

Wittgenstein and Contextualism

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In recent years, Hilary Putnam has advocated what is sometimes called a “contextualist” view of meaning, according to which the meaning of an utterance is shaped in far-reaching and uncodifiable ways by the context in which it is uttered. Professor Putnam cites Charles Travis as the main proponent of the version of contextualism Putnam endorses. Travis in turn cites Putnam as a systematic influence. Perhaps unwisely given the presence of both of these formidable philosophers today, I will argue that the contextualist view Putnam and Travis hold in common is mistaken.

[About my title, “Wittgenstein and Contextualism”: in the effort to shrink this talk to a manageable length, I’ve had to cut out almost everything I wanted to say about Wittgenstein. I’ll throw in a little bit at the end, but the title is now unapt.]

I.

Contextualism is a view about the meanings of linguistic utterances. The relevant notion of meaning is that of *what is said* by an utterance—in alternative terminology, of the *content* of an utterance. In an assertion, for example, what is said is that something is so. If I now assert, “I’ve had a cold for two weeks,” the content of my utterance, what I’m saying to be so, is that I’ve had a cold for two weeks. This suggests that, at least in the case of assertions, we can conceive the content of an utterance in truth-conditional terms—i.e., that we can specify the content of an utterance by stating a condition under which it is true.

Now, utterances are not the only things that have meanings. So, of course, do linguistic expressions: words, phrases and sentences. The question arises: what is the relationship between the content of an utterance and the meaning of the sentence that is uttered? One simple and natural thought is that they are equivalent—that what one says in uttering a given sentence = what the sentence itself means. Given the view of the contents of utterances just suggested, it follows that the meaning of a sentence apt for assertive use can itself be stated in truth-conditional terms. [[CUT The goal of a compositional theory of meaning for a language, then, would be to assign semantic properties to simple expressions, and principles determining the meaning of complex expressions on the basis of the expressions of which they are composed, such that the meaning of a sentence thus generated can be identified with what is said in an utterance of that sentence. Given our assumption that the content of an assertive utterance is truth-conditional, a theory of meaning must be able to generate, for every sentence apt for assertive use, a truth-condition. This is one way of understanding the motivation for the semantic project advocated by Donald Davidson.

Of course there are complications, cases in which it's undeniable that the meaning of an asserted sentence does not suffice to determine the content of the assertion. Many philosophers of language propose to accommodate most or all of these cases as instances of either ellipsis or indexicality. To regard an utterance as elliptical is to suppose, roughly, that certain elements have been "left out" from the uttered sentence—that is to say, that adding those elements to the uttered sentence will yield the sentence that really fixes the content of the utterance. This preserves the core idea of the view we have been discussing: that there is a sentence, closely and intelligibly related to the speaker's utterance, which completely determines its content. Indexicality also seems tractable without departing unduly from the spirit of the truth-conditional

view of sentence meaning. For it seems open to suppose that the contributions made by context to the truth-conditions of utterances with indexical elements are determined by rules that are part of the meanings of the indexical elements in question. For example, it is surely plausible that it is part of the meaning of the English word “I” that it refers in a given utterance to the speaker—for example, that it refers to me when I say, “I’ve had a cold for two weeks”.

A less crude statement of the truth-conditional view of sentence meaning would then be as follows:

The truth-conditional content of an assertive utterance is wholly determined either by the meaning of the uttered sentence or by the meaning of the sentence for which the uttered sentence is elliptical, such that the only contributions from context are determined by rules laid down by the meanings of elements of the sentence.]]

II.

Contextualism, as I will understand it today, denies the truth-conditional view of sentence meaning. It holds that the meaning of an uttered sentence does not suffice to fix the truth-conditional content of the utterance, and that context must make a contribution. Moreover, this contribution cannot be fully accounted for by rules laid down by the meanings of the uttered words.

Travis’s primary way of arguing for this claim is by example. Here’s a typical one (Travis 1997). Suppose Pia has a Japanese maple. She doesn’t like the reddish hue of its leaves, so she paints them green. Now she says contentedly, “That’s better. The leaves on my tree are green now.” According to Travis, in uttering that sentence on this occasion, she has spoken the truth. But now suppose her botanist friend Bill calls, soliciting samples for a study on the chemistry of green leaves. Pia says, “I can give you some. The leaves on my tree are green.” On this occasion, says Travis, her utterance of “The leaves on my tree are green” is false. So one

utterance was true and one false. They must, therefore, have different truth-conditions. But they are both utterances of the same sentence. All that has changed is the context of utterance.

[[CUT If Travis is right that there is a difference in the truth-conditions of these two utterances, it is not a difference that can plausibly be ascribed to any indexical element of the sentence. To suppose that it could would be to suppose that the meaning of the word “green” lays down a rule which has the implication that “green”, when uttered in a context like the first one, applies to leaves when they’re painted green, but when uttered in the second context, applies to leaves only if they’re naturally green. And that seems absurd. Travis also argues that the difference cannot be explained in terms of ellipsis. Generalizing from this and other examples, Travis concludes that contextualism is true across the board: the context of an utterance always plays a role in determining truth-conditions that cannot be domesticated in terms of either indexicality or ellipsis.]]

I believe at least some of the examples of putative truth-value variation that Travis and Putnam present can in fact be explained away in terms of ellipsis, ambiguity and other such phenomena. (For example, one of Putnam’s cases is partly explained by the fact that the English word “coffee” is ambiguous, at least according to my dictionary, between a beverage and a bean.) But to argue this way would be boring, would be certain not to impress a contextualist like Putnam or Travis, and would miss what is really at issue and of interest in their brand of contextualism. In what follows I will discuss particular examples, but I will try to offer a very different kind of reason for rejecting the contextualist reading of them.

III.

At one point, Travis considers someone objecting to his analysis of the Pia example by pointing out that “green” is a vague term. This opens various possibilities, including the possibility that each of Pia’s utterances is neither true nor false—that they simply don’t have truth-values. (In fact, one could hold this view of the example without taking it to flow from the vagueness of “green”. But I will not pursue the matter here.) Travis’s response is straightforward: this is not a feasible tack to take when the utterances in question *clearly* have truth-values, and that is the case with Pia’s utterances. According to Travis, Pia’s first utterance of “The leaves on my tree are green” is clearly true, and the second is clearly false.

But is that so? Whatever else we want to say about the example, is it really *clear* that Pia’s utterances are, respectively, true and false? Let’s focus on the first utterance for a moment: after Pia paints the leaves she says, “The leaves on my tree are green now.” Suppose you overhear Pia saying this, and, being in a contrary mood, decide to object. You might say something like the following: “I’ll grant you, Pia, that the leaves on your tree are painted green. But are they actually green? Certainly, some kinds of object—cars, furniture, walls—are whatever color they’re painted. If you paint a wall green, what you get is a green wall. But the sorts of object in question are what philosophers call artifacts. With *natural kinds* and their parts—cats, trees, leaves, maybe even rocks—the connection between color and color painted is much more problematic. And there’s a straightforward reason for this difference: the layer of paint on the surface of an artifact is, except in unusual cases, *part* of the artifact. If you scratch the paint on a car, you scratch the car itself. But if I apply a layer of paint to my friend’s dog as a practical joke, have I thereby slightly increased the mass of his dog? Certainly not. A living thing or other natural kind does not tolerate the incorporation of a layer of paint as a part. If you like, it is proscribed by the principle of unity and individuation for the kind of substance, in the

Aristotelian sense, that a living thing is. And so painting your leaves green does not make the leaves themselves green.”

A contextualist will be quite impatient with this argument. For it will seem to him to miss one of the fundamental insights of contextualism: namely, that what a person should be understood as saying with a given utterance depends upon the point of her saying it. The point of Pia’s utterance is just to register that she has successfully changed the visible color of the leaves—that is, the color you see when you look at them. That color is indeed now green. Even if there were something to all this high-handed metaphysical talk about the different kinds of change tolerated by natural kinds and artifacts and so forth, it’s irrelevant to evaluating the truth of Pia’s utterance. For we’ve been given no reason to think that Pia *cares* about whether the paint she has applied to the leaves is really part of the leaves or not. All she appears to care about is what color you see when you look at the leaves. And so that *this* color is green is all a reasonable interpreter should take her to be using the sentence, “The leaves on my tree are green now,” to say.

But I think this response is much too swift. It misses the possibility of an alternative view of the matter. The alternative view might be put as follows. When one uses some words of a natural language in an utterance, one’s utterance cannot but express all the meaning that these words have acquired in the course of the history of their use among speakers of the language. That use, needless to say, is rich and complex. Given that this is so, it should not be surprising if on some occasion an utterance was prevented from attaining truth in light of a nuance of the meanings of the uttered words—and correspondingly, a nuance of the truth-condition these meanings determine—that has no bearing on the speaker’s particular interests and concerns in making that utterance. Just because it doesn’t matter to the speaker (or to the audience, for that

matter) doesn't mean it isn't part of what the words say. That is the burden you assume when you speak a natural language. (There are counterbalancing advantages, as you will soon discover if, feeling oppressed by the commitments past use imposes on present in the case of existing languages, you try to make up your own from scratch.)

To this, we can add that the meanings of the words of a natural language are shaped by shared human and cultural interests, and that it's not after all so likely or common that a speaker's own interests will be orthogonal to them. We have, for example, a set of interests in the natural world and our relationship to it. In light of those interests, Pia's actions seem bizarre and pathetic. Who would paint the leaves of a living tree? Surely if you were to actually observe someone paint the leaves of a tree green and then say, "The leaves are green now," you will not take that remark to be just in order as it stands. (When I imagine someone doing and saying this, I can't help but envision her with a fixed, desperate smile.) For this is no one's idea of how to go about acquiring a tree with green leaves.

Obviously, what I have just said about the view of language that I characterized as an alternative to contextualism is at best suggestive. For the moment, I am going to set that view aside. What I am going to argue now, and what I take the case of Pia already to begin to suggest, is that contextualism ignores important features of our ordinary practices of reporting upon, and evaluating, the assertions of other people and ourselves. These features will ultimately point us back toward the alternative view of language.

IV.

In order to bring out the sort of features I have in mind, we will need to look at cases of utterances on less trivial topics than leaf color or coffee beans. Take, for example, money.

In a recent defense of contextualism, Mark Richard offers the English word “rich”, in the sense in which it is roughly synonymous with “wealthy” or “affluent”, as an example of word whose contributions to the truth-conditions of utterances is highly context-sensitive. Richard takes it as obvious that “rich” has this character; he writes, “It is, I think, beyond serious dispute that the truth conditions of [a sentence like] ‘Mary is rich’ vary across contexts, as vary the interest, focus, and so on of participants in a conversation” (Richard, *Philosophical Studies* 119: 215-242, p. 219). [[CUT Note that what Richard takes to be obvious is not merely the trivial point that “rich”, like “big” or “long”, can be used as a relative adjective—that someone might be, say, rich for an American but not rich for an upper-east-side New Yorker. Richard’s claim is that even when the comparison class is fixed, the truth-conditions of “Mary is rich” can vary from context to context.]] Richard imagines two acquaintances of a woman named Mary, Naomi and Didi, who have each just learned that Mary has won a million dollars U.S. in the lottery. They measure Mary’s resultant wealth against the same comparison class: New Yorkers. Didi is amazed by Mary’s windfall, and says to her friend, “Mary is rich.” Naomi, who moves about in more rarified circles, is less impressed, and says to her friend, “Mary is not rich at all.” According to Richard, both Naomi and Didi have probably spoken the truth: “it is very plausible that the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations” (218).

Now, it is undeniable that Didi and Naomi are *relying* on different standards in arriving at their respective judgments. And assuming that their standards are shared by their respective friends, both of their utterances will be met with agreement. It may even be so that for each, reliance on the standard that she did was a social norm, and judging on the basis of a significantly different standard would have met with disapproval. But it does not follow that

“the truth of their claims about wealth turns on whatever standards prevail within their conversations.” Indeed, it seems to me that taking this further step would conflict with further attitudes and dispositions that are very likely to be possessed by Didi and Naomi.

Suppose Didi overhears Naomi’s remark. Didi, let us say, is aware of Naomi’s social milieu and of its effects on the standards and expectations at work in the conversational context of Naomi’s remark. But nonetheless, Didi goes back to her friend and says, “Naomi said that Mary isn’t rich at all. Can you believe the ignorance of her and her friends? They’re so cloistered in their affluent little world, they have no idea how things really are.”

Now, on the contextualist view, it is very likely that Didi’s report of Naomi’s remark—“Naomi said that Mary isn’t rich at all”—is incorrect. Why so? Well, Didi’s report was made in the context of her own social milieu, in which, by supposition, a very different standard for the application of “rich” prevails than in Naomi’s. If those standards enter into the content expressed by “rich” on Didi’s lips, as Richard maintains, then Naomi didn’t in fact say what Didi, in using the sentence “Mary isn’t rich at all” to report Naomi’s utterance, portrays Naomi as saying. This point is reinforced by noting that what Didi goes on to add makes clear that she takes it that the assertion she ascribes to Naomi is false, and obviously so. But by the standards that prevail in Naomi’s social milieu, her remark was not obviously false. Judging by those standards, it was in fact true. Clearly, then, Didi is judging the assertion she ascribes to Naomi, and expects her audience also to judge that assertion, by the standards of *her* social milieu, not Naomi’s. On the contextualist view articulated by Richard, those standards enter into the content of what is said in uttering sentences containing the word “rich”. Since very different standards entered into the content of Naomi’s original utterance, we once again reach the conclusion that Didi’s report misrepresents the content of that utterance.

I think it is clear, however, that in couching her report of Naomi's utterance as she did, Didi did not do anything that would strike any reasonable listener as unfair or misleading. I think it is clear that Naomi, were she to hear of Didi's report, could have no basis for denying its truth. I think it is clear, in other words, that Didi's report was correct.

What is at stake here is a principle that we can put as follows: adjusting for indexicality, tense and the like, we can correctly report what someone said on an earlier occasion with a "that"-clause that simply repeats the sentence originally uttered. Let us call this the *homophonic report principle*. Now, Travis, for one, is aware that it is a consequence of contextualism that the homophonic report principle is not in general valid. He writes, "A token of [contextualism] is that homophonically constructed 'that' locutions are no longer *automatically* apt for specifying what given words said" ("Annals of Analysis", p. 240). In fact, this is an understatement. If the contextualism Travis advocates is correct, then it is *very* often going to be the case that homophonic reports of utterances are incorrect. For context-sensitivity, according to Travis's view, is a completely ubiquitous phenomenon, and all of us are constantly moving into and out of different conversational contexts. It will very often be the case, then, that the conversational context we currently occupy does not suit a sentence whose previous utterance we wish to report for expressing the content of that previous utterance.

Whereas I want to claim as a tenet of ordinary practice that a homophonic report is almost never wrong. Indeed, the assumption of ordinary practice, I take it, is that there is no more accurate way to report an utterance than to use the very same words.

Now, it is true that Naomi might object to Didi's report on the ground that what she said was, as people often put it, "taken out of context". There are a variety of different points Naomi might have in mind here. She might say that Didi missed that she was being ironic. She might

say that her utterance was not an assertion at all but, say, a posing of a supposition for the purposes of an argument. She might say that she immediately went on to register a number of caveats that softened the force of her claim. And so on. But what she cannot claim, surely, is that she did not say *that*. Any such protest would be decisively rebutted were, say, Didi to produce a tape recording of Naomi uttering those words. In the presence of her voice on the tape uttering, “Mary is not rich at all,” it would be madness for Naomi to insist that she did not in fact say that Mary is not rich at all. This is so no matter what conversational context now obtains.

Or again, suppose a reporter wishes to gather information on people’s attitudes toward lottery winners. Rather than conduct an explicit survey (for he fears that people will not be honest in that context), he surreptitiously hangs around Mary’s acquaintances waiting to hear them pronounce on her. Suppose Naomi and Didi are among those he overhears, along with several others drawn from an array of social and economic circumstances. Surely the reporter would not hesitate to compile and quantify the data thus collected, writing, say, “Of ten acquaintances of recent lottery winner Mary, seven said that she was rich and three that she was not.”

It is a way of putting the view suggested by these considerations that when you make an assertion by uttering some words of a natural language—say, English—the words you have uttered go out on the common marketplace. They inscribe a claim that is open for assessment by any English speaker who hears of them, no matter how far-flung, no matter how many communicative links—involving testimony, print or other media—stand between you and that fellow English speaker. As David Wiggins puts the thought, in arguing for what he calls the “autonomy” of natural languages (as against attempts to theoretically downplay natural languages in favor of appeals to Gricean communication-intentions), a speaker does not aim

merely at “being understood...by an audience as wanting to communicate that such and such,”; he aims at “going on record to that effect” (“Languages as Social Objects”, *Philosophy* [1997], p. 504). Among other things, I take it, this requires that the words he utters can be understood as expressing his claim by someone who is not privy to the specific detail of the conversational context in which he uttered them. To put it in a manner that is bound to be misunderstood by someone sympathetic to Travis’s point of view, the words a speaker utters must be capable of expressing his claim on their own. For otherwise he cannot use them to go on record.

I will return to this idea at the end. For now, I want to register a second and related point about the example of Naomi, Didi and Mary. This is simply that, contra Richard, what Naomi said is false. Mary *is* rich.

On what basis can I maintain this? Well, I might argue as follows. To be rich is to have possessions and resources greatly in excess of what is needed to live comfortably. Those like Mary, who have a million dollars in savings or other resources and who draw a respectable salary on top of it (as we can suppose Mary to do) fall into this category. To the extent that Naomi thinks otherwise, it’s because her own wealth has distorted her view of the matter. This can happen in various ways. Rich people may falsely think that millionaires don’t have enough to live fully comfortably, because they confuse certain luxuries with needs. (That these are in fact luxuries and not needs can be argued on a case-by-case basis.) Rich people may be hyperconscious of the lifestyles of the super-rich—those who have a hundred million dollars, or five hundred million, or five billion—and be inclined to discount less obscene wealth in comparison. Millionaires in particular may have all kinds of reasons for thinking of themselves and other millionaires as middle class rather than as rich. Doing so might accomplish any number of things: support a conception of themselves as hardworking common folk, justify their

resentment of taxation, or ease feelings of obligation toward those less fortunate. All of these tendencies are explicable. But they are all mistakes.

Perhaps this little argument as it stands is not totally compelling. What matters for our purposes is just that it is an intelligible and reasonable response to Naomi's utterance. That it is such shows that Naomi's utterance is answerable not merely to local standards of application in play in her particular conversation, but to more universal, more *objective* (in one familiar sense of that term) standards, standards that flow from connections between the concept of wealth and other concepts, such as that of needs and luxuries, as well as pertinent empirical facts.

V.

So far I have suggested that contextualism does not square with two prominent features of our ordinary practice. These are: 1) our nearly unqualified acceptance of the homophonic report principle, and 2) our nearly unqualified openness to subjecting an assertive utterance to arguments and objections that could bear on the truth of the utterance only if its truth-conditions were such as to render it sensitive to considerations that transcend standards of application and use embedded in the local conversational context. [[CUT To these let me add a third, related feature, though I cannot properly argue for its existence today: 3) our employment as a guiding, if defeasible, principle of interpretation that the belief a person expresses in an utterance on one occasion rationally coheres with beliefs she expresses with other utterances on other occasions in just the ways you would expect if the words recurring in these utterances expressed a univocal truth-conditional content. Thus for example, we should expect that the difference in Mary's and Naomi's respective inclinations to utter the sentence, "Mary isn't rich at all", will correspond to differences in their inclinations to utter other sentences involving the word "rich" in ways that

would be predictable on the assumption that “rich” makes for the most part the same contribution to content in all of these utterances. That this principle is in fact a *necessary* methodological assumption in the case of the interpretation of someone who speaks an unfamiliar language is arguably a consequence of certain plausible arguments of Davidson and Quine, but I will not try to show this now.]]

VI.

Let us turn instead to the vexed issue of the word, “know” [that’s K-N-O-W!].

It is here that contextualism has attracted the most attention in the philosophical literature, for it is here that contextualism promises to solve a longstanding philosophical problem—the problem of skepticism. Contextualists about knowledge claims hold that the truth-conditions of utterances of the form “I know that p” vary depending upon context; in particular, what varies is how demanding an epistemic standard must be met by the speaker if his claim to know is to be true. In his recent article, “Skepticism, Stroud and the Contextuality of Knowledge,” Putnam explores one variant of this idea, according to which to claim to know that p is to claim to be in a position to rule out possibilities incompatible with its being the case that p, and *which* possibilities one must be in a position to rule out will depend upon the context of the knowledge assertion. Since, Putnam writes, “it is only in exceptional circumstances that the utterance ‘I might be dreaming’ ...can be understood as educing a relevant possibility”, the skeptics’ educing that possibility cannot serve as a starting point for a challenge to our ordinary claims to know (p. 5).

How does the contextualist know that the possibility that I might be dreaming is not relevant to ordinary claims to know things? The answer is that the contextualist notices that in ordinary

life we do not in fact take such possibilities into account when evaluating knowledge claims—and that, moreover, if someone were in the course of everyday life to challenge our claim to know something on the basis of the dreaming hypothesis (or some other skeptical possibility), we would dismiss their challenge as inappropriate and bizarre.

This is certainly true. But it is equally true—equally an undeniable empirical fact about human beings and their practice—that many people are impressed and puzzled by skeptical arguments when they are first presented with them. They cannot accept the skeptical conclusion, of course, but they are struck by the apparent force of the skeptical arguments. And they take those arguments to challenge precisely our ordinary, everyday claims to know things. Travis writes, in dismissing the skeptic, “What one says in speaking, on an occasion, of A’s knowledge (or ignorance) that F is determined by what, if anything, does count on that occasion as knowing that F. What so counts is what our reactions [as reasonable judges] show to count” (*Uses of Sense*, p.183). Fair enough. But the question is why the contextualist looks at only some of our reactions to a given knowledge claim—those, as we might put it, that are evident “in the moment”—while ignoring others—including, for example, our reactions when we worry over our everyday knowledge claims in light of a skeptical challenge.

Suppose Mary and Max are engaged in a joint project for which it matters whether p, and Max tells Mary that he knows that p and also how he knows that p—for example, he saw that p. It would be absurd, inappropriate and completely unproductive for Mary to challenge Max’s claim to know on the ground that Max might have been dreaming when he took it that he saw that p. But suppose that evening over some beers, with the project satisfactorily behind them, Mary says to Max, “I’m going to argue that you didn’t actually know that p when you claimed to.” Max says, “Alright, let’s see you try.” Mary then takes Max through the steps of an

argument for external-world skepticism, perhaps one along the lines of the first chapter of Stroud's *Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Suppose the conversation ends with Max impressed by the force of the argument, and with his acknowledging that he can't find anything wrong with it. [[CUT Of course, Max doesn't stop taking himself to know that p, and of course neither does Mary. But Max's perspective on the human condition is changed somewhat, and he is encouraged in the future to further philosophical reflection. (Whether that is a good or bad development in Max's life is an open question.)]]

I should make clear that the point of this little vignette is not that Mary's skeptical argument will necessarily be sound, or even that it won't prove to turn on a distorted understanding of our practices of advancing and defending knowledge claims. In fact, I believe that traditional skeptical arguments do involve such distortions, and I have my own view of where those distortions occur. What the vignette illustrates is just that the contextualist's way of reaching this conclusion is much too quick. The contextualist claims, à la Travis, that "our reactions as reasonable judges" show what counts as a legitimate challenge to a given knowledge claim and what does not, adds to this the observation that we don't countenance anything remotely like the skeptical possibilities in evaluating knowledge claims in our day-to-day lives, and concludes by dismissing the skeptical argument. The problem with this line is not in the ceding of authority to our reactions as reasonable judges—there is, indeed, no other conceivable source for that authority (so long as talk of "reactions" is understood in a plastic enough way). The problem is with the contextualist's selective attention in his survey of our reactions. He ignores a whole class of such reactions, reactions that may well strike us as reasonable: namely, those we have when reflecting upon skeptical arguments.

Of course, the contextualist will object that the putative skeptical challenge to Max's claim to know that p did not in fact have that claim in view at all: when, in their chat over beers, Pia and Max link application of the word "know" to the question of whether the alleged knower can rule out the dreaming hypothesis, they thereby either change what is said in uttering that word, or they strip it of any sense at all. But I have argued that this maneuver runs up against central features of our ordinary practices of discourse, namely: our universal reliance on the homophonic report principle, and our openness to criticisms of our assertions that do not respect standards of use and application implicit in the local conversational contexts of these assertions.

Finally, the contextualist might protest that, to the extent that I have identified genuine tendencies in how people treat their own and others' utterances, these tendencies are ways in which we go astray in our treatment of these utterances. If it is true that we unquestioningly accept applications of the homophonic report principle, this just shows how lazy or sloppy or dishonest we are in reporting discourse. If it is true that we find ourselves moved by skeptical arguments and other considerations that have no practical implications for the purposes and aims served by our knowledge claims in daily life, this just shows how easily we can be mystified by those who ignore the contextualist character of truth-conditions.

But if the contextualist were to adopt this response, he would have to contend with the omnipresence of the tendencies I have identified in our discourse. The response thus amounts to situating contextualism as an error theory of our ordinary talk about what people say, much as some philosophers who endorse a subjectivist view of color regard it as an error theory of ordinary talk about colors. Needless to say, to view contextualism as a philosophical proposal for the correction and reform of ordinary talk about what people say would sit very uneasily with contextualism's alleged basis in ordinary language philosophy.

VII.

In closing this talk, I'd like briefly to return to the alternative view of language earlier broached. This is a view according to which a declarative sentence formed from the words of a natural language, on the lips of a speaker of that language, needs no help from context (other than that required to disambiguate and to resolve indexicality) to express the claim it is apt for expressing. I believe that Travis and Putnam suspect that any such view must be guilty of severing meaning from use, with the upshot that it must presuppose an incoherent metaphysics of the meaning of utterances, according to which such meanings are, in Travis's memorable borrowing from Wittgenstein, "shadows" of the uttered sentences.

This suspicion is misplaced. Consider the view proposed by John McDowell in his efforts to motivate the idea that shared natural languages are essential for mindedness. A characteristic remark of McDowell's in this vein comes from an essay in a recent collection on Gadamer, in which McDowell suggests that we ought to be very reluctant to "abandon the thought that the primary form of the ability to mean something by verbal behavior is the ability to mean what one's words mean, independently of the particularity of one's communicative situation—that is, what they mean in the language, in the ordinary sense, that one is learning to speak" ("Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism", p. 187). For a person to mean something by verbal behavior is, for example, for the person to say something. Thus McDowell's suggestion that the primary form of meaning something by verbal behavior is meaning what one's words mean is straightforwardly at odds with contextualism, for it requires that one's words be apt, all by themselves, to provide the content of a saying. But contra Putnam's and Travis's suspicion, McDowell offers this view as a way of *acknowledging* a deep connection between meaning and

use; correlatively, one point is to show why nothing like a “shadow” is needed for understanding the possibility of meaning and thought. For McDowell, philosophers are led into unintelligible forms of Platonism when they fail to see how shared natural languages, in virtue of serving as “repositories of tradition”, provide the background for the development of our capacities to entertain and otherwise traffic with content. One important aspect of their service is that they enable the developing child, simply by her repetition of sentences she has heard her parents utter, to say contentful things.

Now at last for my promised reference to Wittgenstein. On Travis’s reading of *Philosophical Investigations* and cognate works, Wittgenstein’s basic diagnosis of the confusions and distortions of philosophy is that they stem from a failure to appreciate the implications of contextualism. But I believe that Wittgenstein’s diagnosis of philosophy’s troubles is rather different. “Our disease,” he writes, “is one of wanting to explain” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 333). And in the *Blue Book*: “I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything or to explain anything” (p. 18). For Wittgenstein, what above all requires therapy is the perennial philosophical desire to explain our subjectivity—to explain what it is to think and say the things we do, and to understand things, feel things, follow rules, and all the rest—from a standpoint that is somehow outside of what we have in view when we exercise these capacities.

I think I find in the contextualism of Travis and Putnam the persistence of this desire. I think the blindness of their contextualism to the aspects of our ordinary practice I have tried to bring out today stems from a desire, if not quite to reduce, then at least to *ground* content in something. The something in question is the practical purposes and aims involved in our speaking. Now, if facts about the points and purposes of utterances are to play this grounding

role, there must be available an independent conception of what sort of point or purpose an utterance can have. And indeed, there is at least a hint in Travis of such a conception. Travis views the skeptic as wanting to play a language game in which any conceivable doubt about a given claim counts as a legitimate challenge to that claim. But we could never play such a game, says Travis, because it is not the case that “there is some point or worth in doing so” (*Uses of Sense*, p. 186). Travis goes on to add, “[W]hat is worthwhile or pointful for us, and what matters, is defined by our ethology” (p. 187).

Of course what is worthwhile or pointful for us cannot be inconsistent with our ethology. There can be nothing true of us that could not be true of the kind of animal we are. But what we can come, intelligibly and reasonably, to find worthwhile or pointful or to matter is not *defined* by our ethology. The only way to determine whether there is any point to the skeptic’s attacks on our ordinary claims to know is to try to make sense of what the skeptic is saying and arguing in the most charitable way possible, and then to see if it speaks to us, to our reason. No perspective from outside the contents of the skeptical claims and arguments—for example, that of an ethological account of human life—can take over this authority. That is one moral of Wittgenstein’s rejection of reductive or foundational explanation.

[[CUT It is true that there might seem to be traces of a contextualist treatment of skepticism in Wittgenstein, especially in *On Certainty*. And throughout the later writings, Wittgenstein appeals to, and clearly regards as important, the context in which given human actions and utterances take place. But the thrust of these appeals in is in a very different direction from contextualism proper—in, it is, I believe in the direction of the view of language I have opposed to contextualism. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Zettel*:

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our

judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what *one* man is doing *now*, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see any action (*Zettel*, §567).

He adds, in the original manuscript from which this passage is drawn:

The background is the bustle of life. And our concept points to something within *this* bustle (*Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, v.2, 625).

These passages certainly assert the importance of attending to the circumstances, the context, in which people act—for example, speak. But the emphasis is not on the local contexts of particular actions and utterances considered one by one. It is on the vastly complex and far-reaching constellation of circumstances that go into the “bustle of life”, into the “whole hurly-burly of human actions”. It is this, says Wittgenstein, that determines our judgments, concepts and reactions, “not what one man is doing now”. Prominent among these circumstances, I would suggest, are those that go into the development, transmission, and maintenance of natural languages, the paradigms of shared forms of human life.]]

Since I haven't had time myself to say much about Wittgenstein, I want to end by recommending to you a relatively recent commentary on Wittgenstein's “Lectures on Religious Belief”. The commentator begins by noting that these lectures are concerned with ways in which religious and non-religious people “talk past each other” (p.143). For example, when a religious person says, “I believe in a Last Judgment” and a non-religious person says, “I don't believe in a Last Judgment,” this is not helpfully understood as a simple disagreement over fact. The role the religious person's affirmation plays in her life is different in kind from the role the non-religious person's denial plays in her life, different enough that it seems natural to say that in some sense, what is expressed by the one is not straightforwardly the logical negation of what is expressed by the other. Here we seem to have as compelling an example as you could hope for of the phenomenon that funds contextualism.

But the commentator points out that Wittgenstein does not say that the difference in question is one in the meanings of the two utterances—that in fact, he denies it. It is Wittgenstein’s imaginary interlocutor who says, in comparing Wittgenstein’s utterance to the religious person’s: “You mean something altogether different, Wittgenstein.” And Wittgenstein replies, “The difference might not show up at all in any explanation of the meaning” (pp.150-151). The commentator suggests that this can serve as a powerful response to those who charge Wittgenstein with “simple-mindedly equating use with meaning” (p.151). We can put the commentator’s gloss of Wittgenstein’s attitude this way: a difference in point is one thing; a difference in content is another.

The commentator in question is, of course, Hilary Putnam.