Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein

By James Conant

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF ONE ASPECT OF Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein: his interpretation of Wittgenstein's teaching concerning the relation between meaning and use. After furnishing a rough overview of this aspect of Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, I shall attempt to bring into focus what is most distinctive and elusive about it by illustrating, by means of some examples drawn from commentators on Cavell's work, how easy it can be to miss Cavell's and—if Cavell is right about who Wittgenstein is—Wittgenstein's point.

Now Wittgenstein has become quite famous in recent years for putting forward something that gets called a "use-theory of meaning." Wittgenstein 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.[1]

If you look at commentaries on Wittgenstein's work, you will find that commentators have wildly different understandings of what Wittgenstein is saying in this passage. Here is what Cavell says:

> "The meaning is the use" calls attention to the fact that what an expression means is a function of what it is used to mean or to say on specific occasions by human beings. . . . [T]o trace the intellectual history of philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses would be a worthwhile undertaking. . . . A fitting title for this history would be: Philosophy and the Rejection of the Human.
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> Wittgenstein's motive . . . is to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy. . . . He undertook, as I read him, to trace the mechanisms of this rejection in the ways in which in investigating ourselves,

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> we are led to speak "outside language games," consider expressions apart from, and in opposition to, the natural forms of life which give those expressions the force they have. . . . What is left out of an expression if it is used "outside its ordinary language game" is not necessarily what the *words* mean (they may mean what they always did, what a good dictionary says they mean), but what we mean in using them when and where we do. The point of saying them is lost.
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> How great a loss *is* that? To show how great is a dominant motive of the *Investigations*. 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.[2]

I want to draw attention to four topics that are touched upon in this passage: (1) philosophy's usual way of asking after the meaning of an expression—"philosophy's concentration on the meaning of particular words and sentences, in isolation from a systematic attention to their concrete uses"; (2) Wittgenstein's contrasting way of asking after the meaning of an expression— which takes it to be "a function of what it is used to mean or to say on specific occasions by human beings"; (3) where the first way leads us—when we engage in the philosopher's usual way of employing language, we are led to speak "outside language games"; and (4) what the second way hopes to show us—that, when we are led to speak thus, "we no longer know what we mean."

Let's start with *(1)* and *(2)*. A contrast is drawn here between two ways of asking after the meaning of an expression:

> (1) asking after its meaning in isolation from a systematic attention to concrete uses (asking after what the word or sentence means);
>
> (2) asking after its meaning through a consideration of its concrete uses (asking after what the word or sentence is used to mean on specific occasions by human beings).

Readers of Wittgenstein assume that what must be at issue in his invocation of "use" is the importance of asking the second of these questions over and above merely asking the first; or, to put the point in more fashionable—and therefore more dangerous—terms: that what must be at issue is the importance of supplementing our syntactic and semantic theory of language with a third layer, a theory of the pragmatics of natural language or a theory of speech-acts. Cavell takes Wittgenstein to want to urge something potentially far more threatening to traditional analytic philosophy of language than any such mere call for supplementation; namely, that "for a large class of cases" there isn't anything which can count as asking the first question (asking what a sentence means) apart from a prior consideration of the second question (apart, that is, from asking: when might it be said? where? by whom? to whom?).

Let us now turn for a moment to *(4)*. Wittgenstein, according to Cavell, goes on to claim something which has proved even harder for the analytic philosophical tradition to hear: namely, that when, under the pressure of philosophy, meaning and use come apart, then we are subject not just to some degree of ignorance or perplexity as to what we mean; rather, we are subject to something (which is apt to strike us as) far more paradoxical: we are subject to

an illusion of meaning. The way Cavell puts this is to say that, when the philosopher reaches such a crossroads in his philosophizing, he is subject to a "hallucination of meaning":

> [H]e imagines himself to be saying something when he is not, to have discovered something when he has not. Someone in these particular straits may be described as hallucinating what he or she means, or as having the illusion of meaning something.[3]

This is paradoxical insofar as it challenges the deeply rooted intuition that in the realm of meaning *esse est percipe*: if I seem to mean something by my words then, by golly, I do. 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*."[4] But it is only one feature of our concept of a proposition, and it is central to Cavell's and Wittgenstein's teachings that possession of this feature, though a necessary condition on something's counting as a proposition, is by no means a sufficient one.

This takes us to Wittgenstein's numerous thought-experiments, such as his famous invitation to his reader to try to imagine a private language.[5] According to Cavell, Wittgenstein offers these carefully constructed invitations to the reader to imagine such-and-such, in order to lead the reader up a dialectical ladder. When the reader has reached the top of the ladder, he is to throw the ladder away: he is supposed to come to see that he had, all along, only been under the illusion of imagining something.[6] More specifically, according to Cavell, what Wittgenstein wants us to come to see about such cases is that such a hallucination of meaning arises because we imagine we transfer the meaning of an expression where we have failed to transfer the use. Wittgenstein 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."

This takes us back to *(3)*. Cavell's most sustained discussion of a Wittgensteinian example of how the philosopher is led to speak "outside language games" is his discussion of epistemological skepticism. The skeptic wants to examine the integrity of our claims to knowledge; but not any sort of claim will suit the purposes of his investigation. It has to, for the skeptic's purposes, be (what Cavell calls) "a best case of knowledge"—the sort of case which, if a ground for doubt can be adduced, will thereby cast doubt over the possibility of knowledge as such.[7] On Cavell's reading, Wittgenstein's aim is to show the skeptic that he hovers between the horns of a dilemma. Here is how Cavell summarizes the dilemma:

> If the epistemologist were not imagining a claim to have been made, his procedure would be as out of the ordinary as the ordinary language philosopher finds it to be. But, on the other hand, if he were investing a claim of the sort the coherence of his procedures require . . . then his conclusion would not have the generality it seems to have.[8]

Either (this is the first horn of the dilemma) the claim that the skeptic adduces will not be a (proper) claim or (this is the second horn) the claim is a (proper) claim to knowledge. If it is the former, Wittgenstein aims to show that an

investigation of its epistemic credentials does not bear on the integrity of our *ordinary* claims to knowledge. If the latter, Wittgenstein aims to show that it will not be the sort of example of knowledge the failure of which can serve the skeptic's purposes: namely, the specification of a ground for doubting it will not cast a shadow over the *whole* of our knowledge.

The epistemologist may try to seize the first horn of this dilemma and say that he knows that he is using the word "know" or "claim" in a strained and unusual way, but not to worry; for he means to use the word in a special philosophical sense, and it is a relatively technical concept of "knowing" or "claiming" that he aims to investigate. But then he runs up against the problem that the conclusion of his investigation cannot yield, as he takes it to, a discovery concerning the integrity of our ordinary claims to knowledge—it can at most yield a discovery about so-called "knowing" or so-called "claiming." If the epistemologist wants his conclusion to yield a discovery about the nature of knowledge *überhaupt* his investigation cannot afford to lose sight of our concept of knowledge. Cavell remarks:

> Let me . . . emphasize what I take the sense of discovery to indicate about the philosopher's conclusion. First, since it is a discovery whose content is that something we have, supposedly, all believed has been shown to be false or superstitious or in some respect suspect, its sense of being a discovery depends upon a sense of its *conflicting* with what we would all, supposedly, have said we knew or thought. And this sense of conflict depends upon the words which express the conclusion meaning or seeming to mean what these words, as ordinarily used, would express. For *that* is what the conclusion conflicts with. When the philosopher concludes that "we don't really see or know" something, why would this so much as seem to deny what the ordinary person means when he says "I see or know" something unless the words meant, or seemed to mean, the same thing?[9]

The sense of having arrived at a philosophical discovery—that is, a discovery which reveals that things are not at all as we pre-philosophically suppose them to be—is the hallmark of skepticism. Thus if the skeptic is to be entitled to his sense of discovery he has no choice but to accept the second horn of the dilemma, and to agree to the condition that, when he concludes that "we don't really see or know" something, his conclusion will only be able to conflict with what the ordinary person believes (namely, that he sees or knows something when he says "I see" or "I know" something) if, when the skeptic and the ordinary person employ it, the word "see" or "know" signifies the same concept. Thus the burden of Wittgenstein's treatment of skepticism, on Cavell's reading, is directed towards a discussion of the second horn of the dilemma: to showing the skeptic that if his words are meant in the ordinary way—if his example of a claim to knowledge is taken to involve an ordinary claim to knowledge (for example, a claim to know that there is a goldfinch in the garden)—then the overturning of the claim in question will fail to generalize in the requisite way for it to disclose a discovery about the nature of knowledge as such. When a ground for doubt is entered against an ordinary claim to knowledge, it may show that the person who has made the claim doesn't know what he claims to know (for example, that he

doesn't know that the bird is a goldfinch) but not that the speaker doesn't know anything.

The skeptic's twin sense of the peculiarity and the coherence of his investigation derives from his hovering between the two horns of this dilemma, without determinately settling on either one. He wants to use words in an admittedly somewhat extraordinary way and yet mean them in their ordinary sense. He wants to occupy at the same time a position which is both inside and outside the ordinary language-game in which his words have their home. He therefore speaks "outside language games." This does not just mean that he speaks outside the ordinary (and therefore inside some relatively esoteric scientific or literary) language-game; it means that he speaks "outside language games" altogether, ordinary or extraordinary. Wittgenstein describes what happens when we "speak outside language games" as cases of language "idling"[10] or being "on holiday."[11] Cavell takes these descriptions seriously. The words we call upon in such cases are said to be "idle" or "on holiday" because they fail to be at work: they do not engage any determinate circumstances of use.

What the skeptic needs, in order to pull off his trick, is to engage in a performance that qualifies as a speech-act of *claiming* while prescinding from all of the messy context-dependent details that come with any actual concrete situation in which a claim is made. In the following passage, Cavell discusses a putative example of such an utterly generic case of claiming of the sort which the skeptic's inquiry requires as its point of departure if its conclusion is to have any hope of attaining the requisite degree of generality:

> [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. . . .
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> Perhaps one feels: "What difference does it make that no one would have *said*, without a special reason for saying it, that you knew the green jar was on the desk? You *did* know it; it's *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 something; and I am suggesting that there must, in grammar, be reasons for what you say, or be a 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 you saying them we cannot understand what *you* mean.[12]

Cavell argues here that there isn't anything which is *just* saying (and therewith meaning) the words "He knew there was a green jar there." To mean these words one must mean *something* by them and this requires that one have a reason or basis for saying them. In the absence of such a reason or basis, there isn't anything which is the thought which I express in uttering these words. This cuts against the received wisdom of contemporary philosophy of language. Philosophers are apt to think that it suffices to fulfill the conditions for the expression of a determinate thought if I utter a sentence which satisfies the

following two conditions: (i) the individual words of which the sentence is composed are so-called "meaningful" words of the language, and (ii) the words are combined in accordance with the so-called "rules" of the language. Wittgenstein contests just such a view in the following passage from *On Certainty*:

> "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 a different kind.[13]

As we run though 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" (uttering certain words), 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"—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, according to Cavell, thinks that 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 provide something which on its own steam (apart from a context which confers a fully determinate sense upon it) allows for the expression of a determinate thought. 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.

In order better to see the elusiveness of this conception of meaning, let us look at some recent attempts to explicate it. Here is Michael Williams on Cavell:

> Cavell's key notion is that of a "concrete" claim. A concrete claim is one that has a definite point: it is a claim that is made to inform, to warn, to amuse, or whatever. It is, for Cavell, a matter of "grammar" that an utterance must enter a concrete claim if it is to count as an intelligible act of assertion. This means that truth alone does not guarantee intelligible assertability, for a statement can be true without its assertion having any point at all. . . . [I]n Cavell's eyes, though the skeptic uses meaningful sentences, and even uses them in ways that are recognizably analogous to familiar uses, an essential feature of his enterprise forces him to enter his claims in a way that violates the conditions for fully meaningful speech. Though his words mean what they always mean, there is nothing he means by them. In this way, the sceptic's procedure generates an illusion of meaning.[14]

Williams has Cavell here saying that the proposition the skeptic comes out with may well be true but there is a problem about asserting this (true) proposition in the context in which the skeptic wants to come out with it. Now it is a necessary condition on a proposition's being true that it be meaningful; that is, it is a necessary condition on our being able to assess the truth of a proposition that

first we be able to understand it. So Williams, in effect, has Cavell 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 alternatively: there isn't any problem about what the skeptic's utterance would mean if it were assertible—the problem just is that the skeptic's claim runs into conflict with various, as it were, additional (pragmatic) constraints on assertibility. So it looks as 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—a situation in which we could felicitously perform the relevant speech-act without it misfiring. So it starts to look as if we can think the (skeptic's) thought alright, there is just a problem about finding a situation in which we can express it out loud. It looks as if the problem lies not in what the skeptic is trying to say, but in an incompatibility between the *content* of what he wants to say and the *context* of utterance. This suggests a certain way of taking what Wittgenstein means when he says we are led to speak outside language-games: it looks as if the unintelligibility of certain utterances is to be traced to a failure of fit between certain kinds of sentences and certain kinds of situations.

This (mis)reading of Cavell on Wittgenstein is also to be found in the work of Marie McGinn:

> Cavell's attempt to show that the knowledge claims that 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.
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> 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. . . .
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> 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.[15]

McGinn here attributes to Wittgenstein—and Cavell—an implicit reliance on a distinction made famous by Paul Grice: the distinction between sentence-meaning and speaker's-meaning.[16] The additional, supposedly distinctively 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 this second sense of "meaning") still remains to be settled. Insofar 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 being unable to specify the content of the assertion, 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 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.[17]

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 Cavell's Wittgenstein holds (i) that the sentences that the philosopher utters are themselves perfectly meaningful, and yet (ii) 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.

Thus we arrive at a fairly complete misunderstanding of the passages in Cavell that are the target of Williams's and McGinn's exegeses. The whole point of this region of Wittgenstein's thought, on Cavell's reading of him, is to help us to come to see that meaning and use cannot come apart from one another in just the manner that Williams and McGinn have Cavell supposing that it can. Consider the following passage from *On Certainty*:

> 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.[18]

What Wittgenstein says here is not (as Williams and McGinn propose): 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" 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.
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> 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.[19]

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 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 the previous passage from *On Certainty*: the words "I am here" have a meaning *only* in certain contexts—that is, it is a mistake to think that the words themselves intrinsically possess some sort of meaning apart from their capacity to express a meaningful thought when called upon in a context of use. The problem with the pseudo-employment of "I am here" under consideration in the passage above 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 meaning of a 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.[20]

The philosopher takes there to be something which is *the* thought which *the sentence itself* expresses. He takes himself already to know what it means: what it means is a function of what these words combined mean. To consider the use of the sentence for such a philosopher, is to consider an additional dimension of meaning. An investigation of "use," for such a philosopher, is an investigation into the relationship between "the meaning of the sentence"—which we are able to grasp independently of its contexts of use—and the sorts of things this sentence can express or imply (over and above what it means taken by itself) when brought into conjunction with the various contexts of use into which it can be intelligibly imported. Questions can be raised about why what is said is said and what the point of saying it on a particular occasion of use is. 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 the truth to have been spoken on this occasion of speaking. Cavell's Wittgenstein is concerned to contest such a conception of the relation between meaning and use. What your

words say depends upon what they are *doing*—how they are at work—in a context of use. Wittgenstein writes:

> 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?"[21]

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. This is not to say that the sentence "I know that that's a tree," where uttered when a tree stands in plain and open view, cannot be given a sense. We can, as Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes, find a context of use in which these words would be doing something under such circumstances. Thus, in the following passage, Wittgenstein sketches a background that confers upon the sentence "I know that that's a tree" a sense, even though the sentence is uttered while a tree stands in plain and open view:

> [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, this is to say given it a context.)[22]

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

Consider the following sentence: "There is a lot of coffee on the table."[23] This sentence may, on one occasion of speaking or another, say any of indefinitely many distinct things—it may express indefinitely many distinct thoughts. Each of these thoughts will be true under different conditions. Wittgenstein points out that "how a sentence is *meant* can be expressed by an expansion of it."[24] 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: "I meant that coffee has been spilled on the table"; or alternatively: "I meant that there is a huge urn of coffee on the table in question"; or: "I meant that there are bags of coffee stacked 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." The indeterminacy in what thought the sentence "There is a lot of coffee on the table" expresses in each of these sayings of it, is not one that turns on any ambiguity in the meaning of the words of which it is composed. In the sense in which it makes sense to speak of "the meanings of the words" (that is, what the dictionary says their meaning is), the same "meaning of the word" is being drawn on for each of these words ("there," "coffee," "a lot," "is," "on," "the," "table") 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 the 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 Cavell's Wittgenstein, understanding a proposition is a matter of perceiving a certain physiognomy of meaning in an employment of words. This is not something you can do apart from a consideration of the context of significant use.

The following is an example of the sort of passage from Cavell that Williams and McGinn latch onto and from which they construct their reading of Cavell:

> "Not saying anything" is one way philosophers do not know what they mean. In this case it is not that they mean something *other* than they say, but that they do not see that they mean *nothing* (that *they* mean nothing, not that their statements mean nothing, are nonsense).[25]

Cavell's point here is that, in cases where there is a failure of meaning, the failure is to be traced 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 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. The reason for not putting the blame on the linguistic string taken is isolation is not, pace Williams and McGinn, because it is perfectly clear what the string taken by itself must mean; but rather because there is no straightforwardly clear sense to be made of what the speaker wants it to mean in the context in question. This is, again, not because—as McGinn and Williams have it—this linguistic string and that context are inherently incompatible; for, as Cavell points out and Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes, we could stipulate a sense for these words in this context (but then we run against the first horn of the dilemma), or we could find or invent a context of use for this combination of words which is a natural extension of their ordinary language-game (but then we run up against the second horn of the dilemma).

For Cavell's Wittgenstein, there are not two distinct and autonomous levels of making sense—the semantic and the pragmatic—such that one can fully meet the first-level demands for propositionhood and yet still fall short of the conditions for being an assertible proposition. It is just such a view that is repudiated by Cavell in the following passage:

> '[I]t makes sense' . . . just means that we can easily imagine circumstances in which it *would* make sense to say it. . . . It does not mean that *apart* from those circumstances it makes (clear) sense. The point is not that you sometimes cannot say (or think) what is the case, but that to say (or think) something is the case *you must say or think it*, and "saying that" (or "thinking that") has its conditions.[26]

Apart from specifying circumstances in which it makes sense to say a certain sequence of words we have failed determinately to specify what it is that the

sequence of words says. Nonsense, according to the view that Cavell attributes to Wittgenstein, arises when there is an absence of sense. The view that Williams and McGinn attribute to Cavell takes philosophical nonsense to be due to an inappropriate kind of presence of sense; it takes philosophical nonsense be one of two sorts of cases described by Cavell in the following parenthetical remark:

> We are, one might say, asked to step back from our conviction that this *must* be an assertion . . . and incline ourselves to suppose that someone has here been prompted to insistent emptiness, to mean something incoherently.
> (This is not the same as trying to mean something incoherent. Wittgenstein alludes to this possibility in saying "When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless."[27] Nor is it the same as meaning something other than you think. This would describe cases in which your *words* make sense, and they are put together correctly, but you are as it were meaning them in the wrong place.)[28]

Cavell parenthetically mentions both of these sorts of cases precisely in order to distinguish them from the sort of case that he takes to be at issue in Wittgenstein's employment of "nonsense" as a term of philosophical criticism. Let's first consider the second of the cases mentioned here. This is not a case of sheer unintelligibility. The intelligibility of such a case, however, depends upon our seeing the utterer as imagining himself to be in circumstances other than those in which he actually is. The first sort of case—the one mentioned in the preceding portion of the passage—is the sort Wittgenstein himself attempts to characterize when he says:

> 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 calculation.[29]

Wittgenstein's saying that a certain combination of words is to be "excluded from the language" or "withdrawn from circulation" might suggest that he takes the combination of words in question to have an intrinsically flawed sense—to be nonsense not because of an absence of sense, but because of the flawed presence of sense. The preceding section of *Philosophical Investigations* begins:

> 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.[30]

This raises the question: what are Wittgenstein's reasons for proposing that we exclude particular combinations of words from the language? In *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.[31]

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 expression which is senseless, but—because "*we are tempted* to confuse" sentences in which it figures senselessly with meaningful propositions of our language. Saying that "it is as it were its sense that is senseless" is not meant to be a description of a possible sort of case of nonsense. Rather it is meant as a description of a sort of case that we imagine we come upon in philosophizing. Wittgenstein thinks there is a conception of nonsense that, 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—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 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein set his face against such a conception of, as it were, substantial nonsense. It is *à propos* such a conception of nonsense that he writes in the *Tractatus*: "we cannot give a sign the wrong sense."[32]

Most commentators on Wittgenstein's work (early and late) take his 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 so-called "violations of logical syntax" (that is, to 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 so-called "violations of grammar" (which sometimes means the same thing as "violations of logical syntax" and sometimes means "the incompatibility of certain meanings with certain contexts of use"). But, according to Cavell, what the early Wittgenstein calls *the logic of our language* and what the later Wittgenstein calls *grammar* is not the name for 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 philosopher that he has "violated the rules for the use of an expression,"[33] and therefore that there is something determinate that he wants to mean that he *cannot* mean by his words.

With respect to the skeptic, the point of (what Wittgenstein calls) a "grammatical investigation" is to show him 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 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 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 ineradicable (logical or grammatical) 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 *Übersicht* of the various possibilities of meaning his words that are available to him. He is to find, once presented with an *übersichtliche Darstellung* of the grammar, either that 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 (that is, 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 of a Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation, according to Cavell, is to furnish the philosopher with 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. φ

Notes

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell,1952), §43.

[2] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 206-207. All subsequent references to Cavell are to this book.

[3] Cavell, p. 221.

[4] *Philosophical Investigations*, §134.

[5] *Philosophical Investigations*, §243.

[6] "Wittgenstein does not say that there can be no private language. He introduces his sequential discussion of the topic, at §243, by *asking*: 'Could we also imagine…' The upshot of this question turns out to be that we cannot really imagine this, or rather that there is nothing of the sort to imagine, or rather that when we as it were try to imagine this we are imagining something other than we think." Cavell, p. 344.

[7] See Cavell, pp. 133-145.

[8] Cavell, p. 218.

[9] Cavell, pp. 164-5.

[10] "The confusions which occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work." *Philosophical Investigations*, §132.

[11] "[P]hilosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*." *Philosophical Investigations*, §38.

[12] Cavell, pp. 205-6.

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), §349.

[14] Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 152, 151.

[15] Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (New York: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 85-6. All subsequent references to McGinn are to this book.

[16] Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). For an excellent discussion of the differences between Wittgenstein and Grice, to which the ensuing discussion is indebted, see Charles Travis, "Annals of Analysis," *Mind*, vol. C, no. 2 (April 1991): pp. 237-264.

[17] McGinn, p. 85.
[18] *On Certainty*, §348.
[19] *Philosophical Investigations*, §117.
[20] *Philosophical Investigations*, §514.
[21] *On Certainty*, §352.
[22] *On Certainty*, §350.
[23] This example is due to Charles Travis.
[24] *On Certainty*, §349.
[25] Cavell, p. 210.
[26] Cavell, p. 215.
[27] Cavell is here quoting *Philosophical Investigations*, §500.
[28] Cavell, p. 336.
[29] *Philosophical Investigations*, §500.
[30] *Philosophical Investigations*, §499.
[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 130.
[32] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.4732.
[33] I am quoting here from the following passage from Baker and Hacker which identifies as a central continuity in doctrine in the 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 it 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. (G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein; Rules, Grammar and Necessity* [New York: Blackwell, 1985], pp. 39-40, 55 [their emphasis])