other is supposed to continue the series correctly. At one moment the man is watching, puzzled; at the next moment he says "Now I understand," or "Now I can go on," and proceeds to continue the series. What changed? Certainly his saying those words or his physical movements cannot constitute his understanding; so we try to "get hold of the mental process of understanding which seems to be hidden behind the coarser and therefore more visible accompaniments."[56] But when we look "inward," at what goes on in our minds as we suddenly understand something, we may find any number of different thoughts or feelings, or none at all. "For example, while A was slowly putting one number after another, B was occupied with trying various algebraic formulae on the numbers which had been written down. After A had written the number 19 B tried the formula $a_n = n^2 + n - 1$; and the next number confirmed his hypothesis. Or again, B does not think of formulae. He watches A writing his numbers down with a certain feeling of tension, and all sorts of vague thoughts go through his head. Finally he asks himself: 'What is the series of differences?' He finds the series 4, 6, 8, 10 and says: Now I can go on. Or he watches and says 'Yes, I know *that* series'—and continues it, just as he would have done if A had written down the series 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. —Or he says nothing at all and simply continues the series. Perhaps he had what might be called the sensation 'that's easy!'. (Such a sensation is, for example, that of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is mildly startled.)"[57] It might even be that "nothing at all occurred in B's mind except that he suddenly said 'Now I know how to go on'—perhaps with a feeling of relief; and that he did in fact go on working out the series without using the formula."[58]

Now, which of these phenomena is the activity or state of understanding? But he might think or say any of these things without having understood. "For it is perfectly imaginable that the formula should occur

[56] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 153.
[57] *Ibid.*, par. 151.
[58] *Ibid.*, par. 179.

to him and that he should nevertheless not understand. 'He understands' must have more in it than: the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those more or less characteristic *accompaniments* or manifestations of understanding."[59] None of them, we want to say, is the understanding itself. But perhaps we are wrong to assume that the understanding is any single phenomenon, always present when someone truly understands. We need not assume that, when a man tells us "Now I understand," he is giving a descriptive report of an event or process he has just observed within himself. "It would be quite misleading . . . to call the words a 'description of a mental state'. —One might rather call them a 'signal'; and we judge whether it was rightly employed by what he goes on to do."[60] Understanding is not merely a state or activity to be labeled, but a commitment about performance to come.

Or consider the example of "meaning." We say something, and mean it or don't mean it; or we say something and mean something else by it. Or we speak with or without meaning. But how do we do those things? "What is going on in us when we *mean* (and don't merely say) words"?[61] What, for instance, "is it to *mean* the words '*That* is blue' at one time as a statement about the object one is pointing to—at another as an explanation of the word 'blue'?"[62] Certainly we needn't look any different when we mean it one way than when we mean it the other way. So we conclude that the difference must be inner—an intention, a directing of our attention. And sometimes the intention will be there and apparent; but not always. The word "meaning" is used in language games far more complex than we at first suppose.

Recall the example of what might happen in the number-series game if a pupil correctly wrote the series of even numbers up to 1,000, but then continued 1,004, 1,008, 1,012 . . . The teacher stops him, and the pupil says in surprise, "Yes; isn't this how I was meant to do it?" The answer, of course, is no. The teacher meant for him to write 1,002 after 1,000, and 1,004 after 1,002. Yet the teacher did not think about 1,000 or 1,002 or 1,004 until after the pupil made his mistake. Indeed, since the series is infinite, he cannot have thought about all the terms the pupil is to write; yet he meant for them to appear in their proper sequence. The teacher knows what he meant the pupil to do in a case like this one, without having to cast his mind back to his own thoughts and feelings at the time he set the task. "The language-game 'I mean (or meant) *this*' (subsequent explanation of a word) is quite different from this one: 'I thought of . . . as I said it.' "[63] Meaning is not an activity, with duration, that takes place while we speak. "If we say to someone 'I should be delighted to see

[59] *Ibid.*, par. 152.
[60] *Ibid.*, par. 180.
[61] *Ibid.*, par. 507.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 18; compare par. 666.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 217; the example is from par. 185.

you' and mean it, does a conscious process run alongside these words . . . ? This will hardly ever be the case."[64] Nor is it helpful to postulate an unconscious process. "The process which we might call 'speaking and meaning what you speak' is not necessarily distinguished from that of speaking thoughtlessly by what happens *at the time when you speak.*"[65]

Sometimes, asked what you meant, you will need to cast your mind back and try to recall your thoughts as you spoke; but at other times this will be pointless. Compare saying "I shall be delighted to see you" with saying "The train leaves at 3:30." Asked whether you meant the first of these utterances, "you would then probably think of the feelings, the experiences, which you had while you said it." But about the second utterance, the question whether you meant it really would not make much sense. You would not know what you were being asked, and would be at a loss to answer. You might answer, "Why shouldn't I have meant it? What are you suggesting?" At any rate, you would not try to remember what went on in your mind at the time you spoke. "In the first case we shall be inclined to speak about a feeling characteristic of meaning what we said, but not in the second."[66]

In still other cases, our answer about "what we meant" will look much more like a decision made retrospectively, at the time when we are asked, than like a recollection of our thoughts at the time we originally spoke. We can even have meant things of which we were ignorant at the time. Consider this conversation:

"Napoleon really was very bourgeois."
"You mean the man who won the Battle of Austerlitz?"
"I don't know about any battles; was there more than one Napoleon?"
"Well, yes. There was Napoleon I after the French Revolution, who won the Battle of Austerlitz; and then there was Louis Napoleon in the mid-nineteenth century. I thought you might mean him because he really *was* very bourgeois."
"No, no. I meant the one who won the Battle of Austerlitz."

He meant that one, though he did not even know there was such a battle. Again, "I meant" here seems to have the quality of a quasi-performative; it is difficult to decide whether saying it describes an existing connection or makes a new one. We use expressions like "So you meant . . ." or "So you really wanted to say . . ." in order, Wittgenstein says, "to lead someone from one form of expression to another," from what he first said to what he is now willing to accept as an interpretation of it.[67]

The reason we suppose that the "meaning" must have been an activity

[64] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 34.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
[66] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[67] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par 334. Of course there will be other times when we will feel unable to decide whether we meant the man who won the Battle of Austerlitz or not (if, for example, we have been reading about Napoleon but didn't know that there were two, and so don't know which one we were reading about).

going on at the same time as the speech is, first of all, because we use the past tense. We ask "*Did* you mean . . .?" and answer that we *meant* for him to write 1,002 after 1,000. "The past tense in the word 'to mean' suggests that a particular act of meaning had been performed when the rule was given, though as a matter of fact this expression alludes to no such act."[68] And, of course, that fact of usage goes with a whole set of "rules" of the grammar of "what you meant" that prevent it from being merely an *arbitrary* decision made later, when you are asked. "What is there in favour of saying that my words describe an existing connection," a meaning that was already there before I was asked about it? "Well, they relate to various things which didn't simply make their appearance with the [later] words. They say, for example, that I *should have* given a particular answer then, if I had been asked."[69] What I meant is not the same thing as what I mean now, or what I now wish I had meant, or what I would mean if I uttered the same words now. The question of what I meant "refers to a definite time . . . but not to an *experience* during that time."[70]

Sometimes, in order to answer it, I will have to remember my thoughts at the time. But at other times that won't be necessary at all, or won't be helpful. The grammar of the verb "mean"—the way we have learned to operate with it—pulls us in opposite directions here. On the one hand it tells us that the act of meaning took place with the original speech; on the other hand, when we look for that act, nothing we perceive satisfies us as being the act itself. In short, a verb like "to mean" is not simply a label for some recognizable inner process; it is a complex, composite tool put together out of a variety of heterogeneous parts—the various contexts and language games in which the word is used. These include feelings and actions and circumstances, phenomena to which the word can refer, but also phenomena which characterize the occasions for its use as a signal.

Similarly, "neither the expression 'to intend the definition in such-and-such a way' nor the expression 'to interpret the definition in such-and-such a way' stands for a process which accompanies the giving and hearing of the definition."[71] The intention *with which* one acts does not "accompany" the action, nor does the meaning of what one says "accompany" speech. Meaning and intention are "neither 'articulated' nor 'non-articulated'; to be compared neither with a single note which sounds during the acting or speaking, nor with a tune."[72] These verbals do not stand for a process or activity that accompanies speech because they do not, in that sense, stand for anything at all.[73] Their grammar, the language

[68] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 142; compare p. 39.
[69] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 684.
[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 216–217.
[71] *Ibid.*, par. 34.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 217.
[73] Karl-Otto Apel, *Analytical Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1967), p. 36.

games in which they are used, is vastly more complex than the analogy with verbs like "eat" would suggest. That is why verbs like "know," "intend," "understand," and "mean" are peculiarly deficient in their participial forms. We do not say "I am knowing it," "He was understanding it," and the like. And a Wittgensteinian perspective makes the reason why we don't readily apparent: we have no *use* for such expressions, they are not among our language games for these concepts. Meaning, intending, knowing, are not (always) processes that have duration, like eating or running. "Suppose it were asked: *When* do you know how to play chess? All the time? or just while you are making a move? And the *whole* of chess during each move? —How queer that knowing how to play chess should take such a short time, and a game so much longer!"[74]

Our concepts, then, are compounds, assembled out of the variety of cases in which they are characteristically used. We learn their use and their meaning from such cases, and the meaning itself is merely a distillate of what we have learned. These cases may be extremely heterogeneous, not just in the sense that there are a lot of different kinds of, say, "games," but in the sense that a lot of different language games may be played with a single word. And even if the word is a noun, many of these language games need not be label-and-object kinds of games, but may involve quasi-performative signaling. So the meaning of a word may be a conglomerate of very diverse kinds of parts indeed. That turns out to be a fact of profound significance, as we shall see shortly; but first we need to examine one more element in the configuration of language: the significance of context.

[74] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 59. Compare Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, p. 116; also Jean-Paul Sartre on the inner mental state we call "love": "I am not constantly thinking about the people I love, but I claim to love them even when I am not thinking about them." "An Explication of *The Stranger*," in Germaine Brée, ed., *Camus* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 113.

IV

Context, Sense, and Concepts

MEANING is compounded out of cases of a word's use, and what characterizes those cases is often the speech situation, not the presence of something being referred to. As a consequence, the significance for meaning of situation, of circumstances, of context, is much greater than one might suppose. We commonly assume, and with good reason, that the meaning of a word remains fixed no matter in which context it is used. We think of the word as a constant, inserted into a variety of different verbal expressions on various occasions. In the first half of this chapter, we shall see what is wrong with that assumption, how meaning is context-dependent and needs to be completed by context. We shall then be ready, in the second half of the chapter, to sum up the significance of what has been said so far for conceptual thought.

We may begin where we left off, with the vocabulary of "mental activity," specifically "meaning" and "understanding." It was suggested that these will strike us as mysterious inner processes only as long as we insist that the words must be simply labels for classes of phenomena; instead, we need to recognize their function in other language games as well. But that is not sufficient for solving the problems about these verbals. One way of explaining why not would be to say that, after all, the words *can sometimes* be used as labels, can be used for referring to meaning or understanding. And surely what they are then used to refer to *is* a mental activity (what else might it be?). Only we began with the wrong notion, the wrong picture, of what a mental activity is, and how one is recognized.

A more accessible way of explaining why the distinction between labeling and signaling functions is not enough to solve the problems about these verbs might be to show what remains unsolved. A word like "meaning" may sometimes be a true performative, so that in saying "I mean" we *make* a connection rather than describe one. But "understanding" is at most quasi-performative; saying "I understand" is by no means equivalent to understanding. We may say we understand and then discover that we

were wrong; "I understand" can be false in a way that "I promise" cannot. So there remains the question: How do we tell when we ourselves understand? How do we know when to say "I understand" and not have it turn out false? And the old answer will still tempt us: We know by introspecting the characteristic process or feeling of understanding. Moreover, the explanatory power of the idea of signaling or quasi-performative functions is much less with respect to other verbals of "mental activity" that Wittgenstein discusses—verbs like "expecting," "reading," or "pointing to." What does help in solving these problems is precisely the significance of context.

We have said that sometimes the pupil in the number-series games says "Now I understand" because he has had a characteristic experience, such as the formula occurring to him. But we said that such an experience is neither necessary nor sufficient to his understanding, and thus cannot be the understanding itself. Wittgenstein says that the "particular circumstances" are what justifies someone in saying he understands when the formula occurs to him: "it is *the circumstances* under which he had such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands."[1] What sort of circumstances? Well, for instance, "such circumstances as that he had learnt algebra, had used such formulae before."[2] Only in the appropriate surrounding circumstances will the experience or feelings characteristic of sudden understanding *be* understanding. As Cavell says, a man can understand "in the absence of any particular feeling, and in the absence of any particular behavior. The *question* is: *what* particular behaviors and what particular feelings will *count as*" understanding in various circumstances. The point is "that 'in themselves' *no* particular feeling or particular behavior" will be understanding.[3]

What it comes to is something like this: we learn such a word in a variety of contexts, learn to use it in a variety of contexts. Sometimes what makes a context suitable for its use will be a characteristic feeling we experience, sometimes certain behavior on someone else's part, sometimes a commitment we are willing to undertake, but always against a background of suitable surrounding circumstances. We learn to say "I understand," for instance, when the formula occurs to us, under certain circumstances; but we also learn to say "he understands" when he smiles, takes that chalk from us, and moves to the blackboard, under certain circumstances. We further learn from the way the word is used that neither the experience of thinking of the formula nor his smiling and moving themselves are the understanding. For either might occur without our (or his) being able to continue the series correctly. And even being

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pars. 154, 155; compare his "Bemerkungen über Frazers *The Golden Bough*," *Synthese*, 17 (1961), p. 247.

[2] *Ibid.*, par. 179; compare pars. 181, 323.

[3] Stanley Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," (unpublished dissertation, Harvard University), p. 54.

able to continue the series is not the understanding itself, for we can imagine circumstances in which we would say that he understood but was nevertheless unable to continue the series correctly. Our concept of understanding is a conglomerate of these various occasions for its use, including their appropriate surrounding circumstances. Wittgenstein says, "these kinds of use of 'understanding' make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding. For I *want* to apply the word 'understanding' to all this."[4] We have, as Wittgenstein says, a whole series of props in readiness to support our concept; yet each of them is dependent on circumstances, each is corrigible, none is the understanding itself. (That they should be grouped together in a single concept may now strike us as quite arbitrary, but we must postpone that question.)

We may still be tempted to conclude that the understanding must be the sum total of the characteristic experiences plus all the necessary surrounding circumstances. But Wittgenstein responds that the surrounding circumstances merely "constitute the scene for our language-game," are not themselves part of the game.[5] In some circumstances, thinking of the formula justifies us in saying we understand; then, "I understand" is equivalent to "I know the formula." But that does not mean that these expressions are equivalent everywhere, synonymous. As Wittgenstein puts it, "we do say: 'Now I can go on, I mean I know the formula', as we say 'I can walk, I mean I have time'; but also 'I can walk, I mean I am already strong enough'; or: 'I can walk, as far as the state of my legs is concerned', that is, when we are contrasting *this* condition for walking with others." But Wittgenstein warns against supposing "that there is some *totality* of conditions corresponding to the nature of each case (e.g. for a person's walking)," that "I can walk" is a label for the totality of these conditions.[6] Different concepts, different expressions, may "touch here and coincide over a stretch. But you need not think that all lines are *circles*," that if they coincide over a stretch they must coincide everywhere.[7]

One could say of understanding or meaning what Wittgenstein says of intending: that it is "embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess."[8] That is why a speaker can "mean" something of which he is ignorant at the time (the Napoleon who won the Battle of Austerlitz); our language and our culture make the connections between what he says and what he means (can mean). And that is why the teacher can mean, or intend, for the pupil to write 1,002 after 1,000, even if he did not think about those numbers. He "meant" for the

[4] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 532; compare Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949), p. 96.

[5] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 179.

[6] *Ibid.*, par. 183; compare Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 114.

[7] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 192.

[8] *Ibid.*, par. 337.

pupil to write 1,002 in the sense that he had "mastered a particular technique in arithmetic and algebra, and that he taught someone else the expansion of a series in the usual way."[9] The circumstances make possible the intention.

Consider another mental activity, "expecting." It, too, lacks definitive physical markers; we can't always tell from a man's behavior whether he is expecting anything, or what he is expecting. It, too, is associated with certain characteristic feelings or experiences, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute expectation. Thus we may be "expecting N. to tea on Thursday" without having any particular inner experience or feeling, without even thinking about him. And, conversely, the feeling is not enough. Here, for instance, is a characteristic feeling Wittgenstein calls "certainly a case of expecting": "I watch a slow match burning, in high excitement follow the progress of the burning and its approach to the explosive."[10] Yet even this characteristic feeling is dependent on circumstances. "An expectation is imbedded in a situation, from which it arises. The expectation of an explosion may, for example, arise from a situation in which an explosion *is to be expected*."[11] But now suppose, as Cavell suggests, "that while you are shaving one morning you drop your razor into the basin and suddenly are overcome with this feeling characteristic of watching a flame approach an explosive." If someone notices your tenseness and asks what's wrong, you are not likely to say, "I'm waiting for the explosion," or even, "I'm expecting an explosion," but perhaps something like, "I have this queer feeling that something is about to explode." But, what makes the feeling *queer*? We were imagining it to be merely our ordinary, characteristic feeling of expecting an explosion. "Obviously, its queerness comes from its occurring *there*, where, though you are not in fact expecting anything (= there is nothing in those circumstances to be expected . . .), you have this feeling of expecting something."[12]

So there is such a thing as a feeling characteristic of waiting for an explosion, and one might recognize that feeling even if it occurred in circumstances where no explosion is to be expected. But that feeling does not, itself, constitute "expecting an explosion." For that, appropriate surrounding circumstances are also necessary. And it is possible to expect without any particular characteristic feeling, in which case the expectation presumably consists only of the surrounding circumstances, including what precedes and follows. Nor is there a separate characteristic feeling for each of the different things one might expect.

Another method by which Wittgenstein demonstrates the significance of context in mental activities is by inventing experiments in which we

[9] *Ibid.*, par. 692.
[10] *Ibid.*, par. 576.
[11] *Ibid.*, par. 581.
[12] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 124.

are to perform these activities on command. He invites us, for instance, to say "It's cold in here" and *mean* "It's warm in here." Or to point to a piece of paper—and then to its color, and then to its shape. It is not that we flatly cannot point to the color or the shape, but that we feel embarrassingly unsure about whether we have succeeded in doing it or not. We experience a peculiar sense of strain; we concentrate, we "blink with effort" as we "try to parade the right meanings before" our minds.[13] Yet in the normal course of our lives we do not experience any extra strain in pointing to the color of an object or meaning something by our words; no special concentration is required.

We experience strain and effort in the experiments, not because meaning and pointing are particularly difficult activities, nor because they are involuntary, but because they are not simply activities at all—or not in the sense in which we had been thinking of activities. Sometimes meaning, or pointing to, is defined not by anything we do or that goes on in us, but by the surrounding circumstances. "There are, of course, what can be called 'characteristic experiences' of pointing to (e.g.) the shape. For example, following the outline with one's finger or with one's eyes as one points. —But *this* does not happen in all cases in which I 'mean the shape', and no more does any other one characteristic process occur in all these cases. —Besides, even if something of the sort did recur in all cases, it would still depend on the circumstances—that is, on what happened before and after the pointing—whether we should say 'He pointed to the shape and not to the colour'."[14] And for some cases of pointing, there will simply be no characteristic experience at all. We may think following the outline with our finger to be characteristic of pointing to the shape, but "do you also know of an experience characteristic of pointing to a piece in a game *as a piece in a game*? All the same one can say: 'I mean that this *piece* is called the "king", not this particular bit of wood I am pointing to'."[15]

The sense of strain and oddness we experience in trying to point to the color of a piece of paper and then to its shape disappears as soon as we realize that these expressions are simply out of their normal contexts. We are straining to perform a certain action or have a certain feeling when what is missing is not anything we do or feel at all, but a particular set of circumstances. We need to ask in what context the expression "point to the color" might normally, actually be used. For then, as Cavell indicates, we immediately realize that "point to the color" is normally used in circumstances where the object itself is not present. "If we look at the way 'point to the color of your car' is actually used, we realize that the context will normally be one in which we do not point to *that* object, but to something else which has that color, and whose color thereby serves as a

[13] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pars. 510, 33, and p. 176.
[14] *Ibid.*, par. 35.
[15] *Ibid.*

sample of the original. And as soon as we put the request in its normal context, we find nothing could be easier."[16] What someone does when she "points to the color of his car" requires no special mental effort or strain on his part, to assure that he is not pointing, by mistake, to its shape or to the car itself. Pointing to the color rather than the shape is not a special mental activity, nor is it any way queer or difficult; it is simply a matter of different circumstances, a different context. So we are no longer tempted "to regard pointing to something, or meaning it, as requiring a peculiar inner effort . . . once we see that, and see how, the difficulty was of our own making."[17] We made the activity seem mysterious by imagining it in an inappropriate context, by depriving the expression of the normal context in which it is at home, in which it is used and learned, in which it has meaning. Such an ordinary expression "only seems queer when one imagines a different language-game for it from the one in which we actually use it."[18] The context of use supplements and completes the meaning in essential ways, and an inappropriate context can prevent an expression from making sense even though we know perfectly well what the words mean—indeed, just because we know what the words mean.

MAKING SENSE

We are inclined to suppose that we can tell by inspection whether we know the meaning of a particular word, or whether a particular expression or sentence makes sense in English. "It is raining" and "How are you?" make perfectly good sense; "to why up red hurry" is patent nonsense; perhaps some poetic lines fall somewhere in between. And in a way that supposition is correct, but in a way it is false. For it is secure only as long as we consider the word or expression in the abstract, rather than in actual use. As soon as we imagine it actually spoken by someone, not as a philosophical example, the context begins to play an essential role in determining whether or not we can understand what was said, whether the utterance makes sense.

Consider a perfectly clear and familiar expression like "all of it," as it might appear in a question like "Did you . . . all of it?" where the blank is filled in by some verb. We know what "all of it" means, know how to ask such questions and how to answer them; they make perfect sense. Or do they? Cavell suggests that we imagine that question being asked in response to each of the following statements:

> I polished the table. (Did you polish all of it?)
> I scratched the table.

[16] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 91a.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 91b; compare Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, tr. by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1969), par. 622.

[18] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 195.

I played the Brahms concerto.
I played the violin.

I smoked the cigarette.

I ate the apple.
I bit the apple.

I swept out the room.
I decorated the room.
I entered the room.

I nicked the cup.
I broke the cup.
I dropped the cup.

I noticed the envelope.
I glanced at the envelope.[19]

For some of these cases the question "All of it?" makes clear sense; for others, it seems to make no sense at all, and for still others one might say that their sense is neither perfectly clear nor entirely unclear. Of these, Cavell says that they "have" or "make" *some* sense.

It is easy to pick out the clear-cut cases. The question "All of it?" makes perfectly good sense, for example, when asked of "I polished the table," "I played the Brahms concerto," "I smoked the cigarette," "I ate the apple." It makes no apparent sense when asked of "I entered the room," "I hit the target," "I noticed the envelope." But Cavell shows that there are borderline cases. "What might it mean to ask whether you played all of the violin, or how much of the table you scratched, or whether you dropped the whole cup? But there might be a point in these questions. Asking our questions about the violin might be explained as asking whether you played chromatic scales on each string to the top of the finger board, or it might be asking whether you used higher positions where they would have enhanced the tone or made the phrasing smoother; about scratching the table they might suggest that there was a purpose in scratching it—say, to determine what the undercoat of paint had been; asking whether you dropped the whole cup would make clear sense if, say, the cup in question was a magician's prop composed of two halves, one of which, when a gull from the audience is asked to drink from it, falls off when he tips the cup."[20] Even in contexts where the question seems to have no clear sense, the sense can sometimes be *made* clear by appropriate explanations; and, conversely, even in the contexts where it seems to make clear sense, we may nevertheless be surprised to discover that that clear sense is not what the questioner meant after all. Defending or showing the sense of what you say is a matter of making connections;

[19] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 240.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 241.

sometimes the speaker can do this in acceptable ways, and sometimes not.

Some cases which at first seem to make no sense can nevertheless be shown to make sense once they are fitted into an appropriate context. "To make some sense" seems to mean "to make clear sense in some context." But that is all that "to make *clear* sense" can mean, for it surely cannot mean "to make clear sense in *all* contexts." So what is the difference between making some sense and making clear sense? With the examples that make clear sense, the context, the application, seems immediately obvious; with the examples that make only some sense, the context or application have to be found with some effort. Or perhaps one should say they have to be invented. Yet not just any invention will do; the context or application must be recognizable as fully natural, ordinary use. Cavell tries to explain this by contrasting the way one can make sense of, say, "Did you play all of the violin?" with a Wittgensteinian example of an expression whose "grammar needs to be explained": "The rose has teeth in the mouth of the beast." As one possible explication of this expression, Wittgenstein gives "The cow eats its food and then dungs the rose with it," so the rose's teeth are in the cow's jaw.[21] But that is clearly only one of many possible "perfectly good" explanations for the line, "because one has no notion in advance where to look for teeth in a rose."[22] With expressions like "Did you play all of the violin?" which, Cavell says, "have some sense—as it were, a sense that needs *completion* —we feel that there is a *right* context for its use, and that 'figuring out' its application is a matter of hitting upon *that* context."[23] With such expressions, "we haven't the same freedom" as with "The rose has teeth." It is as though we need only "exercise the very capacity for projection upon which language as a whole depends. We have freedom, but we are also subject to the same requirement of all projection, that its appropriateness be made out in terms of the 'invitation to projection' by the context; we have to show *how* the next context is an instance of this old concept."[24]

And sometimes that will turn out not to be possible. "If I ask 'Have you eaten all of the apple?' and you answer flatly, Yes, then what will your response be if I walk over and say, 'But you haven't eaten it all; you've left the core, and the stem and the seeds to waste'? You *may* tolerate that. Perhaps that is my form of life with apples; I 'eat apples' that way and that is not so bizarre but that you may be willing to accept my version of 'eating all the apple' and fit yours to it, conceding, 'I ate all of it except the core.' But this tolerance has its limits. If on another occasion someone objects, 'But you haven't smoked all of the cigarette, you have left the whole filter to waste,' then even if he normally drags on the filter until the ash gives out, and then chews and swallows the rest, we are not likely to

[21] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 222.
[22] *Ibid.*, and *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 10.
[23] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 243.
[24] *Ibid.*

accede to his version of 'smoking the whole cigarette' and effect a reconciliation between his and our version of that activity, saying, 'Well, I smoked it all except the filter': his way of 'smoking' is *too* bizarre; you can't talk to everyone about everything. If someone objects to our claim of having decorated the entire room on the ground that we have left spaces between the bric-a-brac, or failed to place an object everywhere one would fit (physically), we might feel, 'You have a very different conception of "decorating" than I have' or even, 'You don't know what *decorating* is.' You can't share every pleasure with everyone. If someone says we haven't played all of the Brahms concerto on the ground that we only played the *violin* part, then we probably won't feel for a moment that he has a *different* concept of 'playing a concerto,' but simply that he has no concept of *that* at all."[25]

What is acceptable is a matter of how bizarre we find the rationale, whether we can be brought to see the intention, the practical purpose of the question, asked in that way. Sometimes "the question 'All of it?' makes *some* sense, maybe enough for the purpose at hand, and maybe represents the only, or best, way of finding out what you want to know, when it is asked about 'I broke the cup' or 'I scratched the table.' There *may*, that is, be point in asking whether you broke *all* of the cup: e.g., on one side there is a gold monogram which you want to preserve if possible."[26] In that case, we can again see what the questioner meant by his question: "He has got concepts, our concepts, of 'breaking something' and of 'breaking all of something,' and he has shown *how* the concept projects into this context in a way we can all understand."[27] But what would be his point in asking if we broke all of the cup if what he turned out to mean was "that there may be *some fragment or other* which could be broken into smaller fragments? To be told 'But you haven't broken it all; here is a part (fragment) which isn't broken,' might strike us as a joke," and that might be his point in saying it, too.[28]

The meaning of the expression "all of it," though in a way quite constant, is in another way different in each context, depending on the speaker's point in saying it. Thus, we might say "I played all of the violin; *I mean*, I played chromatic scales on each string to the top of the finger board," or "I played all of the violin; *I mean*, I used higher positions where they would have enhanced the tone or made the phrasing smoother." It is not easy to find a satisfactory way of expressing this duality, how the meaning both stays fixed, and fluctuates with the speaker's point; how it is both independent of and dependent on context.

One reason we have trouble here is relatively accessible: our terminology of meaning, point, and so on works differently with respect to isolated

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 243–244.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 244.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 245.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.

words than with respect to sentences, and we become tangled up in our own vocabulary.[29] We can speak of "meaning" in connection with both words and sentences, but the meaning of a word is not the same as meaning in relation to a sentence. The meaning of a word is something like its dictionary definition, a synonym or synonymous phrase that can be substituted for it. Sentences do not have meanings in this sense; there are no dictionaries of sentences. When we ask about meaning in connection with a sentence (unless it is a short sentence in a foreign language), we are usually asking not what the sentence means but what some speaker means by saying it. The answer will be a restatement of his thought, valid only for that particular context and others like it, not a generally valid definition. ("I can walk; I mean, I have the time"; "I can walk; I mean, I am strong enough now.") But though sentences do not have meanings, they do have, or make, *sense*. Words do not make sense, though they may have, or be used in, various senses.

But terminological difficulties are not the only ones in trying to understand what it is about meaning or sense that stays fixed and what it is that varies with context. Evidently the difference is similar to that between the meaning of a word and its use, or between learning a new word in a familiar language game and learning a new language game. Meaning, or whatever stays fixed regardless of context, is by no means all of what is regular or regulated about language, nor all that we learn when we learn language. Besides the meaning or sense, there is something else which makes a phrase like "all of it" sound peculiar in some contexts and lack all sense in others. There is something which makes "pointing to the color" of an object seem difficult. There is something which characterizes certain situations as being such that an explosion "is to be expected." These regularities in language Wittgenstein calls "grammar," and they go far beyond the element of meaning or sense that stays fixed regardless of context. Grammar is what a child learns through experience and training, not explanation; it is what we all know but cannot say. Grammar includes all the patterns or regularities or rules in language, permitting new projections and yet controlling what projections will be acceptable. (Obviously the notion is quite different from what we ordinarily call "grammar," which is learned in school. We shall discuss it in the next chapter.)

Contemporary philosophers usually distinguish here among semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. Semantics is roughly equivalent to the meanings of words; syntactics is the additional element of significance contributed by word order, by syntax. Thus "the man bit the dog" means something different from "the dog bit the man," because of the way the words are arranged. "Pragmatics," as that term is usually used, deals with

[29] The discussion in this paragraph is based on Paul Ziff, *Semantic Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 149–151; and Gilbert Ryle, "Ordinary Language," in V. C. Chappell, ed., *Ordinary Language* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

the circumstances of a word or an expression's use in speech. It concerns "the origin, uses and effects of signs within the behavior in which they occur."[30] Sometimes semantics and syntactics are grouped together under the term "semantics" and contrasted with pragmatics.

That contrast may at first seem to correspond to the difference we have been pursuing, semantics (including syntax) being what stays fixed apart from context, and pragmatics being what varies. But that way of putting it is likely to reinforce the assumption we are trying to dispute in this discussion: that meaning is wholly separable from context. The discussion of pragmatics and semantics by contemporary philosophers differs in several crucial ways from Wittgenstein's treatment of these matters. Benson Mates is a fairly representative spokesman for the non-Wittgensteinian approach here. He says, in criticizing ordinary-language philosophy, "We have all heard the wearying platitude that 'you can't separate' the meaning of a word from the entire context in which it occurs, including not only the actual linguistic context but also the aims, feelings, beliefs, and hopes of the speaker, the same for the listener and any bystanders, the social situation, the physical surroundings, the historical background, the rules of the game, and so on ad infinitum. There is no doubt some truth in this, but I fail to see how it helps one get started in an empirical investigation of language. At the very least provisional divisions of the subject have to be made somewhere."[31] Mates suggests that, as a provisional division, "there is much to be said for" the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. And he finds that the work of ordinary-language philosophers is flawed because many of the common factors they find "among the cases in which an expression is employed belong more to the pragmatics of the expression than to its semantics." Factors which "belong in the category of the pragmatics of the expression . . . should be avoided when 'eliciting' or 'seeing' the meaning."[32]

Mates, then, quite characteristically takes the pragmatics of an expression, its use in speech, to be both subjective and infinitely complex, and thus totally unsuitable for any systematic study. Anything and everything might be relevant to an expression's use, depending on the subjective feelings and motives of speakers and hearers. Wittgenstein, by contrast, shows that the use of an expression is as deeply and rigorously controlled as its semantics or its syntax or its inflection. To be sure, neither meaning nor use is "everywhere circumscribed by rules," and all rules require interpretation and application. But both meaning and use must be and are learned by the child from cases, from just that seemingly infinite, variable welter of experience Mates rejects as unmanageable. Pragmatics are as much, and in the same way, rule-governed as semantics.

[30] Charles Morris, *Signs, Language and Behavior* (New York: George Braziller, 1955), p. 219.
[31] Benson Mates, "On the Verification of Statements," in Chappell, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

That is why, in addition to whatever our words, and their syntactical combination in an utterance, may mean, our saying them has further implications. Because these implications are not part of the meaning of the words, cannot be strictly deduced from them, the logician wants nothing to do with them; they seem to him arbitrary, subjective, infinitely complex. Yet they are as regulated and systematic as any other aspect of our natural language. "The actual use of language carries 'implications' which are of course not deductive, but which are nevertheless fully controlled in our understanding of one another: there is no reason in logic . . . why, if you say, 'Now I hear you,' you 'must' imply that before this moment there was something specific preventing your hearing me (and not that since hearing is a physiological or causal process always going on in the present moment, in a *now*, you can indifferently say 'I hear you' and 'I hear you now')."[33] It is not in every context that I can meaningfully say "Now I hear you" or ask "Did you . . . all of it?" It is not in every context that a perfectly ordinary, meaningful expression will make sense. Wittgenstein imagines someone saying, "At all costs I will get to that house," and then comments: "But if there is no difficulty about it —*can* I try at all costs to get to the house?"[34] Saying "at all costs" has implications, and only where those implications are appropriate does the expression make sense.

Austin makes a similar point in discussing what he calls "the natural economy of language." We examined earlier his demonstration that one cannot classify any and all actions as either voluntary or involuntary. Not only are the words "voluntary" and "involuntary" confined to different, and quite narrow, classes of verbs; but in addition, "in the great majority of cases of the use of the great majority of verbs," no modifier at all is appropriate. "For the *standard* case covered by any normal verb . . . no modifying expression is required or permissible." A modifier is in order "only if we do the action named in some *special* way or circumstances, different from those in which such an act is naturally done. . . . It is bedtime, I am alone, I yawn: but I do not yawn involuntarily (or voluntarily!), nor yet deliberately. To yawn in any such peculiar way is just not to just yawn."[35] It is not in every context that an action can be done voluntarily, that it makes sense to call an action "voluntary."

It is a fact of the utmost importance that we do not constantly say all that could be said. We do not talk all the time, do not utter everything that happens to be true, or everything we know, or everything we think. As a consequence, when we do speak, that action itself has significance; the context in which we speak and our act of speaking have implications for the meaning and sense of what is said.[36] Saying something is an action

[33] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 272.

[34] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 623.

[35] J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 137–138.

[36] Stephen Toulmin has said that language does not consist of "timeless propo-

with implications going beyond the implications of what is literally said, of the abstract meaning the utterance would have if no one said it. Thus, if in the ordinary course of events, someone asks you whether you dress the way you do voluntarily, then as Cavell points out, "you will not understand him to be curious merely about your psychological processes (whether your wearing [those clothes] 'proceeds from free choice . . .'); you will understand him to be implying or suggesting that your manner of dress is in some way peculiar. If it be replied to this that 'voluntary' does not *mean* 'peculiar' (or 'special' or 'fishy') and hence that the implication or suggestion is part merely of the pragmatics of the expression, not part of its *meaning* (semantics), my rejoinder is this: that reply is relevant to a different claim from the one urged here; it is worth saying *here* only if you are able to account for the *relation* between the pragmatics and the semantics of the expression."[37] While that relation clearly is not one of simple logical implication ("voluntary" does not mean or imply "peculiar"), it is nevertheless objectively obligatory in the grammar of the language. The man wouldn't ask if I dress that way voluntarily unless he thought that my way of dressing is somehow peculiar. "Call this implication of the utterance 'pragmatic'; the fact remains that he wouldn't (couldn't) say what he did without implying what he did: he MUST MEAN that my clothes are peculiar."[38] Though "voluntary" neither means nor implies "peculiar," his asking in these circumstances "Do you dress that way voluntarily?" does have implications. "*Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language*; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk."[39]

This, then, is one respect in which the Wittgensteinian treatment of meaning and use differs sharply from the usual contemporary distinction between semantics and pragmatics. A second, closely related difference concerns the relationship between these two aspects of language. Mates

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sitions, but of utterances dependent in all sorts of ways on the context or occasion on which they are uttered. Statements are made in particular situations, and the interpretation to be put upon them is bound up with their relation to these situations: they are in this respect like fireworks, signals or Very lights." *The Uses of Argument* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 180. Toulmin points out that medieval logic dealt with context-dependent utterances rather than timeless propositions, and speculates that the change might have followed the introduction of printing and widespread literacy: "in a largely pre-literate world the transient firework-like character of our utterances would remain overwhelmingly obvious. The conception of the proposition as outlasting the moment of its utterance —like a statue which stands unaltered after the death of the sculptor who fashioned it—would become plausible only after the permanent recorded word had come to play a much larger part in the lives of speculative men" (p. 181). But Toulmin concedes that the cause of the change is more likely the shift of interest from Aristotelian to Platonic thought toward the end of the Middle Ages.

[37] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 9.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

clearly and characteristically takes semantics to be entirely independent of pragmatics, so that one can confine one's study to the former and avoid the infinite morass of the latter. Thus, the meaning of a word or an expression is essentially self-contained and fixed, no matter how or where that word or expression is used. But Wittgenstein argues that meaning and use are intimately, inextricably related, because use helps to determine meaning.[40] Meaning is learned from, and shaped in, instances of use; so both its learning and its configuration depend on pragmatics. One may call the signaling, performative aspects of "I promise" part of its pragmatics, but they contribute to the semantics, the meaning of "promise" just as much as "he promised" or "they might promise" or "that's a promise." Semantic meaning is compounded out of cases of a word's use, including all the many and varied language games that are played with it; so meaning is very much the product of pragmatics.

Wittgenstein is often believed to have taught that meaning and use are identical. But a careful reading shows that this is not a correct interpretation; he regards meaning and use as separate, but intimately related and interdependent. "We say 'behaviour flows from character' and that is how use flows from meaning."[41] As a man's character remains relatively fixed and manifests itself in his actions, so meaning is the relatively fixed element running through a word's many uses. But a man's character is also shaped by his actions, and we read his character from what he does. So, too, meaning is gradually shaped by use and can be learned from use. "Let the use *teach* you the meaning."[42]

Such passages clearly indicate that use and meaning are not identical for Wittgenstein. If he sometimes seems to write as if they were, this is partly because of problems of translation, but also because he is writing specifically for someone who is in the grip of conceptual puzzlement.[43] Such a person will feel that what he needs is meaning—the essence of the puzzling concept; what he in fact needs is an overview of the word's use. Thus, the heart of Wittgenstein's message, directed to such a person, is really: "Don't *ask for* the meaning; *ask for* the use."[44] But in that case,

[40] Compare Karl-Otto Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1967), pp. 40–41.

[41] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), p. 7. Compare *Philosophical Investigations*, pars. 30, 43, 138, 197, 556, 557, 561; *On Certainty*, par 64; and Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, ed. by B. F. McGuiness (London: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 167.

[42] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 212; compare p. 220.

[43] In the most commonly cited passage, *ibid.*, par. 43, Anscombe's translation reads that the word "meaning" can be *defined* by the doctrine that the meaning is the use. The original German has *erklären*, that the word can be *explained* by that doctrine.

[44] Quoted by Gilbert Ryle in "Theory of Meaning," in C. E. Caton, ed., *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 143; my italics. Compare John Wisdom, "Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1934–1937" in Fann, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 46.

the preference of philosophers like Mates for "an empirical investigation of language" which "avoids" pragmatics seems positively perverse, a sure guarantee that the resulting study will remain irrelevant to conceptual puzzlement (which is centrally related to philosophy). That is the third, and most significant, way in which Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and use differs from the contemporary philosophical distinction between semantics and pragmatics. For Wittgenstein, it is the pragmatics of an expression about which we are likely to be confused, and of which we need to be reminded.

CONCEPTUAL PUZZLEMENT

Let us use an example to help us sum up the significance of what has been said so far about meaning and concepts; and thus approach Wittgenstein's discussion of conceptual puzzlement and paradox. We have elaborated three main theses: that words are not, or not merely, labels but often signals; that language is learned from instances of use, and consequently meaning is compounded out of instances of use; and that meaning is context-dependent, that meaning and sense need to be completed by context. These three theses further imply a simple but remarkably important conclusion: the various cases out of which the meaning of a word is compounded need not be mutually consistent; they may—perhaps must—have contradictory implications. These inconsistent or contradictory implications are what give rise to conceptual puzzlement and paradox.

Let us illustrate by reference to a concept that has in fact been a central philosophical concern, the concept of knowledge. At least since Socrates, philosophers have been interested in the nature of true knowledge, how it may be distinguished from mere opinion or belief. (Of course, Socrates was concerned not about knowledge but about *episteme*, but we must postpone the significance of that complication). In various dialogues, the Platonic Socrates gradually establishes a number of criteria by which to distinguish true knowledge.[45] It is eternal and must continue to abide and exist always; it is more firmly fixed in the mind than opinion; it is instilled by teaching rather than persuasion or propaganda; it is able to "give an account of itself"—that is, the man who knows can explain; and, finally, knowledge must be true.

We shall be occupied only with the last criterion, a criterion which many subsequent philosophers have also noted and puzzled over.[46] Knowledge must be true; a falsehood can never be part of knowledge; someone who

[45] Plato, *Republic*, V. 474B–480; *Cratylus*, 440; *Meno*, 97; *Gorgias*, 454; *Timaeus*, 28; *Theaetetus*, 202.

[46] For example, Thomas Hobbes: "There are two things necessarily implied in this word knowledge; the one is truth, the other evidence; for what is not true can never be known. For let a man say he knoweth a thing never so well, if the same shall afterwards appear to be false, he is driven to a confession, that it was not knowledge, but opinion." *Elements of Law*, I, 6, 2.

knows cannot be wrong. Of course, falsehoods are often mistaken for knowledge, and someone who claims to know may well be wrong. But that does not make the falsehoods knowledge. If we claim to know something —say, that Napoleon was born in 1765—and it subsequently turns out that Napoleon was in fact born in 1769, then we say in retrospect: "We *did not know* when Napoleon was born. We claimed to know. We thought we knew; but we did not know." For a proposition really to qualify as knowledge, it cannot turn out to be false. That is not the only requirement, but it is one requirement.[47]

This discovery easily leads onto an epistemological path something like the following: Since knowledge must be true, for anything really to be knowledge it must never throughout all eternity subsequently turn out to be false. But about the kinds of things we normally encounter in our human lives on earth, we cannot be absolutely sure that they will never throughout all eternity turn out to be false. Indeed, we can be fairly sure that some of what we now think we know *will* later turn out to be false. Therefore, strictly speaking, we ought not to claim to "know" any of the things we ordinarily claim to know. We should only have said that we *believed* Napoleon was born in 1765. For if someone says he believes that Napoleon was born in 1765 and it subsequently turns out that the correct date is 1769, we do not say in retrospect what we would say about a claim to know. We do not say, "He thought he believed that Napoleon was born in 1765, but he didn't really believe that." We continue to assert that he believed it, though we may add "but he was mistaken," or "but it turned out to be a false belief." There is such a thing as false belief, but no such thing as false knowledge. So it seems that about ordinary, fallible, human things we ought not, strictly speaking, to claim knowledge at all, but at most belief.

In philosophy, various epistemological and metaphysical schools of thought branch off at this point. Some maintain that there is no such thing as knowledge, really. Others argue that, really, we can only know our own sensations, or only tautological truths, or only transcendent Forms. We need not be concerned with them further here. The initial question: "Must knowledge be infallibly true?" and the initial insight: "If you know, you can't be wrong, so really, we ought not to claim to know . . ."— these are what interest us. For these are conceptual insights, conceptual puzzlement. One does not need to be a philosopher to discover them; anyone speculating abstractly about knowledge may happen upon them.

Now, consider one possible way of responding to these "discoveries" by referring to our ordinary usage. One might say: the kind of ordinary,

[47] The point is made by Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, pars. 42, 90, 367; R. M. Chisholm, *Perceiving* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), p. 16; Ryle, *Concept of Mind*, p. 152; Norman Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 60; and Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 65 ff. Additional requirements, as Austin and Wittgenstein point out, include "being in a position to know."

fallible, human situations in which we usually claim to know things are precisely the kind of situations from which each of us, in growing up, learned the word "knowledge." They are what we learned to call "knowing." They are paradigmatic for the concept; they define it. Wherever did this other, stricter concept of what knowledge "must" be like in order to qualify as knowledge come from? What makes the philosopher with his "discovery" think that what he calls "knowledge" is somehow more truly knowledge than what the rest of us call "knowledge"? The ordinary, fallible occasions on which we claim to know things define what knowledge is, so they cannot, in general, fail to be knowledge.

Hopefully, the reader can feel a certain power in the logic of both the initial "discovery" and the response. Together, they constitute a conceptual paradox, the two sides of a seemingly endless and insoluble dispute. The response is of a kind we characterized earlier as a vulgarization of ordinary-language philosophy: it attempts to refute a conceptual insight, a philosophical position, with evidence from ordinary language. But the "discovery" cannot be refuted that way, for of course we all know quite well that the "discovery" conflicts with ordinary usage. That is why we immediately conclude that "really, strictly speaking," we ought not to talk as we ordinarily do.

What is helpful here is to take seriously the question asked ironically in the refutation: Where *does* the "stricter" idea of knowledge, by which our ordinary claims to know seem inadequate, come from? The obvious but surprising answer is that it, too, comes from ordinary usage. It comes from such facts of ordinary usage as the one we cited in introducing it: that when what someone claims to know turns out to be false, we conclude that he did not know it. The "stricter" notion of knowledge involved in the "discovery" derives from ordinary usage just as surely as the "more ordinary" notion seeking to refute it. But they derive from different parts, different aspects of our ordinary use of the concept "knowledge." Our ordinary ways of operating with that family of words just do include both of these facts, contradictory as they may seem: that we claim to know only (or mostly?) in fallible, human situations, but that we say in retrospect someone didn't know if what he said turns out to be false. The concept of knowledge is compounded out of both what we are claiming when we claim to know, and when we are permitted, supposed, to make such claims. It is tempting to say that the facts are contradictory, but that is nonsense. The facts just are as they are. The contradiction arises only when we try to derive a general, abstract answer to the question of whether knowledge must be infallibly true. The grammar of the word pulls us inexorably in opposite directions here. It is perfectly possible to formulate some consistent generalizations about the concept of "knowledge," for example, a dictionary definition. But to other general questions about it, no consistent answer is possible.

So long as we suppose that a word like "knowledge" must be a label

for some (class of) phenomena, we are blocked from seeing the duality of its grammar. For, of course, phenomena in the world are not supposed to have contradictory characteristics, to be both X and not X at the same time. But as soon as we shift our attention from the noun to the verb, and begin thinking of it as a signal instead of a label, the difficulty no longer blocks us but becomes accessible to investigation. We establish: yes, this *and* this is what we say, what we do. And that recognition can yield new perspective on the nature of knowledge.

Austin has pointed out that claiming to know is more like promising than one might suppose. The verb "to know" is not a performative; saying "I know" does not constitute knowing. But it is quasi-performative. When we claim to know we are not merely describing our state of mind; we are also making a certain kind of commitment. Saying we feel quite sure may describe our state of mind, but saying we know does more than that, does something different. It means issuing a certain kind of guarantee, taking a certain kind of responsibility for the truth of what we claim to know. Knowledge is not a stronger version of belief, Austin says, any more than promising is "something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending: for there *is* nothing in that scale superior to fully intending. When I say 'I know', *I give others my word*; *I give others my authority for saying* that [the thing I have claimed to know is true.] When I have said only that I am sure, and prove to have been mistaken, I am not liable to be rounded on by others in the same way as when I have said 'I know'. I am sure *for my part*, you can take it or leave it: accept it if you think I'm an acute and careful person, that's your responsibility. But I don't know 'for my part', and when I say 'I know' I don't mean you can take it or leave it (though of course you *can* take it or leave it)."[48]

What strikes us when we make the conceptual "discovery" that if you know you can't be wrong is the apparent gap or disparity between what we appear to offer in claiming to know and what is actually ours to give. We offer, or claim, infallibility, yet obviously we are not infallible, and no one supposes us to be. In the light of Austin's suggestion, we might now say: The apparent gap is bridged by our act of speaking, by our authority in speaking, by our commitment. When we claim to know or call something knowledge, we take on responsibility for guaranteeing that the thing will never turn out to be false. Of course both we and our listeners know that it might; but we give our word, our guarantee, all the same, and those to whom we speak normally accept it.

It is tempting to speculate about how enormously useful it is for human beings to have a concept that works in such a way, to play these language games. For it obviously enables some people to act on the strength of other people's responsibility, other people's information. In a world beset with unforeseeable and uncontrollable events, it makes action a little more

[48] Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 67–68.

feasible and responsibility a little more bearable. But for the game to work as it does, for the concept to function as it does, the rules *must* include the "gap" between what we offer in speaking and what seems ours to give. Creatures that really could infallibly foresee the future, that really were omniscient, would have no need for such a concept. And if "I know" meant nothing different from "I believe" or "I am sure," it could not perform for us as it does, could not give us the kind of freedom to act on another's information that it does give. The inconsistency implicit in the grammar of knowledge is not a fault, flawing that concept; it is essential to the concept's function.

WITTGENSTEIN'S DIAGNOSES

Wittgenstein offers two main accounts of what goes on in conceptual puzzlement, "insight," and paradox, though the accounts are evidently related. The one stresses the kind of inconsistency in grammar we have just been discussing; the other stresses the significance of context.

Wittgenstein's first diagnosis is that conceptual puzzlement arises from our desire for order, neatness, system, in our language. Obviously the ability to generalize, to abstract, to find and make patterns, is an essential feature of the human mind. It is what makes language possible; it enables us to understand instructions of the form "This, and things like it, are called 'games' " or "Continue this series in the same way" or "Like that, only more so." It allows us to extrapolate from what is familiar, and thus to master ideas like "permanence," "infinity," "God," without experiencing them directly in any empirical way. But this very capacity can also create problems as we seek order in our language. Wittgenstein suggests that the ability is paralleled by a kind of need, a "craving for generality," a "demand for absoluteness."[49] In the grip of this need, we think that we require a better definition, yet definitions do not satisfy us, "as in certain states of indigestion we feel a kind of hunger which cannot be removed by eating."[50] Wittgenstein says that we do not just happen to find "the crystalline purity of logic" when we are conceptually puzzled; it is a "requirement" that we bring to our investigations.[51] "The puzzles which we try to remove always spring from just this attitude towards language."[52]

But what is wrong with seeking clarity, generality, and order in language, with looking for rules? In the *Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein still says that the desired rules, the desired order, simply do not exist. "We are unable clearly to circumscribe the concepts we use; not

[49] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 17; Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 77.

[50] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 27.

[51] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 107; compare pars. 108, 38.

[52] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 26; compare *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 81. Wittgenstein says explicitly that he has in mind his own work in the *Tractatus*.

because we don't know their real definition, but because there is no real 'definition' to them. To suppose that there *must* be would be like supposing that whenever children play with a ball they play a game according to strict rules."[53] The kind of ideal calculus we are looking for does exist in mathematics, but "our ordinary use of language conforms to this standard of exactness only in rare cases."[54] But there are other passages which say what becomes his firm position in the *Investigations*: there are rules of a sort to be found, but we become "entangled" in them, and they do not yield the kind of clarity we were seeking. In conceptual puzzlement, one "sees a law in the way a word is used, and, trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results."[55] It is we who "lay down rules, a technique, for a game," but "when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed," and we are "entangled in our own rules."[56]

But now one might suppose that this is because we have laid down the wrong rules, made an incorrect generalization instead of the correct one. (That supposition would correspond to the vulgarization of ordinary-language philosophy which attempts to refute a conceptual "insight" by evidence from ordinary language, a "better rule.") Wittgenstein, however, is saying something profoundly different. It is neither that language has no rules, so that our quest for order is in that sense misguided; nor that we have simply come up with the wrong rules. Rather, the rules that can be abstracted from our ordinary use of an expression, from the cases in which that expression occurs, are in fact often mutually inconsistent or contradictory. The cases have contradictory implications. "It may seem

[53] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 25.

[54] *Ibid.*

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 27. Toulmin points out the close parallel of such passages to Heinrich Hertz's discussion, familiar to Wittgenstein, of nineteenth-century debates about the nature of the "force of electricity": "Why is it that people never in this way ask what is the nature of gold, or what is the nature of velocity? Is the nature of gold better known to us than that of force? Can we by our conceptions, by our words, completely represent the nature of any thing? Certainly not. I fancy the difference must lie in this. With the terms 'velocity' and 'gold' we connect a large number of relations to other terms; and between all these relations we find no contradictions which offend us. We are therefore satisfied and ask no further questions. But we have accumulated around the terms 'force' and 'electricity' more relations than can be completely reconciled amongst themselves. We have an obscure feeling of this and want to have things cleared up. Our confused wish finds expression in the confused question as to the nature of force and electricity. But the answer which we want is not really an answer to this question. It is not by finding out more and fresh relations and connections that it can be answered; but by removing the contradictions existing between those already known, and thus perhaps by reducing their number. *When these painful contradictions are removed, the question as to the nature of force will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed,* will cease to ask illegitimate questions." Heinrich Hertz, *Principles of Mechanics*, introduction, cited in Toulmin, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," *Encounter*, XXXII (January 1969), 68.

[56] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 125. Compare Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 77.

queer to say that we may correctly use either of two forms of expression which seem to contradict each other; but such cases are very frequent."[57] If words were labels, this could not be; for the things labeled could not have contradictory characteristics. But if words are tools, each used in a variety of language games, then it is not surprising at all. "It is not to be expected of [a] word that it should have a unified employment; we should rather expect the opposite."[58]

In contemplating a concept abstractly, we generalize too hastily and in the wrong way. We think of an example—or rather, a picture springs to mind—and we extrapolate a generalization from it. We are convinced the generalization is correct, because we know that the example is correct. And this procedure would work well if all valid examples of a word's use had the same, or at least mutually consistent, implications. It never occurs to us that there might be other, equally correct and valid examples of usage inconsistent with the first. Wittgenstein says that conceptual puzzlement is like a disease, and its "main cause" is "a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example."[59] We have a mental picture, and believe that it forces a particular generalization on us; but that belief merely reflects "the fact that only the one case and no other occurred to us."[60] If we do notice other, conflicting cases, our conviction that there must be a single consistent rule leads us to dismiss them as confusing details. "A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense *unambiguously*. The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddied."[61] So we cling to the picture, and to our generalization based on it.

As a consequence, when we are conceptually puzzled, we need exactly what we do not want. We want to escape the confusing encumbrance of detailed cases and proceed directly to the essence, the central core, of the puzzling concept. But that desire only entangles us in the implicit grammatical contradictions; any rule that would satisfy the desire will conflict with other cases. It is as if "in the actual use of expressions we make detours, we go by side-roads." In conceptual puzzlement we believe that we see "the straight highway before us," but "we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed."[62] The very craving for generality and clarity cuts us off from what would resolve our puzzlement: the messy, confused plurality of other valid examples of the word's use. Instead of "craving for generality," Wittgenstein says, one could also speak here of our "con-

[57] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 29; compare Waismann, *Wittgenstein*, p. 125.

[58] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, tr. by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), par. 112; compare par. 113.

[59] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 593.

[60] *Ibid.*, par. 140.

[61] *Ibid.*, par. 426.

[62] *Ibid.*

temptuous attitude towards the particular case," or rather, toward all particular cases but the one, which we take to be general.[63] We want to consider the concept in general, in the abstract, so we dismiss "as irrelevant the concrete cases," which alone could have shown us what we need to understand.[64] "One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need."[65] That is why Wittgenstein insists that we should not just speculate abstractly but should "look and see" how a word is actually used. "But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this. It is not a *stupid* prejudice."[66] It is not stupid because in so many other situations our capacity to generalize, to make and find patterns, is our most powerful tool. "In numberless cases we exert ourselves to find a picture and once it is found the application as it were comes about of itself. In this case we already have a picture which forces itself on us at every turn,—but does not help us out of the difficulty, which only begins here."[67]

All this should make a little clearer the value of ordinary-language philosophy's painstaking attention to the details of usage. For Wittgenstein treats the disease of conceptual puzzlement by varying our diet, by reminding us of the richness and plurality of our actual ordinary speech.[68] In doing so, he does not really tell us anything new; he "assembles reminders" for us.[69] Here "the problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known."[70] What we really lack when we are conceptually puzzled is not a definition or rule, but a clear overview of the relevant cases. Wittgenstein says he is "*not* after *exactness*, but after a synoptic view."[71] The idea of perspicuity, of a "perspicuous representation," he says is of "fundamental importance" and "earmarks the form of account" he gives, his way of looking at things. A main cause of conceptual puzzlement is the fact "that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words. —Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity."[72] Thus the real task here is "not to resolve a contradiction . . . , but to make it possible for us to get a clear view" of the problem troubling us, of "the state of affairs *before* the contradiction is resolved."[73] Of course, a perspicuous overview of inconsistency is not the

[63] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 18.
[64] *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
[65] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 108.
[66] *Ibid.*, par. 340.
[67] *Ibid.*, par. 425.
[68] "The motto here is: Take a *wider* look round." Wittgenstein, *Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 54.
[69] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 127.
[70] *Ibid.*, par. 109; compare "Bemerkungen über Frazers *The Golden Bough*," p. 235: ". . . weil man nur richtig zusammenstellen muss, was man *weiss*, und nichts dazusetzen, und die Befriedigung, die durch die Erklärung angestrebt wird, ergibt sich von selbst."
[71] Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, par. 464; compare par. 113.
[72] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 122.
[73] *Ibid.*, par. 125.

same as a single, unifying, consistent rule that fits all the cases. But if no single, unifying, consistent rule *can* fit all the cases, then an overview of the chaotic facts may well be what is really needed.

LANGUAGE IDLING

Wittgenstein's second diagnosis of conceptual puzzlement and paradox focuses on their characteristic speculative abstractness, their origin in contemplation rather than actual speech. In our craving for generality, we try to abstract from all the particular, concrete cases in which an expression might actually be used, to contemplate it in isolation, at rest. We try to consider it apart from any context; or, one might say, we create a new and special context of abstract contemplation. But this special context is not a context for speech; in it, language is not being used by one person to tell another something, but as an object for study. When we speculate this way about concepts, Wittgenstein says, "the language-game in which they are to be applied is missing."[74] Consequently, conceptual problems "arise when language *goes on holiday*"; they involve "confusions which occupy us . . . when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work."[75] Of course, we may feel that this is an advantage, not a fault. After all, in abstract contemplation we can often be more objective, detached, and perceptive than in the course of daily life; what we all normally take for granted is often wrong. But Wittgenstein maintains that the result of contemplating concepts in this particular abstract way is not new discovery, but puzzlement and paradox. For meaning and sense depend on context, are incomplete without it; so when we consider an expression apart from any context of speech, we deprive it of significant aspects of its meaning.

Let us return to the problem about the nature of knowledge. Traditional philosophers, developing the view that we don't really, strictly speaking, know the kinds of things we ordinarily claim to know, usually proceed in some such way as this: They begin from some simple, obvious fact—a fact so obvious that we will all agree it must surely be an example of knowledge if anything is. Descartes, for example, begins his meditation with a fact "too evident to be doubted; as, for instance, that I am in this place, seated by the fire, . . ."[76] Then these philosophers proceed to show that even such a fact can be doubted after all, might turn out to be false after all; so even *it* is not knowledge. But the kind of example chosen is, characteristically, an example of a piece of knowledge, not of a situation in which one person might actually be moved to *say* to another that he knows something. It is an example of "knowledge," not of "know"; it is a labeling rather than a signaling example.

[74] *Ibid.*, par. 96.
[75] *Ibid.*, pars. 38, 132.
[76] Norman Kemp Smith, ed. and tr., *Descartes Philosophical Writings* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 177.

In his essay "Other Minds," Austin criticizes this way of proceeding and suggests that we analyze instead an imaginary case of someone actually claiming to know something and actually being challenged by a hearer.[77] Austin imagines someone announcing that there is a goldfinch at the bottom of the garden and being asked, "How do you know?" He proceeds to catalogue some of the possible kinds of answers that might be given, showing their great variety ("I saw it," "From its coloring," "I was brought up in the fens," and so on). The response given will, of course, depend on the facts of the case (whether the man saw the bird, where he was brought up), but also on what he thinks the questioner is doubting, what he thinks the point of the question was. If the context does not make clear what the questioner is doubting, he may even be asked, in turn, "How do you mean? What are you suggesting?"[78]

In conceptual puzzlement, in traditional philosophical speculation about knowledge like Descartes', no actual claim to know and no actual challenge to that claim are imagined, so we are at a loss to answer the doubt that is raised, or even to understand what kind of answer might be appropriate. In practice we can account for our knowledge only in relation to particular doubts; there is no answer to the generic question of how we ever know anything at all. Actual doubts about actual claims can (sometimes) be answered. But "the wile of the metaphysician," Austin says, consists in raising doubts about an imagined example of knowledge without "specifying or limiting what may be wrong with it," as context normally specifies and limits what may be wrong with ordinary claims to knowledge.[79] In the absence of such specifications or limits, we are at a loss to answer, and knowledge as a whole seems cast into doubt.

Austin attributes the choice of an unrealistic, abstract example to the traditional philosopher's "wile." But it should be obvious that Austin's kind of realistic example will not serve the purposes of conceptual puzzlement about knowledge; there is good reason why traditional philosophers have not used it. Examples of actual claims to knowledge can be doubted, but those doubts can also be answered; what we want to understand when we are conceptually puzzled is a broader doubt than that—the perpetual, abstract possibility of doubt. That is why we must choose an example of knowledge so obvious that no one can doubt it (in the ordinary way), and then show that it can, nevertheless, be doubted. We all know that it is grammatically wrong to claim to know when there is some particular

[77] Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, pp. 44–84.

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[79] *Ibid.* Compare Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, par. 24: "The idealist's question would be something like: 'What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?' . . . But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off."

reason to doubt. We do not say, "I know the answer, but I may be wrong," though of course we always may be. Austin says "It is naturally *always* possible ('humanly' possible) that I may be mistaken . . . but that by itself is no bar against using" the expression "I know" as we do in fact use it.[80] But why isn't it such a bar? If you have any particular reason to think you may be wrong, you should not claim to know; in conceptual puzzlement we come to think of generic human fallibility as one more such reason. That is not wile, but an extrapolation from the grammar of "knowledge," *part* of that grammar. Why shouldn't generic human fallibility be one more such reason?

We have arrived again at the apparent gap between what we seem to offer in claiming to know and what is ours to give. But we said before that that gap is bridged by the act of speaking. When we abstract from any such act, from any situation in which such an act might take place, the gap appears unbridgeable. In a similar way, if we speculate apart from any context about a concept like "permanence," we may easily persuade ourselves that nothing is ever permanent, that "really, strictly speaking," we should never call anything "permanent." Yet that word has normal uses, which define its meaning. And it is normally not used about things which are, as it were, absolutely permanent (for there are no such things on earth), but about things permanent by contrast with other specific things (a permanent rather than a temporary installation, a permanent rather than a temporary wave in the hair, and so on). The context specifies what might count as permanence in a given case; our act of speaking issues a guarantee that the thing is permanent in that sense. The grammar of "permanent" includes both these features, contradictory though they may seem: that "permanent" means "forever," and yet that it is used about things in this world which do not literally or absolutely last forever. (There is no way of talking about these matters without paradox, for, of course, "forever" has a similar grammar.)

Our concepts are fashioned in working use; they serve to differentiate some features of our world, our actions, our feelings, from others. They were not fashioned for speculating about the world as a whole, in general; for we would have no use for such concepts. In speculating abstractly about a concept apart from any context of speech, we use it without any of its usual contrasts; we, as it were, extrapolate the concept to infinity. But thereby we deprive it of the context, the contrasts, which normally complete its meaning. "What sometimes happens might always happen." Wittgenstein asks, "What kind of proposition is that? It is like the following: . . . 'If it is possible for someone to make a false move in some game, then it might be possible for everybody to make nothing but false moves in every game.' . . . Orders are sometimes not obeyed. But what would it

[80] Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, p. 66; compare Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 303.

be like if no orders were *ever* obeyed? The concept 'order' would have lost its purpose."[81]

In speculating abstractly about knowledge, we seek an example that is better, stronger, than any ordinary, spoken claim to know something; because only if we can show that such an example, too, can be doubted, do we raise doubts about knowledge as a whole. But as a result, something most peculiar happens. We end up with an example *so* obvious that no one would need to *say* it, to claim to know it, and thereby we deprive "knowledge" of an essential part of its meaning. We take a really obvious example of knowledge, such as Descartes' "that I am in this place." But *is* that an example of *knowledge*? Certainly no one would claim that I *don't* know it. Yet neither I nor anyone else would have had occasion to claim to know it here and now, as Cavell says, "apart from some special reason which makes that 'description' of my 'knowledge' relevant to something I did or am doing or saying," apart from some reason for speaking about it at all.[82]

Cavell continues: "Perhaps one feels: 'What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew . . . ? You *did* know it; it's *true* to say that you knew it. Are you suggesting that one sometimes cannot say what is true?' What I am suggesting is that 'Because it is true' is not a *reason* or basis for saying anything, it does not constitute the *point* of your saying something; and I am suggesting that there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be point in your saying of something, if what you say is to be comprehensible. We can understand what the *words* mean apart from understanding *why* you say them; but apart from understanding the point of your saying them we cannot understand what *you* mean."[83]

Whether a fact so glaringly obvious that no one would say it, then and there, is an example of knowledge is a question that cannot be unequivocally answered yes or no. Some aspects of the grammar of "knowledge" incline us to say yes: after all, "you *did* know, or anyway you certainly didn't *fail* to know it," and so on. Other aspects of the grammar—less obvious ones—continue to suggest a negative answer. They suggest that "knowledge" exists only where someone (correctly) claims to know, because the meaning of "knowledge" is not merely descriptive. An important element in the meaning of "knowledge" is not referential, but quasi-performative; an important element of its meaning depends on the act of speaking, of claiming to know. That act, we have said, is what bridges the

[81] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 345.

[82] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," pp. 258–259. Compare Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, par. 622; and par. 553: "It is queer: if I say, without any special occasion, 'I know'—for example, 'I know that I am now sitting in a chair', this statement seems to me unjustified and presumptuous. But if I make the same statement where there is some need for it, then, although I am not a jot more certain of its truth, it seems to me to be perfectly justified and everyday."

[83] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," pp. 258–259.

apparent gap between what is meant or claimed by "I know" and what justifies us in saying it on particular occasions. Imagining examples of "knowledge" where no one would claim to know is inevitably imagining only part of the grammar, part of the meaning of the concept, and thus only part of what knowledge is. The conceptual problem arises in the first step, which "is the one that altogether escapes notice . . . (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.)"[84]

What it amounts to, startling though this proposition may seem, is that something too obviously true to be said does not fully make sense. In choosing the "most obvious" example, we choose one so obvious that we no longer are clear ourselves what it is an example of. Wittgenstein says it is like the question: "Has this room a length?"[85] The answer is so obviously yes that we do not know what the question means or what the answer should be (surely he *can't* mean . . . for he can't fail to know *that*). We are not even able to imagine the opposite: What would a room without a length be? But Wittgenstein asks, "Why do we say: 'I can't imagine the opposite'? Why not: 'I can't imagine the thing itself'?" Can I imagine every room having a length? Well, I simply imagine a room. "Only this picture, in connexion with this proposition, has a quite different role from one used in connexion with the proposition 'This table has the same length as that one over there'. For here I understand what it means to have a picture of the opposite."[86]

Passages like this one are what have led some commentators to the conclusion that Wittgenstein is a verificationist like the logical positivists, holding that the meaning of a proposition depends on the operations performed for its verification or falsification in reality.[87] But any number of utterances have clear meaning and make perfectly good sense, though they are not even assertions that could conceivably be true or false, let alone be operationally falsifiable. Wittgenstein says, "asking whether and how a proposition can be verified is only one particular way of asking 'How d'you mean?' The answer is one contribution to the grammar of the proposition."[88] Verification is only a small part of use, of grammar. And even where verification is relevant, the request for verification is not, as Cavell points out, "the only way in which an explanation of grammar can be requested; it is equally indicative of our failure to understand the grammar of an assertion if we cannot answer such questions as: 'How

[84] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 308.

[85] Wittgenstein, *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 30.

[86] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 251.

[87] See for example, C. S. Chihara and J. A. Fodor, "Operationalism and Ordinary Language: A Critique of Wittgenstein," in George Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 384–419.

[88] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 353; I have translated "*ein*" and "*eine*" as "one" rather than "a" to emphasize what I take to be the meaning of the passage. Compare Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 65–66.

would you teach someone what that says?'; 'How would you hint at its truth?'; 'What is it like to wonder whether it is true?' "[89]

The meaning of a concept grows out of its use in actual human life. In conceptual speculation we want to think about that meaning entirely apart from its use, but it is only in use that an expression fully makes sense. Of course, "How do you know?" still has meaning when we ask it in general: "How does anyone ever know anything?" That is, the words have meaning, the sentence seems to make sense. Cavell says that we have not so much spoken nonsense or changed the meaning of the expression, as "deprived it of everything *but* meaning, *sc.*, deprived it of its normal application."[90] And what is wrong with that? "What is left out of an expression if it [is] used 'outside its ordinary language game'? Not what the *words* mean (they mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what *we* mean in using them when and where we do. Their point, the point of *saying* them, is lost. . . . What we lose is not the meaning of our words—hence, definitions to secure or explain their meaning will not replace our loss. What we lose is a full realization of what we are saying; we no longer know what *we* mean."[91]

What puzzles us when we are conceptually puzzled is real enough; it is no mistake. There really are contradictory implications in the grammar of significant concepts like "knowledge," contradictory generalizations derivable from different parts of that grammar. The trouble with contemplating such a concept in the abstract, apart from any particular context in which it might actually be used, is that our puzzlement springs precisely from ignoring those features of its grammar we thereby exclude. It is not the definition that is troubling; the definition and the syntax are perfectly clear and consistent. The source of, and the solution to, our puzzlement lies in the rest of the grammar, in the complex jumble of cases of use, in the commitment made and responsibility taken when we speak, in the "surrounding circumstances" which set the context for speech.

[89] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* p. 56.
[90] Cavell, "Claim to Rationality," p. 64.
[91] *Ibid.*, pp. 261–262.