Philosophers in Depth

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Daniel Whiting

7.1 Introduction

Wittgenstein famously remarks that 'the meaning of a word is its use' (*PI* §43). Whether one views this as gesturing at a 'theory' of meaning, or as aiming primarily to dissuade us from certain misconceptions of language that are a source of puzzlement, it is clear that Wittgenstein held that for certain purposes the meaning of an expression could profitably be characterised as its use.

Throughout his later writings, however, Wittgenstein's appeal to the notion of use pulls in two directions. Often, Wittgenstein connects the notion of an expression's meaning with that of use in the sense of *usage* or *practice*. More specifically, he suggests that for an expression to possess meaning is for there to be a practice of employing it according to certain rules. 'That', he tells us, 'is why there exists a correspondence between the concepts "rule" and "meaning"' (*OC* §62; cf. *PG* 68; *PO* 51; *RFM* VI §28; *VoW* 103). Indeed, Wittgenstein goes so far as to say, 'The rule-governed nature of our languages permeates our life' (*ROC* §303). Call the view that the meaning of an expression is determined by a general principle governing its use, *rulism*.

Elsewhere, Wittgenstein appears to place emphasis on use in the sense of *utterance on an occasion* (see *OC* §§10, 347):

> If, for example, someone says that the sentence "This is here" (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense.
>
> (*PI* §117)

The suggestion seems to be that what a person expresses in uttering an expression on an occasion is determined, not merely by the words used, but also by salient features of the 'situation' (*Z* §9). Call the view that the

significance of an expression when uttered is determined in a non-negligible way by the surrounding circumstances, *contextualism*.

Many contemporary philosophers, avowedly following Wittgenstein, advance some form of contextualism.[1] Several, however, take contextualist considerations to threaten the idea that for an expression to possess meaning is for its use to be governed by a rule. Wittgenstein himself appears to find no problem in maintaining both views simultaneously. Likewise Searle, a prominent contextualist, unabashedly states that languages are 'sets of constitutive rules' (1979: 176–7), that an expression's meaning 'is determined by rules' (1969: 48). The attitude of Travis, another influential contextualist, is more difficult to pin down, but the overall impression is one of antipathy towards rulism. While Travis readily speaks of 'the rules of a language game' (2006: 18), language games are 'objects of comparison' and being governed by rules might not be one of the respects in which they are comparable to language proper. On one occasion, Travis grants that '"bachelor" is plausibly governed by' a rule (2000: 213) but leaves open whether in this respect 'bachelor' is normal or exceptional. In any case, he immediately proceeds to insist that the rule does not settle the correct use of the expression. Elsewhere Travis straightforwardly denies that an expression's meaning provides 'a set of (effective) standards of correctness such that the standards governing the word on a speaking are always and exactly some selection from these' (1989: 107), that there are 'principles' governing the use of terms that do not refer 'to anything it takes special human capacities to recognize' and yet 'determine [...] *when* such descriptions [involving them] would be true' (2006: 12–13). However, it is possible that the target of these remarks is not the notion of general principles per se but that of principles that apply in *all* situations, *fully* fixing the correctness of uttering an expression and thereby its significance on those occasions *independently* of our distinctively human perspective on such matters.

Travis's evasiveness might reflect diffidence over the compatibility of contextualism and rulism. Other contextualists, in contrast, are less reticent. Dreyfus, for example, explicitly states that 'practices do not arise from [...] rules' (1991: 22). Similarly, Cavell insists that 'language does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure [...] of rules' (2002: 48). Again, Dancy insists that language-use 'is not a matter of the application of rules' (2004: 198; see also Luntley 2003).

Why contextualism should be incompatible with rulism is not immediately apparent but the rough idea – to be unpacked below – is as follows. Contextualism suggests that circumstances are a principal factor with respect to the appropriateness of employing an expression, and so the import of doing so. Thus, context-invariant principles cannot play an important role in deciding the appropriateness of employing an expression, and so the import of doing so. One might say that contextualism's emphasis on *particular* occasions of utterance is at odds with rulism's emphasis on *general* standards of usage.

There are two ways in which rulism's proponent might seek to respond to this challenge. First, she could attempt to demonstrate that contextualism is mistaken or more problematic than opposing positions.[2] Alternatively, she could try to diffuse the alleged clash between rulism and contextualism – and so the apparent tension within Wittgenstein's philosophy – by showing that there is nothing in contextualism that rulism's proponent need deny. I shall pursue the latter option and, in doing so, vindicate Wittgenstein's apparent readiness to advance both.[3]

7.2   Captivating pictures

So far, I have talked vaguely of contextualists holding a view about the significance of an uttered expression and what speaks for or against its employment. In this section, I shall make this more concrete by outlining a picture of language that contextualists oppose.

Dancy outlines a commonly held view according to which 'the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and how they are combined, and its parts would make the same contribution to any other complex in any other context'. Against this, Dancy maintains that 'one and the same term can make different contributions in different contexts' (2004: 194). This, as Dancy makes clear, challenges three prevalent ideas:

> First, that our understanding of utterances and sentences is inferential. Second, that the normativity of language is a matter of its being governed by rules. Third, that the terms of ordinary language have invariant core meanings.
>
> (2004: 197)

With striking similarity, Conant describes a picture according to which 'understanding the content [expressed in an utterance] is just a function of (1) our understanding of the meanings of the individual words of which the assertion is composed and (2) our knowledge of the rules of the language'. Against this, he insists that meaning 'is not something which an expression possesses all on its own and which is subsequently imported into a context of use', and so understanding what is expressed on an occasion of utterance cannot consist in grasp of context-invariant rules (1998: 228, 240).

Travis too, in terms very much alike, outlines a perspective on language according to which

> [a] sentence is a structure of parts, each of which, in meaning what it does, makes a definite contribution to that sentence's way of representing. Jointly, these contributions determine how the sentence represents.
>
> (2000: 199)

Wedded to this, Travis says, is the idea that 'for a statement to bear the understanding that it does is for it to be governed by some set of principles which determine, univocally, everything that is determined as to when it would be true and when it would be false' (2000: 208). In turn, this is part and parcel of the assumption that fluency in a language

> is an instance of a sort of capacity which is always representable by some set of propositions, or principles from which follows all that we can recognise as to when words are [...] used correctly.

In opposition, Travis invites us 'to suppose [...] there to be no such way of calculating, or deriving, from given principles' what is said in an utterance on an occasion (2006: 11, 31).

The view challenged above is one according to which an expression possesses a constant meaning, determined by a general rule governing its employment, in virtue of which it makes an invariant contribution to the meanings of complex expressions and to what might be said on an occasion of use. In its place, the contextualist asks us to recognise that what contribution an expression makes to what is said by its utterance is determined by facts about the particular occasion of utterance.

But what speaks in favour of contextualism? A common route to it is by reflection on situations in which the *same* expression appears, on *different* occasions, to be used to say *different* things (express different thoughts, propositions or truth-evaluable contents). Insofar as there is allegedly nothing remarkable about such cases, one is supposedly warranted in generalising from them to conclude that context-sensitivity is ubiquitous.

Consider:[4]

(1)   Milk is in the fridge.
(2)   Snow is white.

Crucially, (1) does not appear incomplete or ambiguous and contains no obviously indexical terms, such as 'I' or 'this', whose reference one would expect to vary systematically with context. Suppose, however, that David utters (1) and that, on opening the fridge, Kelly finds only a few drops of milk on a shelf. Whether she should evaluate what David said in uttering (1) as true or false, and so what he said, arguably depends on whether he uttered it in response, say, to her asking if the fridge was clean or her asking whether there is enough milk for cereal. Depending on the context, in uttering (1) David might have said different things.

Likewise, imagine that Elliot asks me what colour to use for the mountain peak he is painting. I utter (2) and, in doing so, one would reasonably take

me to have spoken truthfully. Suppose later Elliot stomps dirty snow across the newly cleaned kitchen tiles. I admonish him for doing so but he replies, 'That's not snow. Snow is white'. One would reasonably take him to have spoken falsely. Hence, what one expresses in uttering (2) appears to depend on the context.

What, then, determines the significance of an utterance if not (only) the expressions employed? Contextualists, like Austin, typically appeal to 'the intents and purposes of the utterance and its context' (1975: 143). Given this, there are things that one may 'rightly expect of giving a description; ways one has a right to expect oneself thereby to be enabled to deal with the surroundings one then confronts' (Travis 2006: 30). If the point of uttering (1), for example, is to answer a question about breakfast supplies, Kelly should reasonably expect to find a sufficient amount of suitably packaged milk. These are not arcane facts beyond the ken of ordinary people but the sort anyone acquainted with the situation, and aware of the kinds of needs and interests humans have, could discern.

Insofar as it is straightforward to see how one might tell stories such as those sketched above for virtually any sentence in a language, it would appear that contextualism is true. For such reasons, alongside the above, Dreyfus remarks that 'the truth conditions of an assertion are always relative to a background' (1982: 22). Searle agrees, maintaining that 'the notion of the literal meaning of a sentence only has application relative to a set of contextualised or background assumptions' (1979: 117; cf. 1983: 145). Likewise, Putnam claims that 'the content of an utterance depends on the particular context in which it is spoken' (1999: 87). Moore too approves of the suggestion that 'The meaning of a word, as used in a specific context, has no life outside that context' (1997: 96).[5]

No doubt there are many things one might challenge at this point. I shall set these qualms aside, however. The present concern lies not with the reasons given in favour of contextualism, but with its consequences.

The view that the significance of an uttered expression is ineliminably determined by the particular circumstances threatens to conflict with rulism's claim that an expression's meaning is fixed by a general rule governing its employment. As Recanati suggests:

> On the resulting picture, words are not primarily associated with abstract 'conditions of application', constituting their conventional meaning [...] The conditions of application for words must be contextually determined.
>
> (2005: 190)

Note that on this account, the very notion of an invariant meaning is jettisoned along with that of a rule specifying the conditions of its employment. This at least suggests that the notions of linguistic meaning and of rules stand or fall together.

7.3 A rule by any other name

Contextualism immediately raises the following worry. It would seem that, according to it, there are no invariant bounds as to what any given term expresses, which changes its meaning on each occasion of use, and so there are no general guidelines for the term's employment. Consequently, it is hard to comprehend how speakers could understand such an indefinite variety of meanings or command mastery of the uncircumscribed ways in which the term might be employed.

Contextualists like Dreyfus sometimes appeal to a person's familiarity with 'shared background practices', or allude to 'the skilful ways we are accustomed to comport ourselves' (1991: 75; cf. Cavell 1999: 168; Travis 2008: 155). One cannot, though, help sympathising with McManus's worry that these gestures amount to little more than 'identifying our difficulty, not eliminating it' (2008: 444). True, a subject speaks meaningfully and understands her interlocutors in virtue of being able to comport herself skilfully in certain practices, but what one needs to know is precisely how this is possible in the absence of general principles that she might bring to the occasion.

Moreover, while it might be true that an expression can be put to a variety of uses in various circumstances, appearances strongly suggest that there are robust constraints that hold whatever the occasion. As Cavell admits, 'not just any projection will be acceptable' (1999: 182). While (1), for example, might be used to speak of a few drops of milk in a refrigerator, it could not be used to speak of a puddle of lemonade on a hotplate. In which case, with Mulhall, one might justifiably wonder how one could account for these limits 'without adverting to some idea of a systematic web of norms' (2003: 96).

Anticipating such concerns, Dancy proposes the following account of linguistic competence:

> To know the meaning of the term is to know the *sorts of* semantic contribution that the term can make to a large context, and to have a general understanding of what *sorts of* context are those in which it will make this or that *sort of* contribution.
>
> (2004: 196)

In addition, in the light of that understanding, one must on a particular occasion of use 'be able to tell, to a reasonable degree, which particular contribution the term is in fact making' (2004: 194). On this picture, a sentence *does* possess a kind of general role, but not to express a particular thought; rather, as Conant insists, it is 'a linguistic instrument which is usable in many different circumstances to express any of many distinct thoughts' (1998: 242). This suggests that understanding a sentence, mastering the use

of this 'instrument', requires appreciating not what *thought* it expresses but what *sort of thought* it is capable of expressing when uttered.

In view of this, Dancy allows that one can talk of 'the meaning' of an expression 'in general' as 'the range of differences that it can make', that there 'is a sense [...] in which the term has the same meaning wherever it appears' (2004: 194). Indeed, while some remain resistant (Conant 1998: 240–1), it is not uncommon for contextualists to allow that expressions possess occasion-independent meanings. What they characteristically insist is that those meanings do not *determine* but only *constrain* what might be expressed by an uttered expression. Of all the things that meaning allows might be expressed, it is the job of circumstances to select from among them (see Austin 1975: 145; Putnam 1999: 87; Travis 1989: 17–18; 2006: 32; 2008: 96, 109–10).

One might ask, however, whether this contains anything that rulism's proponent need deny. For these contextualists, there is a 'range of contributions' that each term can make when uttered, which is constrained by a circumstance-independent meaning. Entirely compatible with this, surely, is the view that it is precisely general rules of use that fix, for each term, such a range. In light of the compelling examples adduced, one should no doubt concede that a rule does not by itself determine *just* what contribution a term makes on a particular occasion, but one might insist nonetheless that it does determine the kind of contribution it can make (presumably by determining the kind of way in which it is to be used). Indeed, one might think it precisely the job of rules to provide general guidelines which prepare us for, and can subsequently be tailored to, particular occasions. It is not yet clear, then, to what extent contextualists genuinely *oppose* rulism.

Surprisingly, Dancy is prepared to grant, 'In one sense, indeed, there is nothing wrong with thinking of the meaning of a term as a rule for its use' (2004: 198). It soon becomes clear, however, that this 'sense' is not one available to rulism's advocate. For many contextualists, an expression possesses an invariant significance only in the respect that one can trace a certain *trajectory* in its use. Travis, for example, speaks of an expression's

> actual history in its language – its life, so to speak, among the speakers of that language: what it has been used and taken to communicate on various occasions by various people. This history [...] may have a significant role in determining what the word's meaning what it does was supposed to determine: the standards properly taken to govern it on the various occasions appropriate for its use.
>
> (1989: 110–11; cf. Recanati 2005: 189–90)

Accordingly, the sense in which the use of an expression is governed by a rule is insofar as there are applications of the term that accord or fail to accord with that 'history'. Crucially, however, for the contextualist opposed

to rulism, the relevant pattern is *not* one that might be captured by a general principle. This is because, as Dancy asserts, it is 'essentially inarticulable' (2004: 196; cf. Luntley 2003: 63). Similarly, Dreyfus insists that our 'everyday understanding cannot be fully articulated', that one cannot '*spell out* these practices in' a 'definite and context-free way' (1991: 4). Travis, too, objects to the idea that our capacity to understand a language is 'representable by some set of propositions' (2006: 11).

What such contextualists oppose, then, is a view of linguistic rules as the sort of thing that might be fully expressed or finitely specified. Although they concede an attenuated manner in which it is appropriate to talk of an expression's having 'a meaning' constituted by 'a rule' for its employment, that rule is not one that could be formulated in a way that could be the content of a person's knowledge and thereby be the grounds of her competence with that expression. Here, indeed, is a view associated with contextualism that conflicts with rulism. But why should we accept it?

7.4 Tales of the unexpected

One argument in support of the claim that it is not possible to articulate a rule for the use of an expression is as follows. Though there is a range of contributions that a term might make to a larger whole, that range is, in Dancy's words, irreducibly 'open-ended' (2004: 196; cf. Luntley 2003: 63). This is supposedly due to the fact that it is essential to the terms we employ that they can be projected into unforeseen contexts. Thus, Travis insists that all that can be said about the 'history' of an expression leaves 'questions open as to what future uses of words may be' (2006: 31). Likewise, Moore suggests:

> If the meaning of a word is nothing apart from its continued usage, then any word has at any stage in its history, different possibilities of further meaning-preserving uses woven into [...] There is no legislating in advance for the possibilities of creative language-use that such processes afford.
>
> (1997: 97–8)

Again, in Cavell's words:

> What can be said in a language is not everywhere determined by rules [...] there are always new contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared.
>
> (1999: 180)

Presumably the issue here is not *newness* as such. Rules are inherently general; it belongs to their very nature that they lay down standards for behaviour on occasions other than the present. Rather, the problem is that what

is new is (sufficiently often) unanticipated, and so one is unable to turn to a pre-established rule for guidance concerning the employment of a term.

It would not be feasible, the argument continues, to '*limit* words to *certain* contexts, and then coin new ones for new eventualities' (Cavell 1999: 180). As Dancy explains:

> We could not run a language in which we needed to invent a new term from every context which did not exactly match up to the defined limitations of the terms we have already in hand.
>
> (2004: 196)

As there is no limit to the number of unforeseeable contexts a competent speaker might project a term into, the rules purportedly determinative of meaning cannot be finitely specified.

Two kinds of case are typically offered in support of this (Dancy 2004: 196ff; Dreyfus 1992: 199; Travis 1989: 291; 2006: 60). First, there might be situations in which, in light of the context, one considers it *correct* to employ an expression even though the condition for its correct use, laid down by its alleged rule, does not obtain. Second, there might be situations in which, in light of the context, one considers it *incorrect* to employ an expression even though the condition for its correct use, laid down by its alleged rule, obtains. Admittedly, not all the cases contextualists appeal to fall into one of these categories. A further sort is that in which a rule, in certain circumstances, seems simply to give out. Consider Wittgenstein's example:

> I say "There is a chair". What if I go up to it, meaning to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight?——"So it wasn't a chair but some kind of illusion".——But in a few moments we see it again and are able to touch it and so on.—"So the chair was there after all and its disappearance was some kind of illusion."—But suppose that after a time it disappears again—or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules for such cases—rules saying whether one may use the word "chair" to include this kind of thing?
>
> (*PI* §80)

The implied answer is, of course, no. This, however, hardly undermines rulism. It does not follow, from the fact that 'we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of' an expression (ibid.), that we are not equipped with rules full stop.

Note also that in a scenario such as Wittgenstein's, it is not as if the particular circumstances, as opposed to the general rules, provide a determinate indication as to how to apply the expression. Guidance quite generally appears to give out.[6] Of course, it might be possible, with ingenuity or imagination, to garner how to employ the relevant expression on this occasion,

but that need not be separable from making out that it accords or fails to accord with a rule. Since cases of this kind do not unsettle rulism, I shall turn to the first of the two sorts of counterexample sketched above.

One might hope that, if any term has a standard meaning in virtue of being subject to a rule of use, 'bachelor' does. Consider:

(R1)   Apply 'bachelor' only to unmarried adult men.

No doubt (R1) could guide one's use of 'bachelor' within a limited range of cases. Suppose, however, that Martha has recently separated from her husband, Kieran, who now spends his evenings cavorting at nightclubs and pursuing women shamelessly. Martha might utter, 'That bachelor is having the time of his life'. Here the context appears to call for the application of an expression that violates the supposed rule but, nonetheless, Martha's utterance is readily intelligible and her use of 'bachelor' appropriate given the circumstances. It seems, therefore, that what controls the use of an expression cannot be a rule.

In my view, examples of this kind are hardly decisive. One could accept the possibility of such a scenario but offer a variety of ways of describing it, all compatible with rulism. Which description is appropriate will depend on the circumstances surrounding each case and how its details are to be fleshed out.

One perspective on the above scenario would be to view (R1) as expressing a norm that holds *ceteris paribus* or 'all things being equal'. This would allow for exceptions to the rule, when circumstances demand (i.e. when all is not equal). In Martha's case, the recent separation from Kieran and his resultant behaviour make this application of 'bachelor' a special case constituting a legitimate exception to the rule.

Regarding proposals of this sort, Dreyfus complains that 'we do not, and could not, spell out what everything else is nor what counts as equal' (1991: 75). This objection is misplaced. Why think that one needs to 'spell out' what the *ceteris paribus* clause allows for? Indeed, it is precisely the role of such a clause to forestall spelling out, and anyone who grasps that it is in place will realise that an indefinite number of appreciable factors might permit exceptions to the rule on a given occasion. Of course, if linguistic rules implicitly or explicitly incorporate *ceteris paribus* clauses, they do not provide definitive guidance with respect to the total use of an expression, but for all that they might provide guidance (and thereby provide the expression with a settled meaning).

A different characterisation of Martha's application of 'bachelor' to Kieran would be to say that though it transgresses the rule for the term's employment, and so does not accord with the expression's meaning, it is nonetheless clear enough given the context *what Martha means*, namely that her husband is having the time of his life by behaving like a bachelor. On this

story, Martha's utterance is incorrect by the lights of the rule governing 'bachelor' but nonetheless in the circumstances she manages to express a thought that is by distinct standards entirely apposite. Moreover, on this account, Martha's expressing the thought she does in this context *exploits* the fact that there is a practice of using 'bachelor' according to (R1); that is, though Martha's meaning what she does on this particular occasion is at odds with the general rule, it is parasitic upon it.

Alternatively, one could do justice to the intuition that Martha's use of 'bachelor' is justified by maintaining that her husband is effectively unmarried (one may apply 'unmarried' to him). In light of Kieran's behaviour one might judge that, certificate notwithstanding, he no longer qualifies as a husband. In view of this, Martha's use of the term accords with the rules governing it. This suggests that the propriety of employing an expression depends not only on what according to the rule is the condition for its correct use but in addition what in the circumstances one would reasonably take to count as satisfying those conditions. I shall return to this later.

Finally, perhaps Martha is best interpreted as tacitly *revising* the standards for the use of the expression 'bachelor' and so (given rulism) as altering how it is to be understood, perhaps to mean *voracious male*. This would be to view her linguistic behaviour as implicitly presenting itself as exemplary, as laying down a precedent for future use. Moreover, there is no barrier to recognising that the new rule her performance institutes is parasitic upon that which we can suppose to have previously been operative.

I have suggested ways available to rulism's defender of characterising a case such as Martha's, each of which might, depending on the circumstances, be the natural one to give and none of which appears particularly strained or ad hoc. The contextualist opponent must provide some reason to think that none could be appropriate.

Consider now the converse kind of case. (R1) might provide guidance as to how to employ 'bachelor' within a limited range of cases, but suppose one is in the situation of deciding whether to apply 'bachelor' to a non-standard or novel case that the rule does not seem to anticipate, such as the Pope. The Pope is an unmarried adult male but, arguably, when describing or referring to him, one would and should not employ the term 'bachelor'. Since competent speakers are able to judge correctly that 'bachelor' is not to be projected into a circumstance with respect to which the rule above provides no suitable guidance, and since one would typically expect a competent speaker to be able to do so, grasp of meaning cannot be founded upon grasp of such a rule.

Once again, however, this sort of example is hardly decisive. One could accept the possibility of such a scenario but offer a variety of ways of describing what is going on, all compatible with rulism (some are similar to those above, and so can be discussed briefly).

One way to accept that this situation might occur while maintaining that there are rules governing the use of 'bachelor' would be, once more, to view the norm expressed by (R1) as holding *ceteris paribus*. The suggestion, then, would be that a case involving the Pope is not one in which all is equal (insofar as he is not eligible for marriage).

Alternatively, one might insist that strictly-speaking, given the rule for its employment, applying 'bachelor' to the Pope *is* correct, though in the circumstances (given the Pope's ineligibility for marriage) one can appreciate why a competent speaker who appreciates not only the meanings of words but the dynamics of communicative exchange would be reluctant to do so. Typically, to apply 'bachelor' to a person would generate an expectation or, in Gricean terms (1989), *conversationally implicate* that the relevant person is eligible for marriage. Learning that the individual is the Pope would frustrate this expectation or clash with the conversational implicature. Hence, though it would not be improper to apply 'bachelor' to the Pope by the lights of the linguistic rule, it might nonetheless, in light of the conversation, be misleading. In short, it is *semantically* right but *pragmatically* wrong.

A further possibility would be to view the decision not to employ 'bachelor' in this instance as implicitly changing the rules to which 'bachelor' is subject, as setting precedent for subsequent applications. Perhaps the rule thereby instituted requires that 'bachelor' be applied only to *eligible* unmarried men. Insofar as this alters the rule to which the use of the term is subject, the meaning changes accordingly.

Finally, adopting a more offensive rather than defensive position, the contextualist needs to provide reason to think that a putative counterexample of the above kind is not just a product of the way the specific example is set up, i.e. the particular rule-formulation offered. Nothing so far suggests that one could not arrive at a more inclusive, and so accurate, specification of a rule that provides for all eventualities, perhaps:

(R1*)   Apply 'bachelor' only to eligible unmarried adult men.

An argument is needed to demonstrate that *in principle* this could not be done, that no matter how much one packs into the rule, it would still not provide for all contexts. It is hard to imagine how one might establish this simply by appeal to examples of rules that lack the required comprehensive coverage. In the absence of such an argument, we have no reason to think that the standards for the use of 'bachelor' (or any other term) are limitlessly open-ended, and thereby inarticulable.

I have suggested ways available to rulism's defender for characterising a case such as that above, each of which might, depending on the circumstances, be the natural one to give and none of which appears particularly strained or ad hoc. The contextualist opponent must provide some reason to think that none would or could be appropriate.

So, the two kinds of example fail to undermine rulism. The contextualist critic needs to show that these cases cannot be described in a way that reveals them to be compatible with the idea that there are rules governing the use of expressions (and that thereby determine their meanings). I suspect that, if the contextualist could adduce these additional considerations, she would *already* have to hand a principled argument against rulism, and hence have no need to proceed via counterexamples. In any case, nothing so far has been done to show it is not possible to articulate rules for the use of expressions that competent speakers grasp.

7.5 Endlessly whirling

Considerations of the above kind do not get to what the contextualist sees as fundamentally problematic about the idea of linguistic rules. Dancy suggests that, ultimately, what rulism's proponent fails to appreciate, with respect to the use of a term, is that

> What determines the rights and wrongs of using this term in that unusual case is at least partly the other features of the case – or the other terms it seems right to use in it.

The point here is not that a rule laying down conditions for correct use might not anticipate all circumstances, but rather that whether those conditions could be said to obtain is *itself* a circumstantial matter. Hence, 'The whole thing whirls on endlessly, without any fixed points' (2004: 196–7).

This line of thought is explicit in Travis:

> A rule imposes a statable condition on doing something [...] A condition may admit of understandings. Where it does, the rule by itself, independent of circumstances for applying it, does not tell us what, or which of several things, to do.

Thus, if there were such a thing as a semantic rule, it would not 'settle correct use' (2000: 212). If so, rules cannot provide guidance with respect to the use of a term, and so a competent speaker's understanding of that term cannot consist in grasp of such a rule.

By way of illustration, consider:

(R2) Apply 'stool' only to items of furniture with no back support designed for sitting on.

Does this rule settle, for any object, whether 'stool' correctly applies to it? Well, it *does* fix the conditions under which 'stool' may apply, namely when an object is an item of furniture with no back support designed for sitting on. However, as the contextualist would rightly point out, whether *those*

conditions obtain – whether in turn one would or should apply 'item of furniture with no back support designed for sitting on' to an object – will depend on other features of the context. Imagine, for example, that one is faced with a log by a campfire. Whether one judges it correct to apply 'stool' to it will depend on whether one considers an item 'furniture' if it is only to be used once, or whether one counts rolling a log into place with one's foot 'designing', which may in turn depend on how carefully the log was selected and moved. Nothing in the rule itself could settle those matters. Thus, whether an expression properly applies depends on features of a context whose obtaining in turn depends on features of a context, and so on 'endlessly'.

One cannot get around this apparent difficulty by insisting on specifying the alleged rules homophonically. Consider:

(R2*) Apply 'stool' only to a stool.

'Stool' as it occurs on the right-hand side of this rule when uttered on a particular occasion might admit of various understandings. Thus, whether or not the condition (R2*) expresses for the correct use of an expression obtains is itself a circumstantial matter.

It is because considerations of this kind apply quite generally to any expression that rulism's contextualist opponent suggests that linguistic competence cannot, at least in most cases, be finitely articulated.

Surely, however, all rulism's advocate need hold is that a rule determines which features of a situation call or allow for the application of an expression. She does not also demand that the rule settle whether *those* features may themselves be said to obtain (although other rules might do so). In the present case, the rule fully determines that, *if* it is appropriate to apply 'item of furniture with no back support designed for sitting on', then it *is* correct to apply 'stool'. The fact that context (rather than the rule in question) determines whether the antecedent of that conditional obtains is entirely consonant with the idea that such a rule is in force and might be articulated.

Consider, as another illustration,

(3) The room is tidy.

If uttered when standing in a teenager's bedroom, (3) might express a truth. If uttered in a room visually indistinguishable but in an expensive hotel, (3) might express a falsehood. If one accepts that these possibilities are genuine, one must accept that 'tidy' does not make an invariant contribution to the contexts in which it appears on each occasion of its use. To this extent, contextualism is correct. But this is entirely compatible with there being a rule that determines the *sort* of contribution 'tidy' makes, by fixing the way in which it is to be employed, say:

(R3)   Apply 'tidy' to something only if it is neat, orderly and uncluttered.

Of course, whether one would say of something that it is neat, orderly and uncluttered – what counts on a certain occasion as according with the rule – will in turn depend on the circumstances. But the proponent of rulism need only hold that the general principle determine the kind of conditions under which an expression applies (and so what kind of contribution it might make); she need and surely would not also hold, excessively, that it determine the exact conditions under which those conditions actually obtain (and so precisely what contribution the term makes), and so on 'endlessly'. If one only asks of a rule that it fulfil the more modest role, to be supplemented by the salient facts of the circumstances, there is no reason to think that it must be inexpressible.

The following consideration was offered in support of the claim that no rule for the use of an expression could be finitely articulated: a rule lays down what is to count as the conditions for the correct application of an expression, but whether those conditions obtain itself depends on context, and so on without limit. But, I responded, laying down under what conditions a certain form of behaviour counts as correct is just what one should expect of a rule; one should not also expect it in turn to provide guidance as to when those conditions are met. Rulism does not require of a given rule, as Dreyfus seems to suppose, that its 'conditions of application are stated in the rule itself' (1991: 75).

7.6   Senseless sense

In this section, I shall introduce a quite distinct argument against the idea that 'by specifying [...] rules one can identify in advance which combinations of words are licensed and which prohibited' (Conant 2001: 52), an argument also invoking contextualist considerations.

According to rulism, general principles determine how expressions are to be employed. I have treated this as one with the idea that one might *violate* such principles, largely because it is hard to understand how there might be correct use without the possibility of incorrect use. However, certain contextualists think that this view commits one to a suspect account of *nonsense* and take this to undermine rulism. Specifically, it appears to lead to the view that it is the *sense* of an uttered expression that is *senseless*! Why this should be so may not be obvious, so I shall spell it out.

Suppose Alex utters:

(4)   That drake is female.

A proponent of rulism might wish to view this as breaching the rules governing 'drake'. One might think that such rules proscribe combining 'drake'

with 'is female' and require that one only apply it to male ducks. It is this diagnosis, to which rulism seems inevitably to lead, that allegedly involves a suspect view of nonsense.

According to Conant, if one thinks that nonsense results when a sentence is 'composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way', one thereby views that sentence as expressing 'a logically incoherent' or 'impossible thought' (1998: 247). In turn, Conant continues, this is to think that the sentence 'has a fully determinate kind of sense but the kind of sense that it has is nonsense' (2001: 23), that there is 'something determinate' that a person '*cannot* mean by his words' (1998: 250), and so, in Witherspoon's words, that nonsense is somehow 'a function of what [a sentence] says' (2000: 324). It goes without saying that this conception of nonsense – as a kind of sense that lacks sense – is nonsensical.

One might wonder, however, why thinking of nonsense as sometimes resulting from expressions used in a way that violates the rules governing them commits one to any such view of nonsense. The line of thought appears to be as follows. In diagnosing Alex's utterance of (4), the proponent of rulism continues to view 'drake' as it occurs on that occasion as being the same word as might typically be used by an English speaker when talking of a male duck, i.e. the word that means *drake* and is (because it is) governed by the rules mentioned above. Hence, that theorist is supposing that we understand what 'drake' means, as employed by Alex, and *because of that*, we can appreciate that it is here being used in a way that violates the rules governing it, that is, can understand that Alex's utterance is nonsensical. But this verdict requires, as Witherspoon says of a similar example, that one 'determine which [meaningful expressions] are in play in the utterance under consideration', which in turn 'requires interpreting her utterance' as a whole and hence attributing some kind of sense to it (2000: 342). In order to ascertain what expressions with what meanings occur one must see how they are being employed in their sentential context, and hence one must find some sense in that context.

Were rulism committed to this account, it would indeed be in trouble. But it is hardly compulsory. In order to determine which expressions with what meanings are occurring in the sentence uttered, one does not have to view that sentence as having a kind of quasi-meaning. Instead, one might simply ask the speaker which expressions she used, or intended to use. Conant tends to dismiss such a move as 'psychologistic' (1998: 231; 2001: 32–3), but this is weak. While certain conceptions of the role that a subject's psychological states play in determining the meanings of the expressions she employs are no doubt suspect, it would be an overreaction, to say the least, to divorce meaning entirely from subject's intentions, and psychological attitudes more generally (cf. Glock 2004: 230).

Witherspoon offers a reason for doubting the availability of a subject's intentions in this instance, on the grounds that one 'cannot specify the goal

which the speaker is trying to reach' (2000: 343) and so the content of her intention. With regard to Alex, one cannot say what Alex is trying to mean in uttering (4) because *ex hypothesi* the rule prevents there being any such meaning.

This observation is correct but its force rests on an unduly restricted account of what the pertinent intention would be. Rather than specify what the speaker means to say, one might merely specify the rule she is intending to follow or subjecting herself to (which might anyway be evident from her behaviour).

The worry informing resistance to this could stem from a perceived internal tension in rulism. Its advocate wants to hold, first, that the relevant rules are constitutive of an expression's meaning and, second, that one can use that expression in a way that violates the rule (from which results nonsense). The first claim, however, appears to preclude the second. If one is not following the rule for the use of an expression, one is not using *that* expression (but just a sign that resembles it).

This, however, involves a misrepresentation of rulism.[7] What is constitutive of the expression's meaning is that in *general* its employment is *governed* by a rule, not that on a *particular* occasion it is employed in *accordance* with the rule. Thus, there is no tension in rulism. 'Drake' as it occurs in (4) is still subject to the pertinent principles, even though so using it fails to meet the standards they impose. One is therefore able to identify the meaning of 'drake' as it occurs in (4), not *per impossible* by making sense of the whole in which it is found, but by determining what rule governs its use (which in this instance is breached).

What seems, ultimately, to be the guiding thought underlying the rejection of the idea that one can determine what expressions occur in a sentence that fails to express anything (and so what rules are operative) by appeal to what expressions the speaker intends to use – or, more fundamentally, what rules she intends to be subject to – is a version of *contextualism*. According to it, a word's meaning consists in its contribution to the expression of a significant proposition, and so a word only has meaning in the context of a meaningful sentence. In turn, a sentence's meaning consists in its contribution to a context of significant activity, and so that sentence only has meaning as used on a particular occasion (Conant 1998: 233; Witherspoon 2000: 323–4). Thus, as Conant remarks, 'one can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of a whole only if the whole has a sense' (2000: 194). For this reason, to think that the expressions that make up (4) are subject to but used in breach of rules is to think that (4) has a certain kind of senseless sense.

The problem with invoking such a version of contextualism in an argument against rulism is that it is simply question-begging. To think that an expression only has a meaning in a particular context is just to think that an expression does not have a context-invariant meaning determined by the

rules for its employment, and so to assume rather than show that rulism is false. Contextualism, of this sort, should be the conclusion of the argument, not among its premises.[8]

In the absence of an independent argument in favour of this version of contextualism, there is no reason to think that endorsing rulism – and its associated idea of violating the rules for the use of expressions – commits one to a suspect view of nonsense. One can determine which expressions, with which meanings, are used in an utterance of a sentence like (4) without purporting to make sense of it, namely by reference to the rules the utterer takes herself to be answerable to.

7.7 Conclusion

I have sought to pursue a conciliatory line, to show how a proponent – like Wittgenstein – of the view that there are meaning-determining rules governing the use of expressions can accommodate the kind of occasion-sensitivity that the contextualist – like Wittgenstein – insists pervades language-use. The specificity of what is expressed in the employment of an expression in particular circumstances is not at odds with the generality of principles. There is, then, no tension in Wittgenstein's apparent readiness to advance both rulism and contextualism.

Maintaining this, however, requires making concessions that might undermine the explanatory ambitions of certain theorists, such as that linguistic rules allow of exceptions or revision, that operating with them requires varying degrees of imagination and judgement, and that they could only be applied by creatures with the appropriate sensitivity to the salient features of a context. Thus, one can consistently agree both with rulists and with contextualists like Dreyfus who reject the idea that understanding could be captured by reference to rules that involve 'no *ceteris paribus* conditions', for which there is no 'question of interpretation involved in their application', and that might be operative 'independently of the awareness of a conscious subject' (1982: 10–12).

Notes

* For comments on earlier versions of this material, I am grateful to Emma Borg, Denis McManus and Genia Schönbaumsfeld.
1. See references to Wittgenstein in: Cavell 1999; Conant 1998; Dreyfus 1991; Luntley 2003; Putnam 1999: 87–8; Recanati 2005; Searle 1983; Travis 1989; Witherspoon 2000. Dancy (2004) does not mention Wittgenstein, although he cites Cavell.
2. For a critical assessment of contextualism, see Cappelen and Lepore 2005.
3. Some, though by no means all, of what follows draws on and builds considerably upon the all-too-brief remarks in Whiting 2007.
4. The first example is Travis's (1989: 18–19).
5. In (2002), Moore seems to lean towards the kind of position I outline here.

6. Cf. 'If we have made sure it's a goldfinch [...] and then in the future it does something outrageous (explodes, quotes Mrs. Woolf, or what not), we don't say we were wrong to say it was a goldfinch, *we don't know what to say*. Words literally fail us' (Austin 1979: 88).
7. In otherwise astute discussions, both Hacker (2003: 16) and Schönbaumsfeld (2007: 107-8) overlook this point.
8. Although not defending rulism as such, Glock (2004: 228-9), Hacker (2003: 19), Schönbaumsfeld (2007: 108) and Sullivan (2002: 45) all note the role contextualism plays in Conant's discussion, and all but Sullivan reject it.

8
Necessity, A Priority and Analyticity: A Wittgensteinian Perspective

Hans-Johann Glock

A priori knowledge as defined by Kant is independent of experience not as regards its origins but as regards its *validity*. It need not be innate, yet it can be shown to be true without any appeal to sensory experience, whether it be through observation or controlled experiment. The question of whether such a priori knowledge is possible has always been a central topic of philosophy. One reason for this prominent role is metaphilosophical. From Plato onwards, philosophy has been widely regarded as an a priori discipline, along with logic and mathematics. It aspires to establishing necessary truths, truths that could not fail to be true. Statements like '$g = 9.81$ m/sec^2' or 'Radioactivity causes cancer' may be physically necessary. Their denial may be incompatible with the laws of nature, but it is not contradictory. By contrast, it seems that statements like '$\sim(p \ \& \ \sim p)$', '$2 + 2 = 4$' and 'All material objects are located in space' are necessary in a stronger sense. They must be true, it seems, no matter what the world and the laws of nature are like, since their denial is in some way contradictory. By the same token, precisely because these truths are independent of how the world happens to be, they appear to be knowable independently of ascertaining how the world happens to be.

This rationalist picture has intermittently been attacked by empiricists. Radical empiricists claim that all truths are contingent and that all knowledge must be based on experience – even that of apparently a priori disciplines like logic, mathematics and metaphysics. Thus according to Mill, the truths of mathematics are in effect well-supported inductive generalizations. As Frege pointed out (1959: §§7–10), this is dubious, since it makes the truths of pure mathematics depend on contingent physical facts. Wittgenstein shared this anti-empiricist stance. Thus he rejected Russell's logicism partly because the latter relies on assumptions like the axiom of infinity which are at best contingently true (*TLP* §§5.535, 5.55, 6.1232-3; *PR* 167; *RFM* §§283, 400). Furthermore, he not only distinguished philosophy sharply from empirical science, but also stated explicitly that it is a priori (*LWL* 79–80).

Whereas Frege's alternative to empiricism consisted in a sophisticated, contextualist form of Platonism, Wittgenstein from the start explained logic,