Philosophical Investigations 21:3 July 1998
ISSN 0190-0536

Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use

James Conant, *University of Pittsburgh*

G.E. Moore famously – in the context of proposing to formulate a refution of philosophical skepticism concerning the existence of the external world – pointed to his hand in a well-lit lecture hall and uttered the sentence 'I know this is a hand'; and Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* famously had some problem with Moore's doing this. What problem did he have? Commentators have been offering answers to this question ever since *On Certainty* was first published.

Consider a characteristic early passage from *On Certainty* – §10:

> I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively into his face. – So I don't know, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. Any more than the assertion 'I am here', which I might yet use at any moment, if suitable occasion presented itself. . . . [I]t is only in use that the proposition has its sense. And 'I know that there's a sick man lying here', used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it, and one thinks that the words 'I know that . . .' are always in place where there is no doubt, and hence even where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible.

So the scenario is as follows: I am sitting at the bedside of a sick man, I am looking attentively into his face, and conditions are in all other respects – as epistemologists are fond of saying – epistemically optimal. And now I wish to avail myself of the following words: 'I know that there's a sick man lying here'. Wittgenstein's response: 'Nonsense!'

How nonsense? That is the question with which this paper will be concerned. My aim in this paper therefore will not be to say anything about the details of Wittgenstein's discussion of either Moore's avowals or the skeptic's disavowals of knowledge. My aim will simply be to try to illuminate what kind of a criticism it is that Wittgenstein is entering of Moore, the skeptic or anyone else when he charges someone, as he not infrequently does, with speaking nonsense.

A Standard Reading of Wittgenstein on Nonsense

§10 of *On Certainty* can be taken to support a certain interpretation of what Wittgenstein means by 'nonsense'. Wittgenstein says: '[I]t is only in use that the *Satz* has its sense.' So if what results here is a failure of sense, then Wittgenstein must think that this failure is due not to the *Satz*, but rather to the *use* we make of it. But now what does *that* mean? Wittgenstein says:

> 'I know that there's a sick man lying here', used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it.

Here is a fairly standard account of how such passages are to be read: 'I know that there's a sick man lying here' is nonsense in this situation because the situation is an *unsuitable* one for its use, where unsuitable is taken to mean that the situation somehow does not 'fit' the *Satz* – or, alternatively: the *Satz* somehow does not fit into this context of use. We thus arrive at the outline of an account of what Wittgenstein means when he says of such employments of language that they are nonsense: they are nonsense because of an *incompatibility* between the *Satz* and the context of use: the *Satz* and the context do not *fit* together, they *clash*.

In order to flesh out such an account, one needs to go on and say something about precisely wherein the incompatibility between the *Satz* and the context of use lies. But in order to have much of anything to say about this, one is bound to understand a *Satz* to be more than a mere form of words. One thus either self-consciously or unwittingly takes a *Satz* to be a *proposition* – that is, the expression of a thought, so that the incompatibility in question is taken to be an incompatibility between the nature of something said and the nature of the context in which it is said. Some philosophers will think that it helps to distinguish here between saying and asserting. So, they might say, it is clear what is being said in such an illegitimate employment of language; Wittgenstein's complaint is not directed against *what* is said; Wittgenstein's complaint is directed rather at the idea that the 'something' in question is the kind of thing that can be asserted *here*. The charge is thus not directed against the intelligibility of what is said, but against the intelligibility of the attempt to assert 'it' on such an unsuitable occasion. Nonsense as a term of

criticism is thereby taken to apply to acts of assertion rather than propositions. On this reading, Wittgenstein holds that nonsense results when one attempts the assertion of something that cannot be asserted in a particular sort of context. Marie McGinn is a representative proponent of such a reading of Wittgenstein on nonsense.

McGinn on Wittgenstein on Nonsense

What is it then about Moore's saying 'I know that this is a hand' or my saying 'I know that there's a sick man lying here' in the contexts in question that renders these sentences unassertable in these contexts? McGinn, in her book *Sense and Certainty* supplies a certain line of answer on Wittgenstein's behalf. She takes her clue from Wittgenstein's remarks about how the possibility of knowledge presupposes the possibility of doubt:

> [T]he class of Moore-type propositions might be thought of as the mass of both spoken and unspoken judgements which form, in the context, the completely unquestioned background against which all inquiry, description of the world, confirmation and disconfirmation of belief, etc, goes on; they are all the judgements that are either 'flamingly obvious' or which may be spoken with authority, which will be accepted without doubt, and which may be taken for granted in the justifications that we give for the knowledge-claims or more interesting judgements that we advance.[1]

Moore-type propositions are alleged to be propositions that cannot be prefaced by 'I know', yet McGinn takes it that these propositions express *judgements*. McGinn interprets Wittgenstein's frequent remarks about how 'We do not know what it would be [or what it would mean] to doubt thus-and-so in such-and-such a context' to mean I know *what judgement* the words 'thus-and-so' express, but I am *incapable* of doubting thus-and-so here; and thus, since where doubt is impossible knowledge is equally impossible, I cannot say that 'I know thus-and-so' either. Such an analysis presupposes throughout that there is an 'it' – a judgement *that* thus-and-so – which cannot be doubted (and hence cannot be claimed as a piece of knowledge). McGinn's strategy is thus to understand Moore-type propositions to belong to a special class of judgements: those that are

1. Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty*, p. 103, all subsequent references to McGinn are to this book.

immune to doubt. She then has various subordinate accounts of how such immunity might arise in different sorts of cases. In the case of propositions like 'There are material objects' it is because they form part of 'the completely unquestioned background against which all inquiry, description of the world, confirmation and disconfirmation of belief, etc, goes on'; in the case of Moore's saying 'I know that this is a hand' or in the case (from *On Certainty*, §10) of the interlocutor's saying 'I know that there's a sick man lying here' it is because in the contexts in question what is said is so 'flamingly obvious'.

The words 'flamingly obvious' appear in quotation marks in the passage from McGinn because she takes them from a passage by Stanley Cavell which she quotes earlier on in her book. The passage occurs in the middle of a discussion by Cavell in *The Claim of Reason* of the same issues in Wittgenstein. It runs as follows:

> 'The only oddness or unnaturalness in saying ["He knows that this is a hand"] is just that it is so flamingly *obvious* that he knows, and if you're going to try to convince us that just because it is odd in *that* sense, that therefore we cannot or ought not say to say it, then you're trying to convince us that we cannot or ought not to say something which is true, true in spades. And that is just outrageous.'[2]

This passage occurs in quotation marks in Cavell because it represents a putative objection from an imaginary interlocutor (an objection to Wittgenstein's response to skepticism as thus far characterized in *The Claim of Reason*). McGinn takes Cavell to accept the interlocutor's claim that to say 'He knows that this is a hand' of someone who finds themselves in a Moore-type context is to say something flamingly *obvious*, i.e. that in saying such a thing we are saying something which is true, true in spades. Cavell's problem, as McGinn understands it, is to explain how there could ever be a problem about saying something which is true in spades. She follows up her quotation of the passage from Cavell with the following commentary:

> The main thrust of Cavell's argument against the intelligibility of the knowledge claims the sceptic investigates is, therefore, directed towards countering the belief that uttering a meaningful sentence that is true is enough to constitute one's utterance as an intelligible act of assertion; that his words have a meaning and that the

2. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 211 (quoted by McGinn on p. 89).

> proposition that they express is true is not, Cavell argues, enough to ensure that the *speaker* can mean something by uttering the words he does.[3]

This takes the charge of unintelligibility to be directed not at what Moore or the skeptic says but at the act of attempting to assert it, thus allowing for the possibility of cases in which what is said is true, but the truth of what is said fails to suffice to constitute one's utterance as a fully intelligible act of assertion. So it looks as if we would know what Moore would be asserting if only he were *per impossibile* able to assert it. Although McGinn thinks Cavell himself does not succeed in properly making out why it is that 'we cannot really understand' Moore's or the skeptic's utterances as intelligible acts of assertion, she does think that (what she takes to be) Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein is on the right track; and, as we have already seen, in her own account of Moore-type propositions, she undertakes to explain why it is that we cannot assert 'we know that thus-and-so' where what 'thus-and-so' says is something flamingly obvious.

McGinn thus attributes to Wittgenstein the idea that the propositions which Moore claims he knows may well be true but there is a problem about his asserting of these (true) propositions that he knows them in the contexts in which he wants to make such assertions. Now it is a necessary condition of a proposition's being true that it be meaningful; that is, it is a necessary condition of our being able to assess the truth of a proposition that first we be able to understand it. So McGinn, in effect, has Wittgenstein saying that there isn't any problem about *what* claim the skeptic wants to make – there isn't any problem about what his proposition means – or (to borrow a formulation that Barry Stroud resorts to in a related discussion): there isn't any problem about what the utterances in question would mean if they were assertible – the problem just is that these claims run into conflict with various, as it were, additional (pragmatic) constraints on assertibility. Or, to paraphrase the issue in terms of the (mis-)reading of Austin that is in the offing here: there is a constative and a performative dimension to the speech-act of assertion and Wittgenstein's point (according to this reading of Wittgenstein) is that – although Moore's utterances are perfectly kosher as far as the first dimension is concerned – they turn out to be infelicitous when assessed along the second dimension. So it looks as

3. McGinn, p. 89.

if the problem lies not with the semantic content of the assertion, but with arranging a situation in which we could avail ourselves of its semantic content – in which we could felicitously perform the relevant speech-act without its misfiring.

McGinn therefore attributes to Wittgenstein – and Cavell – an implicit reliance on a Gricean distinction between sentence-meaning and speaker's-meaning.

> The crucial idea, therefore, is that there are two distinct notions of meaning – word-meaning and speaker's-meaning – that are linked together in a much more complex way than the traditional philosopher has supposed. . . . Cavell's view of the relationship between word-meaning and speaker's-meaning might . . . be expressed as the claim that it is a mistake to suppose that the task of interpreting others can ever be taken over completely by a systematic theory of meaning for [a language]. . . . In particular, a speaker's uttering a given sentence, s, to which a theory of meaning assigns the interpretation, p, is never a guarantee that the speaker is correctly described as having performed the act of asserting p. . . .
>
> For the interpreter can never put off altogether the need to satisfy himself that the content-specifying description of the act of assertion that the systematic theory yields makes this particular utterance, in these particular concrete circumstances, intelligible to him as the act of a human agent participating in a humanly recognizable form of life.[4]

The Wittgensteinian contribution to an understanding of the nature of language, according to McGinn, lies in helping us to see that word-meaning and speaker's-meaning 'are linked together in a much more complex way' than the traditional philosopher has supposed. So, whereas Grice might have supposed that what the words of a sentence mean very nearly fully specifies what would be said on any speaking of them, Wittgenstein teaches us that – although the words do specify what is 'meant' in one sense of 'meaning' – there are two 'distinct notions of meaning', and thus what is 'meant' (in a different sense of 'meaning') still remains to be settled. In so far as we only specify what the meaning of a sentence is, an important ingredient of what is meant on any speaking of the sentence is left out – for it turns on something further: on the point of saying it, on one's reasons for so speaking. Thus McGinn says that, in cases of attempted speech-acts of assertion which misfire, the problem lies – not in our

4. McGinn, pp. 85–6.

being unable to specify the content of the assertion (McGinn thinks that understanding the content is just a function of (1) our understandings of the meanings of the individual words of which the assertion is composed and (2) our knowledge of the rules of the language), but rather – in seeing what is supposed to have been the point of having uttered this (independently meaningful) proposition in this (unsuitable) context.

What happens in McGinn's reading of Wittgenstein – and Cavell on Wittgenstein – is, in effect, that a distinction is introduced between two levels of nonsense:

> [The] attempt to show that the knowledge claims that the philosopher investigates are illegitimate or unintelligible is thus an attempt to show, not that the words that the philosopher utters in introducing these claims are themselves meaningless, but that, given the context in which he utters them, we cannot see the point of his saying them, we cannot see what he means by them, we cannot construe his utterance of them as an act of intelligible assertion.

This passage implicitly draws a distinction between a claim's being meaningless and its being unintelligible. Meaningfulness has to do with sentences, and intelligibility has to do with context-embedded speech-acts. It can be perfectly clear what the meaning of a sentence is; yet a context-embedded utterance of it can fail to be intelligible because it can fail 'to be intelligible as the act of a human agent participating in a humanly recognizable form of life'. This allows McGinn to conclude that Wittgenstein – and Cavell[5] – hold (1) that

5. As will emerge soon, I take McGinn to misunderstand the passages from Cavell she quotes in her book in a way which perfectly parallels her misunderstanding of the relevant passages from *On Certainty*. Here are two characteristic examples of the sort of passages from Cavell which occasion the misunderstanding with which I am concerned:

> [N]o one would have said of me, seeing me sitting at my desk with the green jar out of my range of vision, 'He knows there is a green jar of pencils on the desk', nor would anyone say of me now, 'He (you) knew there was a green jar . . .', *apart from some special reason which makes that description of my 'knowledge' relevant* to something I did or said or am doing or saying. . . .
>
> 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; its *true* to say that you knew it. Are you suggesting that one cannot sometimes 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

the sentences that the philosopher utters in entering his (skeptical or Moore-type) knowledge claims are themselves perfectly meaningful, and yet (2) that, given the context in which he utters them, his utterance can nonetheless be charged with unintelligibility. 'Unintelligible' here means: we understand what his words mean but we cannot see *the point* of his saying them, we cannot see what *he* means by them.

Throughout *On Certainty* – as, for example within the brief space of §10 – Wittgenstein himself uses the terms 'nonsense' or 'nonsensical' (*Unsinn*, *unsinnig*) and 'unintelligible' (*unverständlich*) more or less interchangeably. But on McGinn's reading, it looks as if Wittgenstein, if he is to express his own view clearly, needs to distinguish two distinct and autonomous levels each of which involves a distinct kind of 'making sense'.[6] Applied to §10 of *On Certainty*, this

> 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. (*op. cit.*, pp. 205–6)
>
> [T]o know what a person has said you have to know that he or she has *asserted* something, and know what he or she has asserted. What difficulty is there in that? No difficulty, nothing is easier. But what is easy, then, is to understand the point of his words; for that is essential to knowing that he has asserted something and knowing what he has asserted. And that is what is left out when we look upon what he meant as *given* by, or derived from, the meanings of the words he used. . . . If the connection between 'our words' and 'what we mean' is a necessary one, this necessity is not established by universals, propositions, or rules, but by the form of life which makes certain stretches of syntactical utterance *assertions*. (*op. cit.*, p. 208)

6. In the following passage, McGinn spells out the strategy for reading Wittgenstein that she finds in Cavell and then goes on to elaborate herself:

> Cavell's suggestion about the way in which the traditional epistemologist fails to mean anything by the sort of knowledge claim he characteristically investigates depends crucially on the distinction between what a particular word or sentence means and *what someone means by uttering* a particular word or sentence. What a word means is 'what any good dictionary tells us it means', what any adequate definition of the words must state. In this sense of 'means' we think of the English language as consisting of a very large number of expressions, each with a specific cataloguable meaning, which can be put together in numerous ways to form new, more complex expressions, some of which will be whole sentences, which in turn possess specific meanings in this sense. But aside from this notion of what a word or expression means, there is also notion of meaning that relates to the actual *use* of expressions, on specific occasions, in *acts* of assertion. The latter idea of meaning is essentially the idea of *speakers* meaning something *by*

yields the following reading of the passage: Taken as a sentence of English, it is clear what the sentence 'I know that there's a sick man lying here' means – the sentence as it stands possesses a fully determinate meaning on its own – so when Wittgenstein says it is being used in an *unsuitable* situation, what he means is that we do not understand the *point* of the speaker's saying this perfectly determinate thing when he does.

According to McGinn, Wittgenstein's problem in *On Certainty*, strictly speaking, is not with Moore-type propositions – *Sätze* – but with Moore-type *uses of Sätze*. But Wittgenstein's complaint with Moore seems to be – contrary to what McGinn would lead us to expect – that Moore fails to mean something fully determinate by his words because his words themselves fail to mean something determinate:

> I want to say: it made sense for Moore to say 'I *know* that that is a tree', if he meant something quite particular by it. (*On Certainty*, §387)

Wittgenstein thinks that when Moore utters this sentence, in the context of undertaking to refute the skeptic, he fails to mean something quite particular by it (for if he did, the sentence would no longer even appear to be able to bear the philosophical burden which Moore seeks to place on it[7]). But to say that Moore 'fails to mean something quite particular by it' is not to say that he fails to accompany his utterance with an effort to mean the right sort of thing by it – or that he fails to mean the thing by his utterance that he wants to mean. Thus Wittgenstein says:

> uttering the words that they do. Cavell's fundamental point is not that speakers mean (or often mean) something other than what their words mean but that understanding what a speaker means on a particular occasion requires more than recognizing what his words mean, in the first sense of 'mean'; it requires that we understand the *point* of his saying what he does. Moreover, the point of a speaker's act of assertion cannot be determined merely from his words (the meaning of his words) alone, but depends on our being able to see his utterance as an act made intelligible by the context of ends, interests, motives, etc. in which it is embedded. It is only if his utterance can thus be construed as the intelligible action of a rational human agent that a *speaker* succeeds in meaning anything at all by what he utters. (McGinn, *Sense and Certainty*, pp. 83–4)

7. To explain in any detail why Wittgenstein thinks this would take me well beyond the scope of this paper. But I think it is already rather well explained in Cavell's discussion of the notion of a 'non-claim context' in Part II of *The Claim of Reason*.

> The sentence 'I know that that's a tree' if it were said outside its language-game, might also be a quotation (from an English grammar-book perhaps). – 'But suppose I *mean* it while I am saying it?' The old misunderstanding about the concept 'mean'. (*On Certainty*, §393)

The old misunderstanding about the concept 'mean' that Wittgenstein alludes to here is one that he thinks Frege had already uncovered and an indebtedness to this lesson of Frege's already played a central role in his own early work.

Frege and Early Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use

A way of seeing what the misunderstanding in question is – and why Wittgenstein thinks that by 1951 (when he is writing *On Certainty*) it deserves to be called an old one – is to look at Frege's three principles:

> [1] always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
> [2] never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition.
> [3] never lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.[8]

To deny any of these principles is to deny the others. Here is how Frege explicates how a denial of the second leads to a denial of the first:

> In compliance with the first principle, I have used the word 'idea' always in the psychological sense, and have distinguished ideas from concepts and from objects. If the second principle is not observed, one is almost forced to take as the meanings of words mental pictures as acts of the individual mind, and so to offend against the first principle as well.[9]

If we disobey the second principle and ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, we shall look for an answer in the realm of the psychological – we shall explain what it is for a term to have a meaning in terms of mental accompaniments (such as the psychological associations the word carries with it), or in terms of mental acts (such as the linguistic intention with which we utter it); and *that* will constitute a violation of the first principle.

8. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston: 1980; p. x.
9. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, p. x.

Underlying these principles is a doctrine of the primacy of judgment. Frege writes:

> I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of a thought by analyzing the thought.[10]

Frege here opposes an extremely intuitive view of how we come by a thought: namely, by taking hold of its independently thinkable components and putting them together so as to form a coherent whole.[11] The 'parts' of a thought are only the sorts of parts that they are by virtue of the contribution they make to the sense of the whole.[12] Gilbert Ryle attempts to summarize this 'difficult but crucial point' of Frege's by saying that the meanings of words 'are not proposition components but propositional differences'.[13] Here is one

10. *Posthumous Writings*, ed. H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, and F. Kaulbach (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1979); p. 253.

11. In conformity with this doctrine of the primacy of judgment, Frege's concept-script forbids the isolated occurrence of designations for the various possible components of a judgment:

> [I]nstead of putting a judgment together out of an individual as subject and an already previously formed concept as predicate, we do the opposite and arrive at a concept by splitting up the content of possible judgment. . . . But it doesn't follow from this that the ideas of these properties and relations are formed apart from their objects: on the contrary they arise simultaneously with the first judgment in which they are ascribed to things. Hence in the concept-script their designations never occur on their own, but always in combinations which express contents of possible judgement. . . . A sign for a property never appears without a thing to which it might belong being at least indicated, a designation of a relation never without indication of the things which might stand in it. (*Posthumous Writings*, pp. 15–17)

12. Frege worries that the all but unavoidable (and potentially innocent) locution of a thought's having 'parts' or 'components' is already in itself sufficient to mislead one into attributing a false independence to the parts of a thought – so that we imagine that the parts could retain their identity apart from their participation in a whole thought:

> But the words 'made up of', 'consist of', 'component', 'part' may lead to our looking at it the wrong way. If we choose to speak of parts in this connection, all the same these parts are not mutually independent in the way that we are elsewhere used to find when we have parts of a whole. (*Collected Papers*, p. 386)

13. Ryle writes:

> Frege's difficult but crucial point . . . [is] that the unitary something that is *said* in a sentence or the unitary sense that it expresses is not an assemblage of detachable sense atoms, of, that is, parts enjoying separate existence and

of Frege's many exhortations to the reader not to lose sight of the point:

> [W]e ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while, but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgement. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on the parts also their content.[14]

In order to determine the meaning of a word, according to Frege, we need to discover what contribution it makes to the sense of a proposition in which it figures. We need to know what logical role it plays in the context of a judgment. What we want to discover is thus not to be seen at all, if we look at the mere isolated word rather than at the working parts of the proposition in action.[15]

Wittgenstein, in his later work, still takes Frege to be on to an important point when he teaches us that we end up looking for the meaning of a bit of language in the realm of the psychological when we detach the bit of language from its context of use and yet persist in asking: what does 'it' mean? But he seeks to generalize Frege's context-principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use, or – as Wittgenstein prefers to call them – language-games). The possibility of such a generalization already played an important (if somewhat subterranean) role in the work of Frege and early Wittgenstein.

To see how, consider Frege's oft-repeated warning that the same word in ordinary language can be used in some contexts as a proper

> separate thinkability, and yet that one truth or falsehood may have discernible, countable, and classifiable similarities to and dissimilarities from other truths and falsehoods. Word meanings or concepts are not proposition components but propositional differences. They are distinguishables, not detachables; abstractables, not extractables. (*Collected Papers, Volume 1* (Hutchinson: London, 1971); p. 58)

14. *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, p. 71.

15. It has been thought by some commentators that Frege's claim that objects – unlike concepts – are self-subsistent should be interpreted to mean that the context principle does not apply to objects. Frege explicitly repudiates such an interpretation:

> The self-subsistence which I am claiming for number is not to be taken to mean that a number word signifies something when removed from the context of a proposition, but only to preclude the use of such words as predicates or attributes, for such a use appreciably alters their meaning. (*The Foundations of Arithmetic*, p. 72)

name and in others as a concept word. Frege's favourite example of such a word is 'moon'.[16] It can also happen in ordinary language, Frege thought, that an object-expression which has *never* been previously used to express a concept can suddenly be used, for the first time, as a concept-expression; and that we can understand what is meant by such an unprecedented usage. A famous example of a proper name suddenly being used as a concept expression is Lloyd Benson (in the 1988 vice-presidential debate) saying to Dan Quayle: 'You're no Jack Kennedy.' Benson's point was not that two individuals (Quayle and Kennedy) are not identical, but rather that there is a concept (of, say, exemplary statesmanship) which Quayle does not fall under. Frege offers as an example of this sort of creative use of language the lovely sentence 'Trieste is no Vienna':

> We must not let ourselves be deceived because language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept word; in our example, the numeral indicates that we have the latter; 'Vienna' is here a concept-word, like 'metropolis'. Using it in this sense, we may say: 'Trieste is no Vienna'.[17]

In this example, Frege says, we have a word which usually functions as a proper name playing the role of a concept-expression. Frege's reading of this sentence is arrived at through reflection upon what possible use this combination of words might have; that is, by asking himself: in what context would one utter such words and what thought would one then be expressing? If we reflect on when we would utter such a sentence and what we might mean by it, Frege suggests, we will see that that 'Vienna' here could mean something like 'metropolis' (or perhaps even beautiful or majestic metropolis) – and thus the sign 'Vienna' used in this way should be expressed in a proper logical symbolism by a completely different kind of symbol than that which we would use to express the occurrence of the word 'Vienna' in the sentence 'Vienna is the capital of Austria'. Notice that Frege does not conclude that what we have here in his lovely sentence about Trieste is a piece of nonsense – one

16. As, for example, in §51 of *The Foundations of Arithmetic*:

> With a concept the question is always whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions make no sense. We should not be deceived by the fact that language makes use of proper names, for instance Moon, as concept words, and vice versa; this does not affect the distinction between the two. (p. 64)

17. *Collected Papers*, p. 189.

which results from trying to put a proper name where a concept-expression should go. He concludes instead that what fills the argument place for a concept-expression here *is* a concept-expression – and then makes a suggestion about what it might mean. Thus Frege's methodology here is to begin with our *understanding* of the proposition as a whole and to use that as a basis for segmenting it into its logically discrete components. One can see Frege's methodological practice here as illustrating the close relationship between his three principles. If we disobey the second principle in our approach to this example, we end up violating the third ('never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object'): when we consider the word in isolation we take 'Vienna' for an object-expression, yet in this context it does not denote an individual; so if we fail to attend to the logical role of the word in this context, we mistake a concept for an object. What fuels such a mistake is one's tendency to think that one already knows what 'Vienna' means taken all by itself outside the context of that proposition – it means one presumes roughly what it means in a sentence like 'Vienna is the capital of Austria'. Although we do not realize it, Frege thinks that what is really going on when we think in this way is that we succumb to the all but irresistible urge to transgress against his first principle. When we ask for the meaning of the word in isolation, we unwittingly end up looking for the meaning in what Frege wants to teach us to recognize as the realm of the psychological. It may well be true that when I utter the word 'Vienna' in saying the sentence 'Trieste is no Vienna' I intend to mean the same thing as when I utter the word 'Vienna' in saying 'The capital of Austria is Vienna' – the same mental image of the spires of the *Stefansdom* rising up over the skyline of the city of Vienna may float before my mind's eye – but that, Frege thinks, does not bear on whether the word has the same meaning in these two sentences.

The methodological import of Frege's three principles is developed in the *Tractatus* through the claim that in ordinary language it is often the case that the same sign symbolizes in different ways. The distinction between sign [*Zeichen*] and symbol [*Symbol*] which this claim presupposes might be summarized as follows:

* sign – an orthographic unit, that which the perceptible expressions for propositions have in common (a sign design, inscription, icon, grapheme, etc.)

* symbol – a logical unit, that which meaningful propositions have in common (i.e. an item belonging to a given logical category: proper name, first-level function, etc.)

This distinction is introduced as part of the commentary on §3.3 which is the *Tractatus*'s reformulation of Frege's second principle. §3.3 runs as follows:

> Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.

Then, beginning immediately thereafter with §3.1, comes the following commentary:

> Every part of a proposition which characterizes its sense I call an expression (a symbol).
>
> (The proposition itself is an expression.)
>
> Everything essential to their sense that propositions can have in common with one another is an expression.
>
> An expression is the mark of a form and a content.
>
> An expression presupposes the forms of all propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions.
>
> An expression has meaning only in a proposition.
>
> I conceive the proposition – like Frege and Russell – as a function of the expressions contained in it.
>
> The sign is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses.
>
> Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common – they then signify in different ways.
>
> I can never indicate the common characteristic of two objects that we symbolize them with the same signs but by different *methods of symbolizing*. For the sign is arbitrary. We could therefore equally well choose two different signs [to symbolize the two different objects] and where then would remain that which the signs shared in common? (§§3.3–3.322)

The point of the commentary is in part to clarify the notion of 'proposition' which figures in the context principle (only the *proposition* has sense; only in the context of a *proposition* has a name meaning). The relevant notion is one of a certain kind of a symbol, not a certain kind of a sign. The sign, Wittgenstein says, 'is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses' (what is now sometimes called the sign design). The symbol is a logical unit, it expresses something which propositions – as opposed to propositional signs – have in common. Thus the sentences 'Trieste is no

Vienna' and 'Vienna is the capital of Austria' have the sign 'Vienna' in common. These two sentences taken together offer an instance of what Wittgenstein means when he says 'two different symbols can have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common – they then signify in different ways' (§3.321). The sentences 'Trieste is no Vienna' and 'Vienna is the capital of Austria' have no symbol in common – all they have in common are the signs 'Vienna' and 'is'. In (what Wittgenstein calls) a proper logical grammar, each sign would wear its mode of symbolizing on its sleeve. Wittgenstein goes on to say:

> In the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways – and therefore belongs to two different symbols – or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.
>
> Thus the word 'is' appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; 'to exist' as an intransitive verb like 'to go'; 'identical' as an adjective; we speak of *something* but also of the fact of *something* happening.
>
> (In the proposition 'Green is green' – where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective – these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*.) (§3.323)

It is perhaps worth elaborating how Wittgenstein's example in the last paragraph of §3.323 illustrates the point of the first paragraph of §3.323. The propositional sign 'Green is green' can be understood to symbolize in three different ways[18] – and hence can be understood as an expression for any one of three different thoughts. One way of noticing how the same sign symbolizes differently in each of these three cases is to focus on the word 'is'. In each of the propositions which expresses each of these three different thoughts, the sign 'is' symbolizes a different logical relation. In one, the sign 'is' symbolizes the copula (a relation between a concept and an object); in another, we have the 'is' of identity (a relation between objects); in the third, we have the 'is' of co-extensionality (a relation between concepts). The point of the example is to show us that we cannot gather merely from the notation of ordinary language how the sign 'is' is symbolizing in a given instance. Wittgenstein immediately follows this example with the observation: 'Thus there easily arise the most

18. This example only really works if we assume all the letters of the sentence are capitalized – as in a newspaper headline – so that we have no orthographic clues as to when the expression 'GREEN' is being used as the proper name of a person.

fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)' (§3.324).

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that once we appreciate how Frege's three principles work in conjunction with one another we will see that there will always be room for a question as to whether a given sign, when it occurs in two different sentences of ordinary language, is symbolizing the same way in each of those occurrences. And this question cannot be settled by appealing to the fact that the same word (sign) ordinarily occurs (symbolizes) as a name (for example, as a name for the capital of Austria); nor by appealing to the fact that if I were asked what I meant when I uttered one of those sentences I would reply that I meant the word in the same sense as I have on other occasions; nor by appealing to the fact that I, on this occasion of utterance, exert a special effort to mean the word in the same way as before. How can this question be settled? Already in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein answers: 'In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the context of significant use' (§3.326).[19] We must ask ourselves on what occasion we would utter this sentence and what, in that context of use, we would then be meaning by it. The phrase 'the context of significant use' in §3.326 translates *sinnvollen Gebrauch*. It is a condition of being able to recognize the symbol in the sign that the string in which the sign occurs be *sinnvoll*.

Later Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use

Wittgenstein has become famous in recent years for putting forward something that gets called a 'use-theory of meaning'. In §43 of the *Investigations*, he writes:

> For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

19. In this passage, 'recognize' translates *erkennen*. This is the same term that occurs in §6.54: 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually *recognizes* them as nonsensical.' To recognize his 'propositions' as nonsensical is to be unable to recognize the symbol in the sign. For the *Tractatus*, these two forms of recognition eclipse one another. The standard reading of the *Tractatus*, however, requires that these two forms of recognition be mutually compatible: that we be able to recognize the symbol in the sign *and* that we recognize his propositions as nonsensical (because the symbols clash with one another).

This call for an attention to use is often understood as if its point was to teach us the importance of supplementing our syntactic and semantic theory with a third layer, a theory of the pragmatics of natural language or a theory of speech-acts. But the point of a passage such as *On Certainty*, §348 (to which we shall turn in a moment) is meant to be far more threatening to traditional analytic philosophy of language than such a mere call for supplementation. Its point is that 'for a large class' of occasions of speaking there isn't anything which can properly count as asking the question 'What do the words [which have been spoken] mean?' apart from a simultaneous consideration of questions such as 'When was it said?', 'Where?', 'By whom?', 'To whom?', etc.

I said before that later Wittgenstein generalizes Frege's context-principle so as to apply not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within contexts of significant use, or – as Wittgenstein prefers to call them – language-games). Thus later Wittgenstein thinks that if we focus on a sentence and ask, apart from any consideration of the context of significant use, what does 'it' mean, then we will unwittingly end up seeking its meaning in the realm of the psychological. In the light of our brief excursus on how Frege and early Wittgenstein thought one goes astray, if one asks what an expression of our ordinary language means apart from a consideration of any context of significant use, we are now in a better position to understand the point of *On Certainty*, §393:

> The sentence 'I know that that's a tree' if it were said outside its language-game, might also be a quotation (from an English grammar-book perhaps). – 'But suppose I *mean* it while I am saying it?' The old misunderstanding about the concept 'mean'.

What constitutes your meaning thus-and-so by uttering a sentence is not your engaging in a psychological act – which the interlocutor in this passage imagines to be 'the act of meaning it' while I am saying it – but in your employing the sentence in a context in which the sentence is able to do the (Frege and early Wittgenstein say: logical, later Wittgenstein says: grammatical) work of meaning thus-and-so. If one attempts to supply an answer to the question what the expression means apart from a consideration of any context in which it is at work, then one will more or less unwittingly fall into the mistake of thinking that the 'meaning with which one uses a word' should be

understood as a process that we experience while speaking or hearing the word.[20]

Let us consider *On Certainty*, §348:

> Just as the words 'I am here' have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, – and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination.

What Wittgenstein says here is not (as McGinn proposes): it is clear what the sentence 'I am here' means, yet what is meant in saying it remains less than fully intelligible given the unsuitability of the context of use. What Wittgenstein says here about the words 'I am here' is precisely the opposite: that 'their meaning is not *determined* by the situation' – that their meaning still 'stands in need of determination'. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein employs this same example ('I am here') to emphasize that 'the meaning of an expression' (if by this we mean the meaning that the expression has when employed in a context of significant use) is not something which an expression possesses already on its own and which is subsequently imported into a context of use:

> You say to me: 'You understand this expression, don't you? Well then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with'. – As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which is carried into every kind of application.
>
> If, for example, someone says that the sentence 'This is here' (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense. (*Philosophical Investigations*, §117)

20. I am drawing here on the following passage from MS 110:

> It is important to express generally the error I make in all these cases. . . .
>
> I believe that that error lies in the notion that the meaning of the word is an idea that accompanies the word. . . .
>
> For the issue is precisely whether the 'meaning with which one uses a word' should be understood as a process that we experience while speaking or hearing the word.
>
> The source of the mistake seems to be the notion of *thoughts which accompany the sentence*. (pp. 229–230, 233–234)

This passage is quoted (and translated) by David Stern on pp. 105–6 of his book *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*.

What we are tempted to call 'the meaning of the sentence' is not a property the sentence already has in abstraction from any possibility of use and which it then carries with it – like an atmosphere accompanying it – into each specific occasion of use. It is, as Wittgenstein keeps saying, *in* the circumstances in which it is 'actually used' that the sentence has sense. This is why Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, §348: the words 'I am here' have a meaning *only* in certain contexts – that is, it is a mistake to think that the words themselves possess a meaning apart from their capacity to have a meaning when called upon in various contexts of use. The problem with a Moore-type utterance of 'I am here' (according to *On Certainty*, §348) is that *the meaning of the words* 'is *not* determined by the situation'; that is to say, it is not clear, when these words are called upon in this context, *what* is being said – if anything.

The philosopher, Wittgenstein says, tends to think that he understands the sentence apart from and prior to any concrete occasion of use:

> A philosopher says that he understands the sentence 'I am here', that he means something by it, thinks something – even when he doesn't think at all how, on what occasions, this sentence is used. (*Philosophical Investigations*, 514)

The philosopher takes there to be something which is *the* thought which *the sentence itself* expresses. The only questions considerations of use will raise for such a philosopher (in an account of what we mean by our words) will be questions concerning the relationship between 'the meaning of the sentence' – which we grasp independently of its contexts of use – and the various contexts of use into which the sentence can be imported. Questions can be raised about why what is said is being said and what the point is of its being said on a particular occasion of use. But the very possibility of asking such questions presupposes that it is already reasonably clear what thought is expressed, and thus what it would be for truth to have been spoken on this occasion of speaking.

There are numerous passages in *On Certainty*, such as the following, that contest such a conception of the relation between meaning and use:

> 'I know that that's a tree' – this may mean all sorts of things: I look at a plant that I take for a young beech and that someone else thinks is a black-currant. He says 'that is a shrub'; I say it is a tree. – We see something in the mist which one of us takes for a man,

> and the other says 'I know that that's a tree'. Someone wants to test my eyes etc. etc. – etc. etc. Each time the 'that' which I declare to be a tree is of a different kind. (§349)

As we run through these different examples of speaking the sentence 'I know that that's a tree', on each occasion of speaking, the sentence – that is, the string of words – uttered remains the same. In this sense of 'say', in each case we say the same thing: 'I know that that's a tree'. But, in each of these very different cases, Wittgenstein says, 'the "that" which I declare to be a tree is of a different kind' – so in this sense of 'say' (and this is the sense that matters for Wittgenstein), in each case that I say 'that's a tree', *what* I say is different. In each case, the context makes a contribution to what thought it is that I express by these words. Wittgenstein thinks that it is a misunderstanding of how language works to think, as philosophers are prone to think, that the role of a sentence in our language is to be that which on its own bat allows for the expression of a determinate thought – a determinacy which is achieved simply as a function of (1) the meanings of the individual words of which the sentence is composed and (2) the rules of the language. The role of a sentence rather is to provide a linguistic instrument which is usable in many different circumstances to express any of many distinct thoughts.

Wittgenstein's point about both Moore and the skeptic is not, *pace* McGinn, that it is clear in each case what judgment is in question (concerning which Moore avows and the skeptic disavows knowledge) and that, given the special epistemic status of the judgment in question (its immunity to doubt, its status as a framework proposition, etc.), the 'it' in question is something which can be neither known nor doubted. His point is rather that it is not clear what Moore and the skeptic are doing with their words – i.e. what the context of use is supposed to be – and hence what it is that they are saying. For what your words say depends upon what they are *doing* – how they are at work – in a context of use:

> If someone says, 'I know that that's a tree' I may answer: 'Yes, that is a sentence. An English sentence. And what is it supposed to be doing?' (*On Certainty*, §352)

The charge is directed here not against the sentence 'I know that that's a tree', but against a failure on the part of a speaker to provide the sentence with something to do on an occasion of speaking. As Frege and early Wittgenstein already understood, one can not confer a

determinate method of symbolizing on a sentence merely by intending to mean it in a certain way – e.g. in the same way that one meant it on some other occasion of speaking. This is not to say that the sentence 'I know that that's a tree', while uttered when a tree stands in plain and open view, cannot be given a sense. We can, as Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes, always find a context of use in which these words would be doing something under such circumstances:

> [S]omeone who was entertaining the idea that he was no use any more might keep repeating to himself 'I can still do this and this and this'. If such thoughts often possessed him one would not be surprised if he, apparently out of all context, spoke such a sentence [as 'I know this is a tree'] out loud. (But here I have already sketched a background, a surrounding, for this remark, that is to say given it a context.) (*On Certainty*, §350)

To sketch in this way a background, a surrounding, for a remark is to confer a determinate meaning on it – what early Wittgenstein calls, a determinate method of symbolizing – it is to enable us to see what is being claimed by the speaker who claims by means of this remark to know something.

In the context of explaining a passage from J.L. Austin (which makes a point related to that of *On Certainty*, §§349 and 352[21]), Hilary Putnam offers the following example:

> I certainly know the meaning of the words, 'there', 'coffee', 'a lot', 'is', 'on', 'the', and 'table'. But that knowledge by itself does not determine the 'truth value' of the sentence 'There is a lot of coffee on the table'; in fact, the sentence, simply as a sentence, doesn't *have* a truth-value apart from particular circumstances. Moreover, the truth-conditions of the sentence 'There is a lot of coffee on the table' are highly occasion-sensitive: depending upon the circumstances, the sentence can be used to say that there are many cups of coffee on a contextually definite table, or that there is a huge urn of coffee on the table in question, or that there are bags of coffee stacked on the table, or that coffee has been spilled on the table, etc.[22]

A sentence such as 'There is a lot of coffee on the table' may, on one occasion of speaking or another, say any of indefinitely many distinct things – it may express indefinitely many distinct thoughts. Each of

21. The passage in question occurs on pp. 110–111 of *Sense and Sensibilia*.
22. Hilary Putnam, 'Skepticism and Transcendental Argument', unpublished manuscript. Putnam credits an example from Charles Travis (having to do with butter) with inspiring his coffee example.

these thoughts will be true under different conditions. Wittgenstein points out 'how a sentence is *meant* can be expressed by an expansion of it' (*On Certainty*, §349). If you wished to expand on what you meant in having said 'There is a lot of coffee on the table', depending upon what you meant, a different expansion would be required. In clearing up a certain misunderstanding of what was meant by your words, you might find yourself saying: 'No, I didn't mean coffee has been spilled on the table.' But we cannot account for these differences in what is said (in expressing each of these different thoughts by, in each case, uttering the words 'There is a lot of coffee on the table') by supposing that we are drawing on different meanings of the words 'there', 'coffee', 'a lot', 'is', 'on', 'the', or 'table' (as we can, for instance, explain the humorous ambiguity of the newspaper headline 'BRITISH LEFT WAFFLES ON FAULKLAND ISLANDS' by pointing to the ambiguity of the words 'left' and 'waffles'). The indeterminacy in what thought the sentence 'There is a lot of coffee on the table' expresses in Putnam's example is not one that turns on any ambiguity in the meanings of the words of which it is composed. In the sense in which it makes sense to speak of 'the meanings of the words' (i.e. what the dictionary says their meaning is), the same 'meaning of the word' is being drawn on for each word in each of these distinct uses of the sentence. Nevertheless, what is meant by the sentence, in each case, is not the same. Seeing what words, on a given occasion of speaking, mean is a matter of appreciating what they *can* mean in the circumstances of that speaking. It is a matter of perceiving – of the various possible contributions which circumstances of use might make – what sort of contribution the actual circumstances are most reasonably taken to make. For later Wittgenstein, as for early, understanding a proposition is still a matter of seeing the symbol in the sign – of perceiving a certain physiognomy of meaning in a string of signs, of seeing the face of a meaning in an employment of words. And for later Wittgenstein, as for early, this is not something you can do apart from a consideration of the context of significant use.

Wittgenstein on Nonsense

Wittgenstein thinks there is a conception of nonsense which, in philosophizing, we find it all but impossible to avoid falling for. One

way of falling for this conception is to think that a proposition is nonsensical because its parts are illegitimately combined – so that items of two distinct sorts cannot be put together (they, as it were, logically repel one another), another way of falling for it is to think that a content and a context cannot be combined (one 'cannot' utter these words in this context). Already in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein set his face against such a conception of, as it were, substantial nonsense – that is to say, nonsense which appears to result from there being something we cannot do.

The heart of the Tractarian conception of logic is to be found in the remark that 'we cannot make mistakes in logic' (§5.473). It is one of the burdens of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus* to try to show us that the idea that we can violate the logical syntax of language rests upon a confused conception of 'the logical structure of thought' (as if it were something which debars us from saying certain things). Wittgenstein says: 'Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted' (§5.473). If a sentence is nonsense, this is not because *it* is trying but failing to make sense (by breaking a rule of logic), but because *we* have failed to make sense with it: 'the sentence is nonsensical because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination of sense, not because *the symbol in itself* is unpermissible' ([My emphases]; §5.473). The idea that there can be such a thing as a kind of proposition which has an internal logical form of a sort which is debarred by the logical structure of our thought rests upon what Wittgenstein calls (in the Preface to the *Tractatus*) 'a misunderstanding of the logic of our language'.

Wittgenstein's repudiation of the conception of nonsense which underlies this misunderstanding (of the logic of our language) is summarized in the *Tractatus* as follows: 'we cannot give a sign the wrong sense' (§5.4732). In *Philosophical Investigations*, §500, the point is put as follows:

> When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

This raises the question: what are Wittgenstein's reasons for proposing that we exclude particular combinations of words from the language? In *On Certainty*, he writes:

> The propositions which one comes back to again and again as if bewitched – these I should like to expunge from philosophical language. . . . (§31)

> Thus we expunge the sentences that don't get us any further. (§33)

But if it is not the sentences themselves which are nonsense, but our failure to mean something by them, then why expunge them? Why punish the innocent? The preceding section of the *Investigations* (§499) begins as follows:

> To say 'This combination of words makes no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason.

This suggests that we undertake to exclude various combinations of words for a reason. But what reason? In the *Philosophical Grammar*, we find this:

> How strange that one should be able to say that such and such a state of affairs is inconceivable! If we regard a thought as an accompaniment going with an expression, the words in the statement that specify the inconceivable state of affairs must be unaccompanied. So what sort of sense is it to have? Unless it says these words are senseless. But it isn't as it were their sense that is senseless; they are to be excluded from our language as if they were some arbitrary noise, and the reason for their *explicit* exclusion can only be that *we are tempted* to confuse them with a proposition of our language. (p. 130; I have amended the translation)

Wittgenstein's reasons for proposing that we explicitly exclude an expression from the language are – not because it is, as it were, the sense of the expression which is senseless, but – because '*we are tempted* to confuse' the expression on occasions on which it occurs senselessly with meaningful propositions of our language.

When later Wittgenstein raises questions concerning what a sentence appears to mean considered apart from any actual contexts of use, it is usually in the service of drawing attention to a particular sort of experience that a contemplation of the sentence can engender in us: the possibility of imagining that one knows what one's words mean even though no meaning has yet been conferred on them. Wittgenstein does think that meaning can in this respect often appear to come apart from use – especially under the pressure of philosophy. For we are prone to the illusion that simply knowing what our words mean suffices for knowing what we mean by them. Talk of 'meaning coming apart from use' in this sense is shorthand for

talking about a peculiar species of hallucination which Wittgenstein takes to be an occupational hazard of philosophy: a hallucination of meaning.

The intuition runs very deep that in the realm of meaning *esse est percipe*: if we seem to mean something by our words, then, by golly, we do. Later Wittgenstein himself concedes what he takes to be sound in this intuition when he writes: '*one* feature of our concept of a proposition is *sounding like a proposition*' (*P.I.*, §134). But it is only one feature of our concept of a proposition, and it is central to Wittgenstein's teaching that possession of this feature, though a necessary condition on something's counting as a proposition, is by no means a sufficient one.

In §5.4733 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says: 'If . . . [a proposition] has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts.' He then immediately adds: '(Even if we believe that we have done so.)' This last parenthetical remark of Wittgenstein's takes us to the central aim of the *Tractatus*: to show us that we are prone to *believe* that we have given meaning to some or all of the constituent parts of a proposition when we have not done so. The problem, according to the *Tractatus*, is that we often believe that we have given a meaning to all of a sentence's constituent parts when we have failed to do so. We think nonsense results in such cases not because of a failure on our part, but because of a failure on the sentence's part. We think the problem lies not in an absence of meaning (in our failing to mean anything by these words) but rather in a presence of meaning (in the incompatible senses the words already have – senses which the words import with them into the context of combination). We think the thought is flawed because the component senses of its parts logically repel one another. They fail to add up to a thought. So we feel our words are attempting to think a logically impossible thought – and that this involves a kind of impossibility of a higher order than ordinary impossibility.[23] Wittgenstein's teaching is that the problem lies not in the words, but in our

23. Here, again, we find in the *Tractatus* the anticipation of a recurring theme of Wittgenstein's later thought:

> The difficulty is in using the word 'can' in different ways, as 'physically possible' and as 'making no sense to say . . .' The logical impossibility of fitting the two pieces seems of the same order as the physical impossibility, only more impossible! (*Wittgenstein's Lectures*: *Cambridge, 1932–1935*, p. 146)

confused relation to the words: in our experiencing ourselves as meaning something definite by them, yet also feeling that what we take ourselves to be meaning with the words makes no sense. We are confused about what it is we want to say and we project our confusion onto the linguistic string. Then we look at the linguistic string and imagine we discover what *it* is trying to say. We want to say to the string: 'We know what you mean, but "it" cannot be said.' The incoherence of our desires with respect to the sentence – wishing to both mean and not mean something with it – is seen by us as an incoherence in what the words want to be saying. We displace our desire onto the words and see them as *aspiring* to say something they never quite succeed in saying (because, we tell ourselves, 'it' cannot be said). We account for the confusion these words engender in us by discovering in the words a hopelessly flawed sense.

In Wittgenstein's later work, he furnishes countless carefully constructed examples, each of which is designed to engender in the reader the experience of a hallucination of meaning. He aims to show us through such examples how we are prone to imagine we transfer the meaning of an expression where we have failed to transfer the use. In having failed to transfer the use, either *we* mean something different from what we take ourselves to mean or we mean nothing at all. Wittgenstein, in his later writings, describes the sort of awkward relation we occupy with respect to our words in such cases as one in which we are led 'to speak outside language games'. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes what is happening when we 'speak outside language games' as cases of language 'idling'[24] or being 'on holiday'[25] because he takes the words we call upon in such cases to fail to engage – and thus fail to be at work in – any actual circumstances of use. In such cases, the failure can be traced neither to a flaw which resides in the meaning of the sentence prior to the use we make of it, nor to the flawed use we make of an independently determinately meaningful sentence. The failure of meaning which results when we are led 'to speak outside language games' is to be traced neither to some inherent feature of the linguistic string nor some inherent feature of the context of use nor some incompatibility between such features of each. It is to be

24. 'The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.' (*Philosophical Investigations*, §132)
25. '[P]hilosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*.' (*Philosophical Investigations*, §38)

traced rather to a failure on the part of the speaker to project that string into a new context in a fashion which admits of a stable and coherent reading – in a fashion which admits of our being able to perceive in the sentence, when we view it *against the background* of its circumstances of use, a coherent physiognomy of meaning.

Most commentators on Wittgenstein's work – both early and late – understand Wittgenstein's deployment of 'nonsense' as a term of philosophical criticism to represent the conclusion of an argument to the effect that certain combinations of expressions – or the employments of certain combinations of expressions in certain contexts – are inherently nonsensical. If you are a scholar of Wittgenstein's early work, you are likely to think that the trouble is to be traced to violations of logical syntax (i.e. the logical incompatibility of the parts of the proposition). If you are a scholar of his later work, you are likely to think it is to be traced to violations of grammar (which sometimes means the same thing as violations of logical syntax, and which sometimes means the incompatibility of certain meanings with certain contexts of use). But what early Wittgenstein calls *the logic of our language* and what later Wittgenstein calls grammar is not the name of a grid of rules we lay over language in order to point out where one or another of its prescriptions are violated. A grammatical investigation is a convening of our criteria for the employment of a particular concept. But the way an appeal to criteria comes to bear on a philosophical problem, such as that of skepticism, is not by showing the skeptic that he has 'violated the rules for the use of an expression',[26] and therefore that there is

26. I am quoting here from the following passage from Baker and Hacker (which identifies as a central continuity in doctrine in early and later Wittgenstein what I take to be a central continuity in target):

> Wittgenstein had, in the *Tractatus*, seen that philosophical or conceptual investigation moves in the domain of rules. An important point of continuity was the insight that philosophy is not concerned with what is true and what is false, but rather with what makes sense and what traverses the bounds of sense. . . . [W]hat he called 'rules of grammar' . . . are the direct descendants of the 'rules of logical syntax' of the *Tractatus*. Like rules of logical syntax, rules of grammar determine the bounds of sense. They distinguish sense from nonsense. . . . Grammar, as Wittgenstein understood the term, is the account book of language. Its rules determine the limits of sense, and by carefully scrutinizing them the philosopher may determine at what point he has drawn an overdraft on Reason, *violated the rules for the use of an expression*, and so, in subtle and not readily identifiable ways, traversed the bounds of sense. [Their emphasis] (Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein*: *Rules*, *Grammar and Necessity*, pp. 39–40, 55)

something determinate that he wants to mean that he *cannot* mean by his words – that, for example (with respect to some particular claim) there cannot be a legitimate claim to knowledge where the skeptic says there can be, or that there can be where he says there cannot be. The point of the grammatical investigation is rather to show the skeptic that he is faced with a dilemma: either he stays within our language-games and his words express a doubt but not the sort of super-doubt that he is after (his doubt will thus not generalize in the way that he needs it to in order to bring the possibility of knowledge as such in doubt), or he will be led to speak 'outside language-games', stripping his putative context of use of the concrete specificity (and hence the foothold for our criteria) which permits us to mean and thus say what we do on the occasions on which we ordinarily employ the word 'doubt' to express the concept of doubt. No rule of grammar is adduced to exhibit the ineradicable flaws in the skeptic's utterances. Rather the grammar of our various language-games is exhibited to the skeptic, in order to present him with an overview of the various possibilities of meaning his words that are available to him. He is to find, once presented with a perspicuous overview of the grammar, that either he is making perfect sense but failing to ask the question he wants, or that it remains unclear which of the many things he can mean by his words he wants to mean. Wittgenstein's aim, in assembling these reminders, is not to refute the skeptic (i.e. to establish the truth of the negation of what he claims), but to query the sense of his claim: to force on him the question, given what his words can mean, what he means by them. The problem with his words thus lies neither in the words themselves nor in some inherent incompatibility between his words and a determinate context of use, but in his confused relation with respect to his words. The aim is to offer a perspicuous representation of the various things he might mean by his words in order to show him that, in wanting to occupy more than one of the available alternatives at once and yet none in particular at a time, he is possessed of an incoherent desire with respect to his words.

Philosophy Department
University of Pittsburgh
1001 Cathedral of Learning
Pittsburgh, PA 15260