

Wittgenstein vs. Semantic Contextualism

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1. Introduction

Semantic contextualism may be understood as a view about the meanings of utterances. The relevant notion of meaning is that of *what is said* by an utterance, as it is sometimes put, of the *content* of the utterance. To a first approximation, we may say that semantic contextualism (which I will henceforth simply label “contextualism”) holds that the content of an utterance is shaped in far-reaching and unobvious ways by the circumstances, the context, in which it is uttered. In particular, two utterances of the same sentence might vary in content as a result of differences in their respective contexts that do not map onto any obvious indexical elements in the sentence.

The Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and related texts spoke a lot about the context—circumstances, surroundings—of utterances. Was he a contextualist? Some contemporary contextualists think so. Indeed, some contextualists, most notably Charles Travis, believe that the central preoccupation of the later Wittgenstein was to bring out the reasons for, and the consequences of, the pervasive context-sensitivity of content. Now, as it happens, in the last 25 years a large number of philosophers of language, epistemologists, and linguists, often with a quite different methodological orientation and set of influences from a Wittgensteinian like Travis, have come to see context-sensitivity as a deep-seated and enormously consequential feature of meaning. Many now believe that context-sensitivity goes well beyond familiar forms of

indexicality, and properly understood, is at odds with traditional conceptions of semantics. And many believe that contextualism promises novel solutions to long-standing problems in epistemology and elsewhere. These days, contextualism is where it's at. It would be interesting, to say the least, if the later Wittgenstein should turn out to be an apostle of one of the tradition's most conspicuous contemporary trends. In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell noted that "Wittgenstein is still to be received" by "this philosophical culture" (Cavell, 1979, pp. xvi-xvii), prompting Barry Stroud to wonder what kind of reception "work as radical as Wittgenstein's can reasonably be expected to have" (2000, p. 52). But perhaps his time has finally come.

I think that, unfortunately, it has not. I will argue here that attempts to find contextualism in *Philosophical Investigations* do not succeed. Indeed, I will try to show that if we read contextualism back into passages in the *Investigations*, we will end up ascribing views to Wittgenstein that he not only does not endorse, but which are in active opposition to his intent.

2. Contextualism briefly summarized

The content of an utterance, as I've noted, is what is said by the utterance.¹ In an assertion, for example, what is said is that something is so. If I assert, "My son likes trucks," the content of my utterance, what I'm saying to be so, is that my son likes trucks. 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.

Let's stipulate that *semantic* properties of linguistic expressions must be properties those

¹ Some philosophers believe that semantic contextualism is not best glossed as a thesis about what is said by an utterance, preferring recourse to more technical terminology such as "the proposition expressed" by an uttered sentence. The reason is that talk of what is said is thought to be apt only for capturing the *speech-act content* of an utterance, understood to include (among other things) what used to be called implicatures, and hence obviously context-dependent in ways not capturable by a compositional semantics for the language in the manner described in the text below. My own view is that a proper understanding of language in use requires the assumption that there is a notion of saying linked with properly semantic content, but I will not engage this topic here.

expressions possess independently of the circumstances of particular utterances of them. They are thus properties that remain constant across utterances. Where U is an utterance (i.e., a particular uttering on some occasion) of a sentence S , let's say that the content of U is *context-dependent* iff the semantic properties of the expressions constituting S do not suffice to determine that U has the content that it does. Derivatively, we might speak of an identifiable feature or part of the content of an utterance U as context-dependent, and mean that the semantic properties of the sentence do not suffice to determine that feature or part of U 's content.

It's wholly uncontroversial that some forms of context-dependence are pervasive. An utterance by me now of "I'm cold" has a different truth condition than an utterance of that sentence by you now (or me at some other time), for example, so there are no properties we could assign to the sentence in and of itself that would determine, all on their own, the contents of our respective utterances of it. But there are familiar strategies for accounting for the uncontroversial varieties of context-dependence. In a nutshell, the consensus solution is to hold that what possesses truth-conditions is not an uttered sentence itself, but the conjunction of a 'logical form', as it is sometimes called (i.e., a syntactic item that lexically and structurally disambiguates, and perhaps fills in any ellipses of, the uttered sentence) and an index (i.e., an n -tuple consisting of such things as the agent, audience, time, location, demonstratum, etc. of a given utterance). On this view, although we cannot assign properties to a sentence sufficient to determine the content of its utterance, we can assign properties to a syntactic item closely related to the sentence that are sufficient to determine precisely *how* the context of the utterance will contribute to fixing the content of the utterance. The contribution of context is thus under the control of the semantics, in a sense illustrated by the ease with which the project of formal, compositional, truth-conditional semantics can make room for these innovations.

We may understand contextualism, for purposes of this paper, simply as the view that

content is context-dependent in ways that go beyond the familiar ones. We will focus here on two alleged such ways, one associated with proper names and one with predicates. According to Travis, Wittgenstein seeks to draw our attention to both.

One feature that distinguishes these putative forms of context-dependence from those that philosophers have long acknowledged, it's worth noting, is that the former appear resistant to domestication by the strategy just mentioned. The existence of these forms of context-dependence would thus appear to spell the doom for truth-conditional semantics (henceforth, "TCS"), understood as the project of assigning properties to syntactic items (partly by finding principles for determining properties of complex syntactic items on the basis of their parts) such that we await only the specification of something like an index to know what the truth-conditions of a given utterance of a given assertive sentence would be. It is in part because this project has been a central focus of philosophy of language and linguistics for some time that contextualism is a radical doctrine.²

3. Proper names and descriptions

At the outset of §79, Wittgenstein ascribes to Russell the view that "the name 'Moses' can be defined by means of various descriptions". For example, we might define "Moses" as "the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness", or "the man who as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter". Wittgenstein points out a feature of our ordinary linguistic practices that might be taken to support Russell's view. If a person asserts, "Moses did not exist," it is natural to respond along the following lines: "What do you mean? Do you mean that there was no single man who led the Israelites through the wilderness? Do you mean rather that

² Some philosophers accept the existence of the kinds of context-sensitivity asserted by contextualists, but believe that TCS can accommodate these kinds of context-sensitivity by introducing appropriate parameters into the index. I agree with Travis and others that this strategy is untenable. But that is not my topic here.

there was no man who as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter? Or something else?" The gist of these questions might seem to be: what description specifies the sense of "Moses" as you (the speaker) use it?

After noting the apparent support for the Russellian view, Wittgenstein goes on:

But when I make a statement about Moses,—am I always ready to substitute some one of these descriptions for "Moses"? I shall perhaps say: By "Moses" I understand the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses, or at any rate a good deal of it. But how much? Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name "Moses" got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases?—Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa?—Consider another case. When I say "N is dead", then something like the following may hold for the meaning of the name "N": I believe that a human being has lived, whom I (1) have seen in such-and-such places, who (2) looked like this (pictures), (3) has done such-and-such things, and (4) bore the name "N" in social life.—*Asked what I understand by "N", I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions.* So my definition of "N" would perhaps be "the man of whom all this is true".—But if some point now proves false?—Shall I be prepared to declare the proposition "N is dead" false—even if it is only something which strikes me as incidental that has turned out false? But where are the bounds of the incidental?—*If I had given a definition of the name in such a case, I should now be ready to alter it.* (§79)

Following Travis (1989, p. 253), I have italicized two sentences in this passage; they constitute the "italicized remarks" mentioned below.

According to Travis, Wittgenstein here puts forth the thesis that "when it comes to saying what the sense of [a] name was, different things on different occasions will count as correct answers to that question, or more simply, there will be different things on different occasions which that sense counts as being (or having been)" (1989, pp. 255-6). Travis takes it that "parts of [the thesis] are in both italicized remarks" (1989, p. 255). Note that by "sense", Travis means Fregean sense. We may follow Travis in linking Fregean sense to what I am here calling content. Thus construed, the sense of a proper name, as it is used in a given utterance, fixes part of the content, part of what is said, by that utterance.

As Travis notes, the thesis conflicts not just with the Russellian view but with the “cluster” view that Kripke finds in this passage. On Kripke’s interpretation, Wittgenstein is suggesting that the meaning of a name is given by a whole “cluster” of descriptions, such that the reference of the name is whatever object satisfies “enough or most” of these descriptions (Kripke, 1980, p. 31).³ But as Travis sees it, this view retains the assumption that it is Wittgenstein’s primary concern to undermine: namely, that a proper name has the same sense on every occasion of its use. For Travis, Wittgenstein’s real aim is to get us to see possibilities like the following: 1) that in some context that might arise in which I use “Moses” in a sentence, “the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness” would be part of an accurate specification of the sense of that name as I use it, but 2) that in some other context that might arise in which I use “Moses” in a sentence, that description would not be part of a correct specification of the sense of that name as I use it. For Travis’s Wittgenstein, unlike Kripke’s, the meaning of a name, conceived as something the name carries with it unchanged through occasions of use, does not on its own determine the name-in-use’s contribution to what is said by an utterance. What has a sense is not a name *tout court*, but a name as uttered on a particular occasion. And what sense the name thus has will vary from context to context, even while the name’s meaning—its semantic properties, such as they may be—remains unchanged. This view is a form of contextualism.

In one dimension, however, Travis’s interpretation is very close to Kripke’s: he shares Kripke’s view that Wittgenstein is a descriptivist. That is, he takes Wittgenstein to hold that a name’s sense can be specified via descriptions. Travis is quite upfront about this attribution. He notes that among the “elements in the Russellian trial balloon [i.e., the view Wittgenstein ascribes

³ In fact, it’s not completely clear that Kripke ascribes a view about the meanings of names to Wittgenstein. He introduces his distinction between theories of the meanings of names and theories of how the references of names are determined immediately after quoting the passage from Wittgenstein, and he doesn’t unambiguously assert that Wittgenstein offers a theory of the former sort (1980, pp. 32-33). But Travis follows common interpretive practice in assuming that he does intend such an assertion.

to Russell] which are not under challenge here” is the view that “the sense of a name is specifiable in terms of general properties, so in giving descriptions which would then be taken as saying to whom the name is understood to refer” (1989, p. 253).

On what basis does Travis view Wittgenstein as a descriptivist? According to Travis, descriptivism “appears to be endorsed in the first italicized passage”, i.e., the sentence, “Asked what I understand by ‘N’, I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions.” Evidently Travis ascribes to Wittgenstein the following assumption: when one offers a description of a person in response to a question about what one understands by a certain proper name, one is best understood as purporting to *give the sense* of the name as one uses, or has used, it. The ascription of this assumption is essential to Travis’s attempt to read contextualism into §79: it is that assumption that enables Travis to construe Wittgenstein as moving from the observation that descriptions apt for answering a question about the understanding of a name in one context will not be apt in other contexts to the conclusion that the sense of the name varies from context to context.

It seems to me, however, that this assumption is Wittgenstein’s real target.

To begin with, we ought to note its sheer implausibility. Consider a typical context for asking a question of the form, “What do you understand by [the name] ‘N’?” Suppose I’m sitting with a friend at a coffee shop and I start gossiping about someone I call “Charles Travis”. I say, among other things, “Charles Travis will be at the APA this year.” My friend asks, “What do you understand by ‘Charles Travis?’” I might give various definite or indefinite descriptions at this point: “a philosopher of language who formerly taught at Northwestern”, “a leading contextualist”, “the greatest living admirer of John Cook Wilson”, “the fellow you and I had dinner with in Evanston three Octobers ago”, etc. If Travis happens to walk by our table

immediately after my friend asks her question, I might just answer, “the guy walking by our table”. As Wittgenstein points out, what I say will vary depending upon the occasion.

But upon what features of the occasion? If I am a rational, cooperative person, the descriptions I provide will be shaped by my beliefs about which such descriptions might effectively answer my friend’s question. And these beliefs will in turn be shaped by beliefs about my friend: for one thing, about the nature of the doubt or puzzlement that prompts her to ask the question. For example, I may have reason to think that my friend suspects me of confusing Charles Travis with Charles Taylor, or of conflating the two into one person. Or, although this sort of case is less frequently encountered in ordinary discussion, I may have reason to believe that my friend suspects that I am guilty of an elaborate hoax concerning the existence of a philosopher named “Charles Travis”. I will likely offer different descriptions depending upon which of these possibilities I take to be so. And the descriptions I select will be further dependent upon my beliefs about my friend’s relevant background knowledge. For example, if I believe my friend (who, let’s say, I take to suspect me of confusing Travis with Taylor) has forgotten about our dinner with Travis three Octobers ago, I will see little to be gained by citing that particular datum. If I don’t think my friend would recognize Travis on sight, I’d be less likely to mention that he’s the guy who just walked by. And so on.

These considerations suffice to explain why I will offer “different points on different occasions” in response to the question, “What do you understand by ‘Charles Travis?’” By the same token, however, they make it highly implausible that a given answer to this question by me ought to be taken to specify the *sense* of that name as used in the utterance prompting the question. Even if we are amenable to the idea of a descriptive sense for “Charles Travis”, and even if we are amenable to the idea that the name’s descriptive sense will vary from use to use, it seems absurd to suppose that the contextual factors shaping its sense are the *same* as those we

have noted to shape the response I offer to my friend's question. The factors shaping the latter include beliefs on my part about the nature of the doubt prompting my friend's question and about her background knowledge. Why should these facts about my friend have anything to do with the sense of the name as I uttered it—with *what I said* in uttering it? The peculiarity of positing such a connection is reinforced by the observation that at the time of my utterance, my friend hadn't yet voiced her question, nor, may we suppose, had I any reason to think that she would. Did I then not know what I was saying until my friend spoke?

Surely once we recognize the character of the contextual factors shaping my answer to my friend's question, we should say rather this: that the descriptive sense of my utterance (such as it is) is one thing, and the descriptive material needed to quell my friend's doubt is another. Perhaps the descriptions I offer in responding to my friend articulate the sense of the name on my lips. But if they do, that's in the nature of a coincidence. For my response is in the business of quelling my friend's doubt, not of articulating the sense of the name.

It's true that the various possible doubts I have imagined prompting my friend's question are all such that she might equally have asked, "Who do you take yourself to refer to with 'Charles Travis'?" If, by contrast, I interpret my friend's question as tantamount to asking, "What is the Fregean sense of 'Charles Travis' as you just used it?", then any variation in the answers I might give to that question will of course reflect variations in my understanding of the sense of that name as I use it. But anyone who wants to make something of this point is obligated to actually *argue* that, despite appearances to the contrary, questions like "What do you understand by 'Charles Travis'?", when pressed in ordinary discourse, ought to be given the latter interpretation. We need such an argument if, with Travis, we are to saddle Wittgenstein with contextualist descriptivism on the basis of his remark, "Asked what I understand by 'N', I should enumerate all or some of these points, and different ones on different occasions."

So far, I've suggested that Travis reads something into this remark that isn't there: the remark merely reports on a familiar phenomenon that is not itself plausibly regarded as evidence of Travis's view. But doesn't Wittgenstein himself draw a semantic conclusion from his observation? After all, he writes that his point "may be expressed like this: I use the name 'N' without a *fixed* meaning [Bedeutung]" (§79). But of course, Wittgenstein goes on immediately to say, "Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts" (§79). And I want to claim that it would be a serious mistake to take anything Wittgenstein has to say about "meaning" in §79 and surrounding passages to amount to an endorsement of Travis's assumption that the descriptions provided by a name specify the sense of that name as uttered, and so express the descriptive contribution of that name to the content of the utterance. It would be a serious mistake because, as I will now argue, Wittgenstein is actively cautioning *against* that assumption.

Why believe that names have descriptive senses to begin with? One of the main reasons philosophers have been attracted to the idea is a thought Travis expresses with the remark that descriptions might "state what guide to a referent the sense counts as providing" (1989, p. 253). Travis endorses the idea of senses as "guides", as long as that idea is disentangled from the traditional non-contextualist view of the senses names are fit to bear. He writes, "When such things [i.e., issues of the context dependence of content] are spelled out in the right way, there is no harm in the underlying intuition that there is something to be understood about a name which guides us to its referent..." (1989, p. 274).

In casting the sense of a name as "guiding" us to the name's referent, Travis is obviously not claiming that the sense tells us the location of the referent, as if it were a GPS tracking unit. The thought must be rather that the sense tells us which object is the referent. Even without going in any detail into the question of what it is to know which object is the referent of a name—of

what, exactly, constitutes such knowledge—we can see one structural assumption imposed by the guidance idea. The assumption is that it is possible to grasp the sense of a name independently of, in advance of, knowing which object is the name’s referent. Just as a set of clues cannot guide me to the solution to a puzzle if it is a condition on understanding the clues that I know the solution, a sense cannot guide me to a referent if it is a condition on knowing or grasping the sense that I know which object is the referent. Senses specifiable by description now seem the natural choice, because one does not need to know which object uniquely satisfies a given set of descriptions, or even whether any object does uniquely satisfy a given set of descriptions, in order to understand those descriptions and to associate them with a name. We might think of the descriptions as identifying criteria for an object’s counting as the referent, and one can grasp such criteria without knowing what in fact satisfies them.

Now consider Wittgenstein’s follow-up to the first italicized remark. He suggests initially that “my definition of N” would perhaps be the man of whom all the descriptions he cites or might cite in response to “What do you understand by ‘N?’” are true. He then imagines that one of the points he’s enumerated in response to this question “proves false”. What Wittgenstein is presumably imagining is the discovery that, e.g., nothing satisfies one of the descriptions he cites. Rather than feeling obliged to recant his original assertion of “N is dead”, he suggests that “If I had given a definition of the name in such a case, I should now be ready to alter it.”

Travis takes Wittgenstein in this sentence to be advancing the thesis that “what would count as correct statements of the sense of a name on some occasions for stating the sense would not do so on others” (1989, p. 255). Travis’s thought is that if one of the points Wittgenstein enumerated hadn’t been proven false, his original answer to the question would have counted as a correct statement of the sense of “N” as it was used in his utterance; but as things stand, the original answer does not count as a correct statement of the sense. What Wittgenstein describes

more specifically, however, is a scenario in which he is prepared to *change* his first answer to the question upon discovery of the error. If, à la Travis, we take Wittgenstein to hold that the descriptions he gives in answer to the question what he understands by “N” specify the sense of that name as he used it, then we need to interpret him as describing a scenario in which he changes his view about the sense carried by “N” in his original utterance of “N is dead”. In altering his first answer, he is saying that he was mistaken, at least in part, in specifying the sense of “N” as he did. He is saying that he was, in that respect, wrong about the sense of “N” on his lips.

On Travis’s interpretation of what Wittgenstein’s responses to the question are supposed to do (namely, specify sense), it follows that Wittgenstein was initially mistaken about what he was saying in uttering “N is dead”. That in itself is not overly troubling. It’s certainly possible for speakers to be mistaken about the contents of their own utterances; “You don’t know what you’re saying,” sometimes expresses a criticism meant to be taken literally. But if one is capable of being wrong about which descriptions specify the sense of a name as one uses it, and more particularly, if one’s being right or wrong about this is a matter to be decided on the basis of such considerations as whether anything satisfies these descriptions, then the idea that descriptive senses serve as guides to referents is put under severe strain. Talk of guidance is apposite only because knowledge of the descriptive import of a name is envisioned as independent of and prior to knowledge of which object, if any, satisfies those descriptions. But Wittgenstein’s accounting of the relationship between the descriptions a speaker associates with a name and the facts about what satisfies those descriptions denies precisely this point. What he describes is not a scenario in which his grasp of the descriptions associated with “N” tells him which object is the referent of “N”, but rather a scenario in which discoveries about the relevant bits of the world tell him

which descriptions to associate with “N”. And so the descriptions do not after all lead the way. They are not the guides.

There is a lot to be said about the idea that Travis expresses in casting descriptions as articulating “what guide to a referent the sense counts as providing”, much of which would take us too far afield. But one thing to be said about that idea is that it might appear to gain support from our practice of responding to doubts about our use of names by describing features that we take the referent of the name to possess. I am suggesting that the real purpose of §79 is to undermine this appearance. Closer attention to our practice suggests that the descriptions we give in responding to challenges are not intelligibly understood as specifying guides, in the envisioned sense, to referents. But then a central motivation for descriptivism is undermined.

A second thing to be said about the guidance idea is that it is closely related to another train of thought. That train of thought goes as follows. On a descriptivist conception of sense, Wittgenstein can say to anyone who challenges his understanding of “N”: “Look, in saying ‘N is dead’, I was saying that whichever individual it is that is F, G and H is dead.” And the possibility of this response seems to guarantee that Wittgenstein’s utterance was contentful even if no actual referent is forthcoming. That is to say, even if it turns out that there is no unique individual that is F, G and H, it would seem we can still understand what Wittgenstein was saying to be so, what state of affairs he envisioned to obtain. On the other hand, if there is no descriptive restatement available of the content of Wittgenstein’s utterance, then in a situation in which there is good reason to doubt that “N”, as Wittgenstein used it, had a reference, we would seem to have no handle on what his utterance said to be so. We cannot say, “In saying ‘N is dead’, Wittgenstein said that N is dead,” if we don’t ourselves take “N” to refer to anything. Nor can we offer a descriptive restatement, since, by supposition, there is no descriptive restatement. We must, it seems, conclude Wittgenstein did not in fact say anything at all. But then it is not merely the

truth-value of Wittgenstein’s assertion, but the question of whether he so much as made a contentful assertion at all, that is hostage to empirical facts about the ostensible subject matter of the remark. And that dependence for intelligibility on the empirical can seem—that is to say, it has seemed to many philosophers—intolerable.

This train of thought, in particular its final stage, is also an explicit target of Wittgenstein’s reflections:

Suppose I give this explanation: “I take ‘Moses’ to mean the man, if there was such a man, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, whatever he was called then and whatever he may or may not have done besides.”—But similar doubts to those about “Moses” are possible about the words of this explanation (what are you calling “Egypt”, whom the “Israelites” etc.?). Nor would these questions come to an end when we got down to words like “red”, “dark”, “sweet”.—“But then how does an explanation help me to understand, if after all it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don’t understand what he means, and never shall!”—As though an explanation as it were hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another—unless *we* require it to prevent a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not every one that I can imagine.

It may easily look as if every doubt merely *revealed* an existing gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is only possible if we first doubt everything that *can* be doubted, and then remove all these doubt.

The sign-post is in order—if, under normal circumstances, it fulfils its purpose. (§87)

Here Wittgenstein begins by imagining a descriptive specification of which person he means by “Moses”. He points out that such a specification does not in fact guarantee an understanding of who he means by that name. For we can imagine circumstances whose discovery would prompt legitimate doubts about what Wittgenstein is speaking of with the words in which he couches his descriptive specification. Reflection on the regress that now obviously arises prompts the interlocutor to the despairing conclusion, “so I still don’t understand what he means, and never shall!” Wittgenstein’s response is to suggest that this reaction stems at least in part from a misconstrual of the familiar phenomenon from which the whole train of thought

began: the phenomenon of explaining the use of names by giving descriptions. Due attention to what goes on in these explanations shows that they do not after all embody a commitment to the crucial assumption: the assumption that we understand who or what a person means with certain words only if we have found a specification of his meaning whose intelligibility does not depend on any contingent worldly facts, and hence which is invulnerable to doubt. For when we give our explanations-by-description, we muster up descriptions that are keyed to the specific doubts at issue, and in whose intelligibility we place faith despite the fact that there is no guarantee against our discovering things that threaten that faith. Wherever the assumption comes from, then, it is not the deliverance of careful attention to the relevant ordinary linguistic practices and to the conception of understanding those practices embody.

4. Family resemblances

Travis writes:

Suppose I say (on an occasion, of course), ‘Something satisfies the concept *chair* iff it is a chair.’ I purport to state some condition for something’s being a chair. What condition? That depends on how ‘chair’ is to be understood on the use I made of it in stating that condition: on what would count as a chair where being one is understood as it would be on that use. The idea of family resemblance (on the present reading) is that different things would so count on different occasions for the counting—on different *admissible* understandings of being what ‘chair’ speaks of, namely, a chair, so on different uses of ‘chair’. (2006, p. 59)

According to Travis, when I use the clause, “it is a chair” to state a condition on objects, what condition I state will vary from occasion to occasion depending upon what counts as satisfying the common noun “chair” as I use it on these occasions. So a given object might meet the condition I thereby state on one occasion while failing to meet the condition I thereby state on another occasion—not because the object changes, but because the condition I state does. This view is a form of contextualism. It is also, says Travis in the passage just quoted, “the idea of family resemblance”. Recanati (2005, pp. 190ff) casts a very similar view as “in the spirit of

Wittgenstein”, and Bezuidenhout agrees (2002, pp.123ff).

The term “family resemblance” is introduced in §67. In §66, Wittgenstein asks us to look for features common to all the activities we call “games” and distinguishing them as such. He suggests that any feature we come up with—amusingness, competitiveness, having winners and losers, etc.—will turn out to fit only some of those activities. The “result of this examination” is that we see not universally shared features, but rather “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (§66). And he says, “I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’” (§67).

The phrase “family resemblance”, then, is used to formulate the following observation: if we try to find features in common to all the items we group under a general term like “game”, we will find instead family resemblances. But for Travis (and Recanati), the “idea of family resemblance” is the thesis that what we state to be so of an object, in calling it a “game” (or some other general term), will vary from occasion to occasion. The question is why this thesis should be thought to be the message of Wittgenstein’s observation. I take it the train of thought ascribed to Wittgenstein is this. Suppose on some occasion you classify an activity that is amusing but lacks winning and losing as a “game”. (Wittgenstein gives an example of such an activity: “ring-a-roses”.) Suppose on another occasion you classify an activity that has winning and losing but is not amusing as a “game”. That these activities have such different features suggests that you are operating on these two occasions with, as Travis would put it, different understandings of being what “game” speaks of. Accordingly, what you state to be so of the first activity, in calling it a “game”, differs from what you state to be so of the second activity in calling it a “game”.

But I think this interpretation of the message of Wittgenstein’s family-resemblance

observation gets his intent almost exactly backwards. To begin with, we should note that Wittgenstein takes his observation to hold equally well if we substitute talk of the “the concept of game” for talk of “the term ‘game’” (§71, 75). It would beg the question against the contextualist interpretation to assume that Wittgenstein understands concepts as items at the level of content (à la much of the contemporary literature), so that sameness of concept would guarantee sameness of content. But however we construe Wittgenstein’s talk of concepts—and what we ought to do, here as elsewhere, is to construe his words as untechnically as possible, as giving us no more or less than those words do in ordinary discourse—his point, self-evidently, is that it is the *same* concept that is correctly applied from case to case even as different family resemblances come into play. And that is enough to ensure that there is a striking failure of fit between the text and Travis’s and Recanati’s designs upon it. For Travis and Recanati, differences in which family resemblances are present or otherwise salient on occasions for applying a given term entail, or at least make likely, differences in the content one would express in applying that term. But Wittgenstein’s explicit point is that differences in which family resemblances are present do *not* entail a difference in the concept one applies. Again, the problem is not that it is impossible to understand the notion of a concept in such a way as to render these claims consistent. The problem is the great oddity of taking Wittgenstein, in making the latter claim, to be thereby arguing for the former.

A proponent of the Travis-Recanati interpretation might object that Wittgenstein does not merely make his observation about family resemblances and then set it aside: the observation is rather a springboard to larger and deeper philosophical points. And that is certainly true. But reflection on these larger points just reinforces that the contextualist interpretation is misjudged.

One of the central strands of the reflections prompted by §66 and §67 concerns the question of how concepts and meanings are to be explained. Suppose we are asked to explain a given

concept. How are we to do so? One implication of the family resemblance observation is that for at least a large range of the concepts associated with ordinary general terms, there will be no common feature *F* such that we can explain the concept by saying, “An object falls under the concept iff it is *F*”. We will be unable to delineate such a feature even if we help ourselves to talk of logical sums or other such apparatus (§§67, 68). In such cases, we can do no better than give some examples and point out some of the family resemblances they exemplify: “How should we explain to someone what a game is? I imagine that we should describe *games* to him, and we might add: “This *and similar things* are called “games”” (§69).

Notice that appreciating this point about explanation does not require denying that there is something in common to all the things we call “games”. What all the activities we call “games” have in common, setting aside errors in our application of the term, is that they are *games*. We need that piece of sanity if we are to say, as Wittgenstein does in the sentence just quoted, that we can explain to someone what we call “games” by describing, precisely, games. But this fact about the things we call “games”—namely, that they are games—is not a fact we can have in view in advance of our possession of the concept of a game. It is thus not a feature to which we can appeal in explaining that concept, or similarly, the meaning or application of that term.⁴

Now, what can seem troubling about the kind of explanation Wittgenstein envisions, in which, we describe some games and say, “Games are things like this,” is its vulnerability to misunderstanding. We might wonder: how can we ensure that the recipient of the explanation takes the examples in the right way—that she picks up on the right similarities, that she brings to bear what’s she’s learned from these examples to new cases in ways of which we would approve? And the answer, of course, is that we cannot ensure this. But that is not a distinctive failing of this kind of explanation: “giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a

⁴ It is just because noting that games are games goes no distance toward elucidating the concept of a game that we do not think to mention it when asked, as in §66, to list features common to games.

better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too” (§71). Concepts like that of a game, whose ‘family resemblance’ character is so obvious, are useful for Wittgenstein in that they provide a particularly vivid illustration of a moral that holds more generally. The moral might be put this way: if explanation of our words and concepts is to be possible, the target of the explanation must have, or acquire, something that cannot itself be imparted by an explanation. She must have, as we might put it, the right sensibility. She must react to and employ and build upon our explanations in ways that place her within the circle of competent users of our words and concepts.

This thought, which from one perspective is near platitudinous, nonetheless has crucially important ramifications for Wittgenstein. It is a member of a small family of interrelated themes and points of emphasis that inform the whole of the *Investigations*. They are continually deployed in Wittgenstein’s various attempts to loosen the grip of what he regards as confused and damaging philosophical conceptions and pictures.

Tracing this deployment would takes us well beyond the bounds of this paper. But enough has been said, I think, to make clear how ill suited is the contextualist interpretation of the “idea of family resemblance” for making sense of the line of thought just briefly traced. The examination of “game”, a term whose applications so strikingly exhibit a family-resemblance character, cannot do its work if we react to the examination with the thought, “Well, if the features of the activities we call ‘games’ vary so greatly from case to case, then there is surely *some* level at which our understanding, our concept, of what counts as a ‘game’ varies from case to case.” This thought is essential for motivating the contextualist interpretation. But what is needed to grasp the point of Wittgenstein’s appeal to family-resemblance terms is to appreciate precisely that sameness of concept *needn’t* correspond to sameness of features in the examples we cite to explain the concept. That is what is supposed to impress upon us the dependence of

successful explanation, of achieving understanding, upon sensibility—upon the recipient’s taking up and making use of the explanation in ways that will bring her in line with us but which the explanation itself cannot guarantee.

Again, I don’t wish to deny that talk of “concepts” and “understanding” is malleable enough that we could find a way to interpret Wittgenstein’s remarks so as to render them consistent with the contextualist view that Travis associates with “the idea of family resemblance”. But the fact that a text can be interpreted in such a way that it is not logically inconsistent with a given view is, needless to say, a thin basis upon which to justify attribution of that view to it.

5. Ingenuity, insight and language mastery

The *Investigations* might be taken to provide support for contextualism not merely by explicitly agitating for it, but more indirectly by challenging its nemesis: truth-conditional semantics (TCS).

According to Travis, one of Wittgenstein’s key thoughts is that, “We can add new ways of using words to the ways with which we are already familiar by something like ingenuity and insight, applied to the novel occasions which make such new uses for words apt” (2006, p. 27). Travis goes on: “The appeal just signaled to such notions as ingenuity and insight (as to the needs of novel occasions, e.g., for describing things) is meant to contrast with that idea, common to Dummett, and Davidson, as to what a mature state [of language mastery] would be like” (2006, p. 27). We can set aside Dummett. Davidson is of interest to Travis because he is a stand in, aptly enough, for TCS. So we need to ask if the accusation sticks in this case.

Travis is certainly right about the thought he ascribes to Wittgenstein. One way to understand the thought is as corollary of another which Wittgenstein is concerned to emphasize in a number of places: that understanding the meaning of a word does not mean having a piece

of knowledge equipped to automatically deliver an answer, in every case one might or even does in fact encounter, about how the word is to be correctly applied in that case. No matter how well one understands the meaning of a word, and no matter how well one is informed about the relevant circumstances that, on a given occasion, might be thought relevant to the question of how the word is to be applied on that occasion, there is no guarantee that an answer to that question will be obvious—no guarantee that there will be no room for reasonable doubt about which answer to give. At the limit, there may be no honest course of action except a refusal to come down on one side or the other. But short of that limit, application of the word may call, not merely for a bare appeal to what one already knows about the meaning of the word, but for, as Travis says, “ingenuity and insight”. And it may require, as it were, not just a backward-looking justification but a forward-looking leap of faith: faith that one’s new use of the word will seem apt in retrospect.⁵

These thoughts may be seen in turn as further steps in the reflections outlined in the last section. We’ve seen that any explanation we might provide of, say, what a game is might be misunderstood. But, Wittgenstein writes, “Isn’t my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give?” (§75) And so what *we* know when we understand the meaning of “game”, or the concept of a game, is not itself something that leaves no room for misunderstanding or doubt; it is not something our possession of which could ensure that we will always see straightaway how the word ought to be applied; it is not something whose presence obviates the need for ingenuity or insight.

Why does Travis think TCS cannot countenance this point? Travis imagines a French toddler, Ghislaine, who has begun to use the word “chaussure”, in at least a few contexts, in ways that her parents regard as correct. Ghislaine is in what Travis, in homage to §1 of *Philosophical*

⁵ For an elegant discussion of points in this vicinity see Cavell, 1979, Chapter VII.

Investigations, calls an “Augustinian stage” of language use—that is, a stage one is in when one is on the way to a mature mastery of the language but has not yet gotten there. Now, Ghislaine certainly does not “know all there is to know as to how, and of what, ‘chaussure’ might, on occasion, be used correctly” (2005, p. 25). But, given the Wittgensteinian thoughts just retailed, a mature language user does not know any such thing either: the presence or absence of such knowledge is not what constitutes the difference between a mature speaker and a person at an Augustinian stage. And he thinks a TCS-ist, as represented by Donald Davidson, must disagree:

For, on Davidson’s conception of a theory of meaning for a language, the French open sentence, ‘_____ sont chaussures,’ has a satisfaction condition which would look like, or amount to, this: ‘Things satisfy ‘_____ sont chaussures’ iff they A.’ ... So if one knew the satisfaction condition, or what it states, one would know all there is to know as to when what is said of items, in using ‘sont chaussures’ to mean what it does in French—so in using it to say of those items what *it* does—would be true” (p. 25).

He goes on:

So for...Davidson, Ghislaine will make a qualitative leap in moving from her Augustinian state to a mature one. She will gain knowledge of a fact which entails *all* that she will then be prepared to recognize, including both what, in her Augustinian state, she is already prepared, and what she is not yet prepared, to recognize as to when in speaking ‘sont chaussures’ of things (in speaking French) one would speak truth.

It is on the basis of this analysis of Davidson’s view that Travis takes it to run counter to Wittgenstein’s reflections on the role of ingenuity and insight.

On Davidson’s view, according to Travis, knowing the satisfaction condition for “sont chaussures” entails that one “would know all there is to know” about the circumstances under which a mature French speaker would be prepared to recognize objects as satisfying “sont chaussures”. Thus imagine a description of some objects in which it is not explicitly given that the objects are shoes. Suppose that even so a mature French speaker would be prepared to recognize, on the basis of that description, that the objects satisfy “_____ sont chaussures”. That a mature French speaker would be prepared to recognize that the objects satisfy “_____ sont

chaussures” on the basis of that description is then something to be known about the circumstances under which a mature French speaker would be prepared to recognize objects as satisfying “_____ sont chaussures”. So someone who knows “all there is to know” about these circumstances would know this fact in particular. It follows that for Travis’s Davidson, knowing the satisfaction condition for “_____ sont chaussures”—as given in an axiom like, “Things satisfy ‘_____ sont chaussures’ iff they are shoes”—suffices for knowing that given this particular description of these objects, a mature French speaker will take the objects to satisfy “_____ sont chaussures”. And the claim that having the former piece of knowledge automatically suffices for having the latter does seem to clash with the idea that we will sometimes need ingenuity and insight if we are to know how to apply a term.

The problem, of course, is that this line of thought involves a patently fallacious move. Granting TCS, a theory apt for characterizing the meanings of French utterances and sentences will indeed contain an axiom like, “Things satisfy ‘_____ sont chaussures’ iff they are shoes.”⁶ Knowing this fact, we know an important fact about competent French speakers: namely, that when faced with an utterance of a sentence of the form, “S sont chaussures”, they will believe that utterance to be true if and only if they believe the objects denoted by the term replacing “S” to be shoes. The capacity of this piece of knowledge to help us determine, in a given case, whether or not a mature French speaker will regard as true a given utterance of a given sentence of the form, “S sont chaussures” depends, obviously, on our knowing whether or not a mature French speaker will regard the objects denoted by the term replacing “S” as shoes. And there is no basis for ascribing to a proponent of TCS the bizarre claim that knowledge of the satisfaction condition of “_____ sont chaussures” automatically brings with it knowledge of all there is to know about the circumstances under which French speakers will regard things as shoes. It is

⁶ That this axiom involves an oversimplified understanding of the notion of satisfaction is obviously irrelevant for the present discussion.

perfectly consistent to hold both that a person who understands French will have a piece of knowledge summarized by the above satisfaction condition for “chaussures” and to hold that knowing whether a mature French speaker would regard such-and-such objects as shoes will sometimes (or for that matter, always) require ingenuity and insight.

Travis’s belief to the contrary may be encouraged by the assumption that a truth-conditional theory of meaning purports to articulate a set of rules that a mature speaker of a language follows in making competent use of the language. So construed, a truth-conditional theory attempts to characterize a psychological structure possessed by a mature speaker that guides, and thus explains, both her production and understanding of utterances. On the most natural ways of developing this idea, it conflicts with Wittgenstein’s insight.

But it is simply a mistake to suppose that such psychologism must be part of TCS as such. Certainly there must be a link between what a truth-conditional theory tells us about a language and the actual practice of speaking and understanding that language. Natural-language semantics just *is* (part of) the study of the actual practice of speaking and understanding a language; there is nothing else for it to be. But the requisite link is already provided for by the requirement (here I bracket indexicality for ease of exposition) that the right-hand side of a T-sentence theorem of a truth-conditional theory of meaning for a language L—a theorem of the form, “S is true iff p,” with “S” replaced by the name of a sentence and “p” by a sentence—specify that which is said to be so by a speaker of L when she asserts S. This requirement ensures that on the truth-conditional approach, semantics is the study of a certain important property of speech acts—namely, of *what is said* by a speech act—and correlatively, of a central aspect of what one understands when one understands a language in use. It thus ensures that that semantics on the truth-conditional approach is part of the study of the practice of speaking and understanding a language. The idea that knowledge of a theory of meaning explains language mastery (or even

that it would suffice for mastery of the language, a weaker idea that Davidson himself did admittedly toy with) is thus gratuitous.

6. Conclusion

In closing, I should allow that the question of whether Wittgenstein is productively associated with contextualism is a large one, and that I have only scratched the surface here. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to try secure for contextualism the later Wittgenstein's imprimatur. One might seek to read specific passages of the *Investigations* as endorsing or encouraging contextualism. Or one might try to portray contextualism as in accord with general themes or ideas that seem Wittgensteinian in nature—such as the idea that meaning is closely tied to use. In this essay I follow up only on attempts of the former sort, and then only some of those that have been, or might intelligibly be, offered.⁷ My thesis has been that finding contextualism in the passages in the *Investigations* here discussed is not merely unwarranted; it is at cross-purposes with an appreciation of the points about explanation and understanding that these passages are chiefly concerned to provide.⁸

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⁷ For discussion of attempts of the latter sort, see Bridges, ms. It's worth mentioning a further limitation on the present discussion: in keeping with the focus of this volume, I focused almost exclusively on *Philosophical Investigations*. Some writers have ascribed varieties of epistemic contextualism to Wittgenstein on the basis of passages in *On Certainty*. Although I believe this reading of *On Certainty* is quite wrong-headed, the topic deserves an independent treatment.

⁸ I'd like to thank Arif Ahmed for very helpful comments on this paper.

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