
Studies in the Way of Words

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Part 1

Logic and Conversation

Prolegomena

There is a familiar and, to many, very natural maneuver which is of frequent occurrence in conceptual inquiries, whether of a philosophical or of a nonphilosophical character. It proceeds as follows: one begins with the observation that a certain range of expressions E , in each of which is embedded a subordinate expression α —let us call this range $E(\alpha)$ —is such that its members would not be used in application to certain specimen situations, that their use would be odd or inappropriate or even would make no sense; one then suggests that the relevant feature of such situations is that they fail to satisfy some condition C (which may be negative in character); and one concludes that it is a characteristic of the concept expressed by α , a feature of the meaning or use of α , that $E(\alpha)$ is applicable only if C is satisfied. Such a conclusion may be associated with one or more of the following more specific claims: that the schema $E(\alpha)$ logically entails C , that it implies or presupposes C , or that C is an applicability/appropriateness-condition (in a specially explained sense) for α and that α is misused unless C obtains.

Before mentioning suspect examples of this type of maneuver, I would like to make two general remarks. First, if it is any part of one's philosophical concern, as it is of mine, to give an accurate general account of the actual meaning of this or that expression in nontechnical discourse, then one simply cannot afford to abandon this kind of maneuver altogether. So there is an obvious need for a method (which may not, of course, be such as to constitute a clear-cut decision procedure) for distinguishing its legitimate from its illegitimate applications. Second, various persons, including myself, have pointed

to philosophical mistakes which allegedly have arisen from an uncritical application of the maneuver; indeed, the precept that one should be careful not to confuse meaning and use is perhaps on the way toward being as handy a philosophical vade-mecum as once was the precept that one should be careful to identify them. Though more sympathetic to the new precept than to the old, I am not concerned to campaign for or against either. My primary aim is rather to determine how any such distinction between meaning and use is to be drawn, and where lie the limits of its philosophical utility. Any serious attempt to achieve this aim will, I think, involve a search for a systematic philosophical theory of language, and I shall be forced to take some tottering steps in that direction. I shall also endeavor to interweave, in the guise of illustrations, some discussions of topics relevant to the question of the relation between the apparatus of formal logic and natural language.

Some of you may regard some of the examples of the maneuver which I am about to mention as being representative of an outdated style of philosophy. I do not think that one should be too quick to write off such a style. In my eyes the most promising line of answer lies in building up a theory which will enable one to distinguish between the case in which an utterance is inappropriate because it is false or fails to be true, or more generally fails to correspond with the world in some favored way, and the case in which it is inappropriate for reasons of a different kind. I see some hope of ordering the linguistic phenomena on these lines. But I do not regard it as certain that such a theory can be worked out, and I think that some of the philosophers in question were skeptical of just this outcome; I think also that sometimes they were unimpressed by the need to attach special importance to such notions as that of truth. So one might, in the end, be faced with the alternatives of either reverting to something like their theoretically unambitious style or giving up hope altogether of systematizing the linguistic phenomena of natural discourse. To me, neither alternative is very attractive.

Now for some suspect examples, many of which are likely to be familiar.

A. (1) An example has achieved some notoriety. Ryle maintained: "In their most ordinary employment 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' are used, with a few minor elasticities, as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone's action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his

fault." From this he drew the conclusion that "in ordinary use, then, it is absurd to discuss whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary"; and he characterized the application of these adjectives to such performances as an "unwitting extension of the ordinary sense of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary,' on the part of the philosophers."¹

(2) Malcolm accused Moore of having misused the word "know" when he said that he knew that this was one human hand and that this was another human hand; Malcolm claimed, I think, that an essential part of the concept "know" is the implication that an inquiry is under way.² Wittgenstein made a similar protest against the philosopher's application of the word "know" to supposedly paradigmatic situations.

(3) Benjamin remarked: "One could generate a sense of the verb 'remember' such that from the demonstration that one has not forgotten p, i.e. that one has produced or performed p, it would follow that one remembers p . . . Thus one could speak of Englishmen conversing or writing in English as 'remembering' words in the English language; of accountants doing accounts as 'remembering how to add,' and one might murmur as one signs one's name 'I've remembered my name again.' The absurd inappropriateness of these examples, if 'remember' is understood in its usual sense, illustrates the opposition between the two senses."³ (There is an analogy here with "know": compare the oddity of "The hotel clerk asked me what my name was, and fortunately I knew the answer.")

(4) Further examples are to be found in the area of the philosophy of perception. One is connected with the notion of "seeing . . . as." Wittgenstein observed that one does not see a knife and fork as a knife and fork.⁴ The idea behind this remark was not developed in the passage in which it occurred, but presumably the thought was that, if a pair of objects plainly *are* a knife and fork, then while it *might* be correct to speak of someone as seeing them as something different (perhaps as a leaf and a flower), it would always (except possibly in very special circumstances) be incorrect (false, out of order, devoid of sense) to speak of seeing an x as an x, or at least of seeing what is plainly an x as an x. "Seeing . . . as," then, is seemingly

1. *Concept of Mind*, III, 69.

2. Malcolm, "Defending Common Sense," *Philosophical Review*, January 1949.

3. "Remembering," *Mind*, July 1956.

4. In *Philosophical Investigations*.

represented as involving at least some element of some kind of imaginative construction or supplementation.

Another example which occurred to me (as to others before me) is that the old idea that perceiving a material object involves having (sensing) a sense-datum (or sense-data) might be made viable by our rejecting the supposition that sense-datum statements report the properties of entities of a special class, whose existence needs to be demonstrated by some form of the Argument from Illusion, or the identification of which requires a special set of instructions to be provided by a philosopher; and by supposing, instead, that "sense-datum statement" is a class-name for statements of some such form as "x looks (feels, etc.) ϕ to A" or "it looks (feels, etc.) to A as if."⁵ I hoped by this means to rehabilitate a form of the view that the notion of perceiving an object is to be analyzed in causal terms. But I had to try to meet an objection, which I found to be frequently raised by those sympathetic to Wittgenstein, to the effect that for many cases of perceiving the required sense-datum statements are not available; for when, for example, I see a plainly red object in ordinary daylight, to say "it looks red to me," far from being, as my theory required, the expression of a truth, would rather be an incorrect use of words. According to such an objection, a feature of the meaning of "x looks ϕ to A" is that such a form of words is correctly used only if *either* it is false that x is ϕ , *or* there is some doubt (or it has been thought or it might be thought that there is some doubt) whether x is ϕ .

(5) Another crop of examples is related in one way or another to action.

(a) *Trying*. Is it always correct, or only sometimes correct, to speak of a man who has done something as having *eo ipso* tried to do it? Wittgenstein and others adopt the second view. Their suggestion is that if, say, I now perform some totally unspectacular act, like scratching my head or putting my hand into my trouser pocket to get my handkerchief out, it would be inappropriate and incorrect to say that I tried to scratch my head or tried to put my hand into my pocket. It would be similarly inappropriate to speak of me as *not* having tried to do each of these things. From these considerations there emerges the idea that for "A tried to do x" to be correctly used, it is required either that A should not have done x (should have been

5. Grice, "Causal Theory of Perception," *Aristotle Society Supplementary Volume*, 1961.

prevented) or that the doing of *x* was something which presented *A* with some problems, was a matter of some difficulty. But a little reflection suggests that this condition is too strong. A doctor may tell a patient, whose leg has been damaged, to try to move his toes tomorrow, and the patient may agree to try; but neither is committed to holding that the patient will fail to move his toes or that it will be difficult for him to do so. Moreover, someone else who has not been connected in any way with, or even was not at the time aware of, the damage to the patient's leg may correctly say, at a later date, "On the third day after the injury the patient tried to move his toes (when the plaster was removed), though whether he succeeded I do not know." So to retain plausibility, the suggested condition must be weakened to allow for the appropriateness of "*A* tried to do *x*" when the *speaker*, or even someone connected in some way with the speaker, thinks or might think that *A* was or might have been prevented from doing *x*, or might have done *x* only with difficulty. (I am not, of course, maintaining that the meaning of "try" in fact includes such a condition.)

(b) *Carefully*. It seems a plausible suggestion that part of what is required in order that *A* may be correctly said to have performed some operation (a calculation, the cooking of a meal) carefully is that *A* should have been receptive to (on alert for) circumstances in which the venture might go astray (fail to reach the desired outcome), and that he should manifest, in such circumstances, a disposition to take steps to maintain the course towards such an outcome. I have heard it maintained by H. L. A. Hart that such a condition as I have sketched is insufficient; that there is a further requirement, namely that the steps taken by the performer should be *reasonable*, individually and collectively. The support for the addition of the supplementary condition lies in the fact (which I shall not dispute) that if, for example, a man driving down a normal road stops at every house entrance to make sure that no dog is about to issue from it at break-neck speed, we should not naturally describe him as "driving carefully," nor would we naturally ascribe carefulness to a bank clerk who counted up the notes he was about to hand to a customer fifteen times. The question is, of course, whether the natural reluctance to apply the adverb "carefully" in such circumstances is to be explained by the suggested meaning-restriction, or by something else, such as a feeling that, though "carefully" could be correctly applied, its application would fail to do justice to the mildly spectacular facts.

(c) Perhaps the most interesting and puzzling examples in this area are those provided by Austin, particularly as he propounded a general thesis in relation to them. The following quotations are extracts from the paragraph headed "No modification without aberration": "When it is stated that X did A, there is a temptation to suppose that given some, indeed, perhaps *an*, expression modifying the verb we shall be entitled to insert either it or its opposite or negation in our statement: that is, we shall be entitled to ask, typically, 'Did X do A Mly or not Mly?' (e.g., 'Did X murder Y voluntarily or involuntarily?'), and to answer one or the other. Or as a minimum it is supposed that if X did A there must be at least one modifying expression that we could, justifiably and informatively, insert with the verb. In the great majority of cases of the great majority of verbs ('murder' is perhaps not one of the majority) such suppositions are quite unjustified. The natural economy of language dictates that for the *standard* case covered by any normal verb . . . (e.g. 'eat,' 'kick,' or 'croquet') . . . no modifying expression is required or even permissible. Only if we do the action named in some *special* way or circumstances is a modifying expression called for, or even in order . . . It is bedtime, I am alone, I yawn; but I do not yawn involuntarily (or voluntarily!) nor yet deliberately. To yawn in any such peculiar way is just not to just yawn."⁶ The suggested general thesis is then, roughly, that for most action-verbs the admissibility of a modifying expression rests on the action described being a nonstandard case of the kind of action which the verb designates or signifies.

B. Examples involve an area of special interest to me, namely that of expressions which are candidates for being natural analogues to logical constants and which may, or may not, "diverge" in meaning from the related constants (considered as elements in a classical logic, standardly interpreted). It has, for example, been suggested that because it would be incorrect or inappropriate to say "He got into bed and took off his trousers" of a man who first took off his trousers and then got into bed, it is part of the meaning, or part of *one* meaning, of "and" to convey temporal succession. The fact that it would be inappropriate to say "My wife is either in Oxford or in London" when I know perfectly well that she is in Oxford has led to the idea that it is part of the meaning of "or" (or of "either . . . or") to convey that the speaker is ignorant of the truth-values of the particular dis-

juncts. Again, Strawson maintained that, while "if p then q" entails " $p \rightarrow q$," the reverse entailment does not hold; and he characterized a primary or standard use of "if . . . then" as follows: "each hypothetical statement made by this use of 'if' is acceptable (true, reasonable) if the antecedent statement, if made or accepted, would in the circumstances be a good ground or reason for accepting the consequent statement; and the making of the hypothetical statement carries the implication either of uncertainty about, or of disbelief in, the fulfillment of both antecedent and consequent."⁷

C. My final group of suspect examples involves a latter-day philosophical taste for representing words, which have formerly, and in some cases naturally, been taken to have, primarily or even exclusively, a descriptive function, as being, rather, pseudo-descriptive devices for the performance of some speech-act, or some member of a range of speech-acts. Noticing that it would, for example, be unnatural to say "It is true that it is raining" when one merely wished to inform someone about the state of the weather or to answer a query on this matter, Strawson once advocated the view (later to be considerably modified) that the function (and therefore presumably the meaning) of the word "true" was to be explained by pointing out that to say "it is true that p" is not just to assert that p but also to endorse, confirm, concede, or agree to its being the case that p.⁸ Somewhat analogous theses, though less obviously based on cases of linguistic inappropriateness, have been, at one time or another, advanced with regard to such words as "know" ("To say 'I know' is to give one's word, to give a guarantee") and "good" ("To say that something is 'good' is to recommend it").

So much for the suspect examples of the kind of maneuver which I initially outlined. All or nearly all of them have a particular feature in common, which helps to make them suspect. In nearly every case, the condition C, the presence of which is suggested as being required for the application of a particular word or phrase to be appropriate, is such that most people would, I think, on reflection have a more or less strong inclination to say that to apply the word or phrase in the absence of that condition would be to say something *true* (indeed usually trivially true), however *misleading* it would be to apply the word or phrase thus. This is connected with the point, noted by

6. "A Plea for Excuses," *Philosophical Papers*, ed. Urmson and Warnock, p. 137.

7. *Introduction to Logical Theory*, III, pt. 2.

8. Strawson, "Truth," *Analysis*, June 1949.

Searle, that in a good many of these examples the suggested condition of applicability is one which would deny a word application to what are naturally regarded as paradigm cases, cases which would be obvious choices if one were explaining the meaning of the word or phrase by illustration.⁹ What could be a clearer case of something which looks blue to me than the sky on a clear day? How could it be *more* certain that my wife is either in Oxford or in London than by its being certain that she is in Oxford? Such considerations as these, when they apply, prompt a desire to find some explanation of the relevant linguistic inappropriateness other than that offered in the examples.

It is not clear, however, with respect to most of the examples, just what explanation is being offered. Let us, for convenience, label a philosopher who takes up one or another of the positions mentioned in my list of suspect examples an "A-philosopher"; let us call the condition which he wishes to treat as involved in the meaning of a particular word (e.g., "remember," "voluntary") a "suspect condition"; and let us call the word in question a "crucial word," and a statement, the expression of which incorporates in an appropriate way a crucial word, a "crucial statement."

It seems to me that an A-philosopher might be occupying one of at least three positions:

(1) He might be holding that crucial statements entail the relevant suspect conditions (that, for example, to do something carefully entails that the doer's precautionary steps are reasonable, and that if the steps are unreasonable, then it is false that the deed was carefully executed).

(2) He might be holding that if the suspect condition fails to be true, then a related crucial statement is deprived of a truth-value.

(3) He might be holding that (a) if the suspect condition is false, the related crucial statement may be false or, alternatively, may lack a truth-value; and (b) if the suspect condition is true, then the related crucial statement will be either true or false.

The logical relationship, in this case, between the crucial statement and the suspect condition will be similar to that which, with some plausibility, may be supposed to hold between a pair of statements of

9. "Assertions and Aberrations," *Contemporary British Philosophy*, ed. Williams and Montefiore.

the form "A omitted to do x" and "A might have been expected to do x." Consider the relationship between:

(1) "A omitted to turn on the light."

(2) "A might have been expected to turn on the light."

The following account has some plausibility. If statement (2) is false, then statement (1) will be false if A turned on the light; if he turned on the light, then he certainly did not omit to turn it on, whether he should have turned it on or not. If, however, statement (2) being false, A did not turn on the light, then the truth or falsity of statement (1) is in doubt. Given, however, that statement (2) is true, that A might have been expected to turn on the light, then statement (1) is false or true according as A did, or did not, turn on the light.

A somewhat parallel account might be suggested for the relation between:

(1') "A tried to turn on the light."

(2') "It was, or might have been, a matter of some difficulty for A to turn on the light."

Suppose that statement (2') is false; then perhaps statement (1') is false if A just did not turn on the light; but if A did turn on the light, then perhaps statement (1') lacks a truth-value, or has an indefinite truth-value. But given that statement (2') is true, then statement (1') is true if A turned on the light or took (unsuccessful) steps toward that end, and statement (1') is false if A took no such steps. (I am not, of course, suggesting that such an account would be correct, only that it would have some plausibility.)

It is generally pretty difficult to pin an A-philosopher down to one rather than another of these three positions. One of the few cases in which this seems possible is that of Benjamin. Continuing the passage in which he contrasts the supposedly genuine (and certificatory) sense of "remember" with the invented sense, he says that the opposition between the two senses is not "one which permits the crude exposure of its existence by *denying* that in these examples one remembers one's name or one's language, for such a denial would in each case entail that one had forgotten them. The inappropriateness would lie in bringing up the notion of remembering in its usual sense at all in such connexions." This passage, though perhaps not absolutely conclusive, strongly suggests that Benjamin thought of the genuine sense of the word "remember" as being such that, if the suspect condition