

## *Philosophy and Language Learning*

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### **1. Introduction**

Wonder is often recognized as the source of philosophy. What kind of things do we wonder at? Sunsets, the universe, the complexity of life, but also the speed and depth with which children learn to speak. Our language is infinitely complex, yet a normal child will learn to master important parts of this intricacy in a couple of months and large parts of it in a couple of years. The depth of this acquisition is astonishing: it transforms their whole being. And the sheer speed is beyond belief: a concept is a complicated structure, yet a child can learn several a day in the most intensive period. They hear a word being used a time or two – and they understand what it means. *How is that possible?*

At this point, if we continue the reflection that wonder has started off, we slide into philosophy. Wonder freezes to perplexity; the lines of thought opened by wonder are sedimented into seemingly impossible structures; it is as though children learn to speak on the basis of far too little. The input seems incredibly poor compared to the output: take almost any concept, our explanations are quite patchy, little more than gestures, and the applications children are exposed to amount to a tiny fraction of those possible. All they see is a fragment of the concept. Yet they learn. *How is that possible?* This question, which was previously an expression of awe (“Isn’t it amazing!”), is now said in a strained tone of voice (“I don’t understand!”). A gap has opened up in front of us, right in the heart of an ordinary phenomenon, between what children have to go on and what comes out of it, between teaching and learning.

This is the beginning of a sceptical doubt concerning language and language learning, one variant of which, Saul Kripke's, will be examined in the first section of this paper. Afterwards, we shall probe the philosophical theory of language acquisition that *seems* the most promising to fend off this doubt. Towards the end, though, we shall ask whether both these paths perhaps start out from an illusion.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Learning as Luck

A natural story of meaning and understanding goes like this. The meaning of a word is given by a rule for its use. Upon learning a new word, we are shown some examples of its use, and from these examples we grasp the underlying rule. The rule enables us to proceed from the finite number of uses we have been shown to being able to employ the word ourselves in other situations. In short, grasping the rule enables us to continue on our own, yet still in the same way as others. The rule, which underlies or is embodied in particular uses, determines or specifies future uses of the word so that an application of a concept *follows* from or is *governed* by the rule, which is what allows us to say that the underlying rule *justifies* the use and that some uses are correct and others incorrect. Now there may be different interpretations of the word "rule" here, in particular concerning whether the rules are strict or flexible, but that some story like this is true seems necessary in order for meaning and understanding to be possible at all.

And yet Kripke takes Wittgenstein to have proven this picture incoherent (Kripke, 1982). There is a sceptical paradox buried in its heart. For each word there are *infinitely many incompatible rules compatible with any finite set of examples*, and there is no fact that determines which of these rules is relied upon in any particular set of applications, because each such candidate fact is either of the wrong type, as in a dispositionalist analysis of meaning, or itself liable to being interpreted in indefinitely

many ways, as for instance some kind of mental item (representation, concept, understanding, or image). Accordingly, if there is no fact about which rule to extrapolate from a set of applications, then neither is there any fact about the *meaning* of words – nothing governs or guides my applications. Hence, there is no scope for a distinction between changing the meaning of a word (use it in a different sense) and agreeing with its meaning (using it in the same sense). Neither is there any scope for a distinction between correct and incorrect applications. Anything I say is consistent with the meaning of the word, which only implies that there is no such thing as consistency and meaning.

What picture of language learning emerges from this scepticism? Something like this: children hear a word being used a couple of times, and after a while they use the word themselves, in roughly the same contexts as we want them to be used. What the sceptic suggests is that this is *all there is*. More specifically, there is nothing in or beneath particular utterances that the child grasps and that fixes right and wrong ways to continue. Hence, we cannot justify our own use, whether to ourselves or to others. It follows that there is a certain sense in which we cannot even *explain* to the child how the word is to be used. Imagine you are visiting an alien tribe: they speak, you look baffled, and then they begin talking s-l-o-w-l-y and c-l-e-a-r-l-y, as though they try to explain their words in their own language. Now that is what even our clearest explanations are like: just more of the same. If we are lucky, children get what we call the point and do as we want them to, and, fortunately, they normally and eventually do, perhaps after some gesticulation on our part, but it is still merely a matter of luck.

Imagine a little child that seems to have learnt the meaning of the word “kitty.” Often when a cat comes by or she sees a picture of a cat in a book, she smiles and says something we recognize as “kitty.” But then something happens:

Now take the day, some weeks later, when she smiled at a fur piece, stroked it, and said “kitty.” My first reaction was surprise, and, I suppose, disappointment: she doesn’t really know what “kitty” means. But my second reaction was happier: she means by “kitty” what I mean by “fur.” Or was it what I mean by “soft,” or perhaps “nice to stroke”?<sup>ii</sup>

Most parents have experienced similar things. It does not look too problematic. The child simply did not understand the word; we thought she did, but were proven wrong. There might be other words that our children seem to understand but that they really do not. As the example demonstrates, though, their misunderstanding will sooner or later surface. Isn’t that fairly straightforward? In a sceptical mood, though, we are unsettled by such an episode. We realize that it is no more than what was to be expected. Then we feel paralysed by a certain *powerlessness*: there is nothing we can do. Nothing? Well, I may try to “explain,” point to a few more kitty-pictures, tell her that kitties are alive, that they move, and so forth. The child may nod eagerly and seem to get the point, but the next day it is “kitty” at the fur piece again. What can I do? In the end, nothing. I cannot *force* the meaning of the word into her.

If the child is to acquire language, it must make that leap from learning-contexts to new contexts. There are infinitely many incompatible rules compatible with the examples the child is shown, and there are infinitely many ways of interpreting each explanation we give her, all of them “correct.” Yet she does, most of the time, go on as we want her to. It is pure luck, bordering on the mysterious. We have no *reason* to

believe that children will continue the way we do; all we can do is hope that they will. The philosophical import of Cavell's example is that it reminds us that our luck may run out. When we initiate a new human being into language, there is an abyss under us. As by magic, we fly, but now the spell has been broken – any time now, we will fall.

We said that the child normally does continue in the right way, that is, in *our* way. Couldn't we rest content with that? Perhaps, was it not for the sneaking suspicion that the like-mindedness that uniform use indicates actually is a chimera. Cavell's child called the fur piece a "kitty" – what if she had not noticed the fur piece? What if she was *never* exposed to fur pieces? All we would have seen then was the child producing "kitty" only in the right contexts; we would live in the happy belief that her inclinations did correspond to ours, that she was one of us. We would never have discovered her waywardness. So it is not just that she is exposed to mere fragments of our language, out of which she is supposed to learn a complete language. I am only exposed to fragments of *her* language. Who knows what she would have said if she had only been exposed to other contexts than those we actually come across? Perhaps all sorts of wild things would have come out of her mouth! And if she would have called a live elephant a "table" if she came upon one, then I have to say that she really does not know the meaning of "table." I could show her an elephant and test her, but I cannot test everything. Reflecting on this possibility, we become unable to rest in the hands of our trust in the inclinations of others. As though anytime now, our inclinations may disperse. Anytime now, our children may stop going our way. And we would be powerless to prevent it; inclinations are immune to reason. I could not even prove to myself that the child would be the one going astray – we would all be astray.

### 3. Community Control

Kripke is not a sceptic. Although he accepts the conclusion that there are no meaning-constitutive facts, he thinks that this cannot be the whole story, since we do in fact have a language. But how can meaning-attributions like “I mean” and “He means” be meaningful without there being any fact that they correspond to?

As long as we consider the individual in isolation, argues Kripke, we will not be able to distinguish between the right way and what only *seems* to be the right way, a contrast that appears necessary to our concept of meaning. An individual cannot justify his confidence that his way is the right way (that *that* is a cat, that *that* is an excuse, that *this* is pain, and so forth). Yet the situation is completely different as regards *third person* meaning-ascriptions. A parent or teacher will not accept just any way children handle words. However, what do we mean when we declare the child wrong? We cannot mean that some fact is missing, say, a mental representation or some piece of behaviour, because what she said, whatever she said, can always be made to accord with some interpretation of what we have said. The only thing we *can* mean is, simply and starkly, that she did not say what we are inclined to say. She is wrong, because I, her parent and teacher, would not have said what she says – that’s all.

In principle, the same goes for all speakers: I say that someone is wrong or have misunderstood a word if it is contrary to *my* linguistic leanings. Yet the other need not accept my authority; he may be inclined otherwise. If such differences were widespread enough, language could not exist. Fortunately, we are fairly uniform in conceptual inclinations. In practice, therefore, the community distinguishes between right and wrong applications. “The right way to go on” means “the way *we* go on.” Thus, the community saves the philosopher from scepticism and the speaker from emptiness.

This is critical to the child's way into language. If a child does not apply a word like *we* would be inclined to, her sounds are without sense. If she continues to go on in deviant ways, she is deemed a deviant, even a mystery. And the unfortunate child that just does not get it is powerless to help herself. She cannot *figure out* what concept we are aiming at with our examples or what she is supposed to do upon seeing a pointing finger, not because she is stupid but because reasoning will not help her: meanings cannot be figured out, that is what this scepticism amounts to. All she can do is *guess*, and if she's wrong, then bad luck. In fact, from the point of view of reason, all anyone can ever do is guess. So it is as though the poor child will have to guess what we guess.

Conversely, if the child produces the right word in the right contexts frequently enough, we take her up into our community. She is now one of us, a speaker of our language. And that is all there is; the philosopher can say no more. Yet what about explanation, correction, and instruction? Well, in order to grasp any attempt at instruction, which in itself is in accordance with infinitely many incompatible interpretations, the child must react to it in the desired manner, so in the end all we can say is: either she gets it or she does not. In other words, the child does not react correctly because she understands; rather, we say she understands because she has the right reactions. So for the child, *we* are the masters of meaning. Learning a language is in a very deep sense, indeed, the deepest sense possible, to be *socialized*.

In the film "Wordplay" we meet a man getting up one morning and slowly discovering that words seem to have changed places during night (Craven, 1985). For instance, his colleagues say "dinosaur" instead of "lunch," and when he looks baffled at them, they look baffled at him. Feeling that he is losing his sense of sense, he desperately asks his wife what "lunch" means. She gets scared – why, it is a colour, of

course! Soon, language turns into pure Babel; more and more words suffer a radical change of meaning. Or so it seems to him. For the others, all is normal.

The point is not that something like this might happen – that would amount to Humean scepticism about the future. The point is that *if* it happened, reason would have to bend – therein consists both its tragic and its comic effect. For, according to Kripke, unless the man’s family and colleagues are corrected by a wider society, we cannot even say that the meaning of “dinosaur” has *changed*. When the man asks, in despair, why everyone talks weirdly, they look at him as though he was the weird one. And he is – intelligibility demands keeping up with the others. He will have to start all over again, like a child.

#### **4. Second Nature**

There is something both evident and disturbing about this scepticism. Evident, because *of course* we have to employ words in roughly the same ways if we are to understand each other. This truism becomes disquieting, however, when it is supposed to be all there is to language, when the brute fact of the community’s inclinations becomes the sole standard. How can we get out of this quandary, keeping the importance of community while avoiding its dictatorship? A promising family of theories is social pragmatism. Unfortunately, they do not deliver what we need.<sup>iii</sup>

Social pragmatism will often agree with at least one feature of Kripke’s sceptical solution: as regards meaning and language, the community is the source of normativity. One can only distinguish between correct and incorrect applications on the grounds of a possible discrepancy between the individual speaker and the community. Yet the pragmatic aspect of this theory produces an emphasis not on shared interpretations and inclinations, but on shared *actions*. Furthermore, meaning is not only social, but also



holistic. Sounds are words only as part of social traditions, and to understand them is to know how to employ them in social contexts. So Kripke was right in considering conformity essential to language but wrong in treating the conformity as mental and atomistic, something achievable in an instant harmony of inclinations.

Language, the social pragmatist argues, presupposes a background against which a sign becomes meaningful, and any explanation presupposes this stage-setting (cf. PI, §257). Importantly, though, the background does not consist in an implicit theory or set of beliefs, but in elementary skills. One such skill is the ability to see which similarities are relevant for various concepts, because this is what makes a speaker able to apply a word in different contexts without being taught an *explicit* rule. Indeed, as the sceptic shows, even a precise and explicit rule for each concept would not make such a sense of similarities redundant. So what the sceptic unknowingly demonstrates is that knowledge of language is not theoretical but practical: we rely on skills, not interpretations. Yet the sceptic's oversight is quite natural, because as these skills are mastered, they recede into the background, into unobtrusive obviousness, as though they slowly grow into our body. Paradoxically, the sceptical argument helps us to notice this, by proving that the mind alone cannot take us all the way into language. Language is a corporal art form – like writing, walking, and, indeed, like *talking*.

This pragmatism is given a distinctive twist by Meredith Williams, who pays particular attention to language learning (Williams, 1999, pp. 157-187). According to her, community verdicts account for one aspect of normativity, namely, the possibility of an application being correct or incorrect. However, it is the process of learning that explains the other dimension of normativity, that the current application *follows* from the former. More specifically, the connection between rule and action is to be found in

*training*. This process is closer to the behaviourist notion of conditioning than it is to the cognitivist idea of interpretation, as it does not involve a circular imputing of conceptual capacities to the child. Through training, children acquire the mastery of bedrock techniques that the complex edifice of language is built upon.

Importantly, this training is devoid of intellectual content: it is a purely practical skill. That is why the sceptical doubt cannot get a foothold here; the regress of interpretation is blocked by a way of responding to instruction that is not a kind of interpretation (cf. PI, §201). Indeed, acquisition of language *could* not occur if the child had to decipher the instructor's words and gestures – that is the truth of the sceptical argument. Only by following the instruction as *a matter of course* can the child succeed; only blind obedience can initiate it into language. Through this training, argues Williams, we come to share a sense for which similarities are relevant for classification, and “sense” is exactly the right word here: the right way to go on with a concept seems so evident and so obvious that we feel it is not conventional (which it is) but natural. Thus, to learn a language is to form a *second nature*.<sup>iv</sup> So even if it is, as Kripke says, the community that decides which applications are correct use of language, that community is not an external force: a master of language has internalized his culture so that is now his nature. I am, that is to say, part of the community that Kripke is appealing to. For the *child*, though, the community is a Kripkean community, an external authority judging her, personified in her parents.

## **5. Meaning as Meaning**

Much of what social pragmatism says is true. There is only one problem: it does not answer the sceptic. Indeed, the sceptic should agree to most of it. However, he would add one thing, for him the all-important fact: by penetrating beneath what we say and

do, we have discovered that all this is groundless. Our second nature is *merely* the way things seem or feel; training is at best a *causal* explanation for our sense of similarities. A criticism of scepticism, therefore, will have to go deeper. Informed by Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, I shall now present a view of language and language learning that does go deeper, though it is a depth that might seem even more superficial to the sceptic than social pragmatism. If I achieve my aim, though, the following sections will induce a kind of vertigo to upset our sense of philosophical depth.

### 5.1. *Form of Life*

In a sense children learn so much *less* than we think they do when they learn to speak. Consider the child who, as we say, knows the word "apple." A dictionary tells us "apple" means "the round fruit of a tree of the rose family, which typically has thin green or red skin and crisp flesh. Many varieties have been developed as dessert or cooking fruit or for making cider."<sup>v</sup> The child, though, knows nothing of fruits, ciders, and families of trees, nor much about growth, plants, and the workings of the soil and the sun. All she does is to make the sound "apple" when an apple is at hand. Does she know the meaning of "apple"? Or if it is of the essence of play that it contrasts with work, then how can a child know what "play" means when it has no idea what "work" means? Examples abound.

Obviously, I am not teaching a two-year-old the meaning of "philosophy" by pointing to the letters in my book while saying, however slowly and clearly, "p-h-i-l-o-s-o-p-h-y." That word is ahead of her. She is not ready yet. Is she is ever ready? Reflecting on the examples above we might wonder if all words are like this for the child learning language, forever in the future (are they ever different to us?) As though for those halflings halfway into language there are no words.

In another sense, though, children learn so much *more* than we think they do. The range of what they acquire is unbounded. When they learn the meaning of “apple,” “daddy,” and “cat,” they also begin to understand what words, foods, animals, parents, and humans are. When they learn the meaning of “yesterday,” they begin to know what time is, what memory is, what telling stories is, and so forth. At first, all this is ahead of them. Nevertheless, after some growing, some learning, and some living, they catch up with their words, owning them the way we do, if we do.

To acquire a word is to acquire all sorts of things, and out of these “all sorts of things” one cannot extract *the* meaning, regardless of whether we conceive of it in mental or practical terms. When we both know the meaning of a word, there is not *some-thing* we both have, some determinate thing that constitutes the understanding, unless that simply means that we have both learnt the word. Importantly, though, neither do we possess two *different* somethings: meaning is not a something, but it is not a nothing either (cf. PI, §304). Wittgenstein’s point about use is not primarily about the practical nature of language but a far more elementary one, namely, that meaning is established *in* the use of language, *in* the life with language, not by anything *under* or *over* that use. It is as though we imagine that what we say itself cannot be meaningful and that the meaning must be something else, like an idea or a technique, as though these were more inherently meaningful than the words themselves. But when speaking itself is no longer felt to be capable of sustaining meaning, then nothing else will satisfy us either.

This is not to deny that there are conditions for ascriptions of meaning and understanding. Yet what conditions there are for an utterance to be meaningful is itself a matter of the particular situation we are in. My daughter once said to her little brother

that he could “borrow” a certain coveted toy, but after five seconds she took it back. I told her that that is not to “borrow” anyone anything and that one must let the other keep the thing for at least some minutes. Assuming that this is correct, I have formulated a criterion for a concept, yet criteria are at once more and less than a rule. “Borrowing means that he can keep it for at least some minutes” is not true as a rule: if it is a car, some minutes are not enough, but if it is a toy, some days are too much, at least for children. On the other hand, a strictly general rule, if we had one, would be hopeless as a means of initiating anyone into language, as its complexity would outgrow our comprehension. So there are criteria for how words are used, but they cannot be isolated from particular contexts in which some issue is addressed.

The view of language negatively expressed by the formula “There is no such thing as *the meaning* of a word” is positively expressed by the concept of a form of life. An adult learning a second language may very well be said to be learning the meaning of words, inasmuch as all the elementary concepts constituting the human form of life are already there from their first language. A child learning language, though, is learning far more than words, or, rather, learning words is to become part of the world that makes these words into what they are. In the end, nothing more or less can be said.

Nobody would deny that acquiring *some* concepts (e.g. coronation, rent, or marriage) is a matter of learning how to participate in some section of our particular culture, in which the application of key concepts is strictly governed by rules, though not strictly enough for a Kripkean sceptic. Yet are these concepts what the philosopher is attracted to? No, he is attracted to far more basic kinds of words and speech acts: pointing and promising, thinking and willing, things and properties, and so forth. It is the acquisition of these concepts (and activities) we take interest in when we are

interested in language learning in philosophy, not words that presuppose that the learner already knows a language.

Consider pointing. Can we imagine human beings that do not point, do not understand pointing, and cannot be made to understand pointing either? We can imagine people pointing without the use of the index finger, say, with their fist or with a nod of the head. But that would still be pointing. Yet to imagine human beings who do not point *at all* I cannot do. I can imagine non-pointing beings that *look like* human beings, but then I would have to imagine them without language and without humanity. As Cavell says about Wittgenstein's builders, "I imagine them moving sluggishly, as if dull-witted, or uncomprehending, like cave men," or like "robots, or men hypnotized" (Cavell, 1996, p. 278). In short, I imagine them as *inhuman*.

On Kripke's view of language, there are no constraints on application other than community verdict, which is a mere aggregate of individual inclinations. Hence, if we are inclined to, we could apply "kitty" to kitties *and* fur pieces. Yet Kripke appears to regard inclinations as arbitrary, as contractions of pure will, something we can have or not have independent of what else goes on in and around our lives. An inclination, however, is itself part of a life. Can we imagine a community that is "inclined" to use the same word for kitties and fur pieces? Of course, the word "kitty" might be ambivalent or homonymous, but that is not the issue. Can we imagine that these people are following *the same rule* in applying "kitty" to kitties and fur pieces? Can we imagine that "kitty" is used *in the same sense* for both and only kitties and fur pieces? It is this possibility that Kripke implies is as rational and as arbitrary as any other pattern of application. Yet do we understand such a possibility? If their community has ruled that going from kitties to fur pieces is the right way to go on with the word "kitty," then

we must presume that they do not see any significant differences between kitties and fur pieces. If so, what concept of animal would such people have? Perhaps one very different from ours. And if so, what concept would they have of life? Again, perhaps one very different from ours. Yet everything cannot be just different. There are limits to what conceptual differences we can imagine if what we are imagining is to be human beings with a human language. Thinking the kitty-fur case through, we may feel that too many things would have to be different for us to be able to recognize these creatures as fellow human beings.<sup>vi</sup>

In “Declining Decline,” Cavell distinguishes two ways of accentuating Wittgenstein’s concept of a form of life (Cavell, 1989, pp. 41-44). The first, represented by both Kripke and Williams, emphasizes the *social* nature of language. Thus, the concept of life-form duplicates the concept of culture and leads to a view of language acquisition as essentially a process of acculturation or socialization. Now perhaps the social nature of language was, once upon a time, important to remark upon in philosophy. Regrettably, though, it has come to eclipse the other side of Wittgenstein’s concept, one closer to the ground, namely, the *natural*.

In this second sense, the concept of life-form is meant to draw attention to “The common behaviour of mankind” (PI, §206). That is why Wittgenstein sometimes likened his philosophy to natural history. Here the implied contrast is not between our culture and other cultures but between the human and the inhuman, that is, between people and gods, angels, aliens, machines, monsters, and animals. Thus, when Wittgenstein summons us to accept our form of life, he is not being conservative or relativist but reminds us that *this* is the way humans promise, tell stories, react to pain, follow a rule, and so on, and that “this” is something we can in the end only accept, not

explain in the sense of justify. Indeed, speaking is itself one of those general facts of human nature that make us the creatures we are. Hence, learning language, which is just as much a growing into language, is an articulation, modification, and transformation of the natural reactions of the human child. Learning language is not to replace nature with culture, but to develop humanity in natural ways.

### 5.2. *Plasticity*

The social-pragmatic insistence on the socio-cultural foundation of meaning turns fateful when combined with the emphasis on automatized habits implicit in the concept of second nature. Great theoretical cunning is then called for to avoid a cultural relativism grave in ethical and political consequences. Moreover, it fails to account for one of the most salient features of words, their *plasticity*, blatant in poetry but apparent even in ordinary speech. To learn a language is also to learn how to disobey that language – to develop a sense for how and when to transgress it.

It is evident that the ability to wrench words free from the context in which they are acquired is essential to language learning. Yet it is not as though the child does this once and for all for each concept. No speaker is ever done with the task of applying words in new contexts.

[If] there are always new contexts to be met, new needs, new relationships, new objects, new perceptions to be recorded and shared, then perhaps it is as true of a master of language as of his apprentice that though “in a sense” we learn the meaning of words and what objects are, the learning is never over ... The “routes of initiation” are never closed (CR, p. 180).



Incredibly, it is easy to forget that language exists in time. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, we create rules of language backwards, but speak forwards. We change and our world change: the aspects that strike us and seem worth remarking on may enter into constellations not seen before. If words are to keep up with the world and our position in it, which they are not always doing, yet must do to some extent if they are to constitute a language, they must be plastic. I do not have to imagine new technologies or declare the mantra that “no two contexts are exactly alike” in order to appreciate this fact about our lives as speakers. I only have to remind myself that a context is *open*. It is not given what context I am in and what alternatives I have for interpreting it. I have to work it out. Which means: I will have to speak – language will not do it for me.

Readers of Wittgenstein have long insisted on the limitations of grounding meaning in a relation between word and object. Even so, it is of limited use to replace objects with contexts, especially if one treats contexts as though they were objects. The idea of rules connecting words with contexts presupposes that contexts are delivered to us in a manageable number of definite kinds, recurring day in and day out like the rooms in our house and the spaces of our city. Williams states concerning the master of language: “[The] social context is what makes his actions and judgements what they are” (Williams, 1999, p. 179). What is wrong with this view, however, is that it ignores that meaningful actions and judgements determine which context we are in. Consequently, the concept of context is not able to serve as a general explanation of the concept of meaning; no rules correlating sounds with contexts can constitute meaning, for contexts are not given independently of what is said. Certainly, features of the context can often serve to elucidate the meaning of particular utterances, but as soon as

context is sublimated into an independent source of meaning conferring sense on sounds, we are fantasizing.

In the film *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays the role of a man whose fate it is to relive the same boring day over and over again (Ramis, 1993). Nothing is new; the very same situations turn up each day. At first, he rejoices: in such a world he is not responsible. He can say and do whatever he wants. Inconsequentiality, though, leads to indifference: it does not matter what he is saying and doing. After going through the same day for years, he has been trained to come out with precisely the right words, each utterance tailored to its context. He has learned the rules and is now able to apply words blindly. Yet he is slightly bored with his own words and other people's reactions to them – they are so obvious. It is tempting to say that he is not really *speaking*. It is as though some knowledge of the rules is speaking through him. Indeed, the next stage of his development would simply be silence. Yet this is a world in which language has become second nature, a world in which Meredith Williams is right, which indicates why a second nature would soon turn my nature into that of a speechless creature. However, even in an eternal groundhog day language cannot completely become second nature. Murray's art cannot be perfected, because he himself changes. Even here he is not released from the burden of speaking himself, of himself.

A child is taught the word "alone." Later, it learns that one can be said to "feel alone" even when together with other people. To learn as much, it will have to see that the second use is connected to the first, but also that they differ, perhaps even how they differ. Learning language is to grasp such connections, and not just backwards, with regard to already established use, but forwards, grasping them as they are introduced, occasionally even extending words oneself this way. We use expressions like "feed the

kitty” and “feed the swans,” and then “one day one of us says “feed the meter” ... and we understand, we are not troubled” (CR, p. 181). This is what Cavell calls to *project* a word, and similar things happen all the time. And even if the two expressions are said to have different meanings (so that one can maintain that a rule must exist for *each* of these two meanings, though not a single rule that covers both), the child will still have to work *that* out. Words do not come labelled with numbers in front of them like in dictionaries, signifying what sense it is used in. And though nobody has denied that words can have different meanings, it is easy to underestimate the philosophical importance of the fact that words are continuously projected. Yet facing examples like the one above, it is hard to see how any rule, or any *anything*, can prescribe projection so that when we possess this item, understanding is guaranteed. Nonetheless, we manage quite well without such an item.

Many projections are so obvious that they hardly count as projections at all, such as the use of “chair” of a new design of chair. Other applications break with the expected directions of projection. Of these, some are accepted so as to become established usage; others will be taken as a gesture, meaningful only in the moment; and still others will fall to the ground – they didn’t make sense. Yet who is to decide what makes sense? It feels awkward to say that anyone “decides” such a thing. It often happens that I *want* to understand something, say, a joke or a poem, but I cannot *decide* to do so. But if everyone agrees that some utterance is senseless, do they not decide that it *is* senseless? I find that awkward, too. What does the latter part, “decide that it is senseless,” add to the first, “everyone agrees that some utterance is senseless”? Nothing. And no matter how much we agree, some future being or people may find it senseless. Then we are left with this: our senses of sense are not in agreement. And there is no

court above or ground below to settle the matter. Kripke seems captivated by the idea that there must be something that determines what *really* makes sense, something above or below our actual ways of agreeing and disagreeing, whereas there neither must be nor is such a something.

### 5.3. *The Ground of Scepticism*

All agree that children do not usually learn words by being told explicit rules. For the most part, they just drift more or less painlessly into language. Nonetheless, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something like rules *must* lie underneath or be implicit in our use of language and that these rules are what we attempt to articulate when we explain children how words are to be used. Yet when we have this idea of rules as subterranean determinates of meaning, it seems as though our explanations only *hint* at the real rules, as though even the best rule is not really a rule and that even the best explanation is close to nothing compared to the infinite complexity of use. In the voice of the interlocutor of the *Investigations*, "But do you really explain to the other person what you yourself understand? Don't you get him to guess the essential thing? You give him examples, - but he has to guess their drift, to guess your intention" (PI, §210).

However, what comparison do we have in mind when we feel that explanations are but frail gestures? Certainly, compared to the precise and elaborate explanations of the best dictionaries, our ordinary methods for teaching children words are nothing but hints. Yet although *this* contrast may stir one to wonder about the marvellous linguistic capacity of children, it does not create the feeling of impossibility that characterizes philosophical confusion. This contrast is not what one has in mind when staring into the pit of philosophy, because in that frame of mind even the best dictionary will seem insufficient and indeterminate. The comparison we have in mind in philosophy, rather,

is nothing less than an equivalent of the infinitely many ways in which a concept can be adequately used, the possession of which would *insure* correct application. We want, for each word, something that yields everything that can be said by the word. Compared to this “something,” we feel, the teacher’s examples are but gestures towards the unspeakable content that the child is to grasp.

I show the child some examples and add, “Now you go on in the same way.” It is this “in the same way” that poses all the problems. Somehow the *real* understanding, in its infinite complexity, is hidden in this locution. No matter how intricate and complex my explanations are, I will have to affix the elusive “go on in the same way,” which in the grip of philosophy seems far too open, far too loose, almost irresponsible. It is as though I am frustrated by the fact that I, the teacher or parent, cannot *force* the meaning of the word into the child, as though I were afraid that if I leave anything up to her, we are in danger of losing everything. That is why I crave the eradication of the “in the same way.” Is this the anxiety expressed by Kripkean scepticism?

Yet what do *I* mean by “in the same way”? Does the teacher know anything more than the child? *What* is it I know and that I want to transmit to the child? And now the dialogue continues in a familiar way: I want the child to grasp the underlying rule – what rule? – the rule that she is to add 2 – what does this rule tell me to do? – to begin with 2, 4, 6, 8, and then to go on in the same way ... But then it dawns upon me that I am in no better position myself: “Have I got more than I give in the explanation? ... Any explanation which I can give myself I give him too” (PI, §209-§210). In the end, I must not only employ examples to show the *child* how the word is being used but also to show it to *myself*. Yet when I do philosophy, examples, no matter how many and no

matter how good, are felt to be less than what I mean. Then what do I mean? Examples again. As though I must gesticulate inwards to explain to myself what I mean.

In fact, Kripke misses the insight that his scepticism contains. He even sees the crucial thing, namely, that I can only give examples to myself. Yet he then feels that the concept of meaning vanishes into air, instead of seeing that it is the *gap* that vanishes. If I can only give examples to show myself what I mean, I am no longer able to say what this gap actually consists in, nor what a bridge is supposed to do. Consequently, it is no longer clear what it means to say that there is no bridge. The sceptic is like a man walking in the desert and exclaiming, in despair, “There is no bridge here!” – what does he mean? And now to start looking for a bridge, like the anti-sceptic is doing, is not the way to restore sanity. The solution is to see how our words are hollowed out when we try to say what this gap amounts to, how we can only gesture towards “it,” and how the impression of philosophical depth in this frantic gesturing is, in fact, a void.

Questions like “How can past use *govern* future use?”, “How can a child come to *understand* what a word means?”, or “How can a child know what a smile *means*?” may seem like perfectly adequate questions, yet they are void of any clear sense, as we do not know what a justification would look like here. Solemnly declaring that such things are unjustifiable is, therefore, just as hollow as declaring them to be on a firm foundation. The absence of foundations does not mean that we are suspended in midair.<sup>vii</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

We have now investigated three pictures of language learning. They have in common a cramped attitude to the relation between the individual (the learning child) and the community (usually represented by the parents). Kripkean scepticism presented the

language learner in a situation of total freedom or total void. The Kripkean sceptical solution presented the language learner as in a situation of total submission to an external authority. What I called “social pragmatism” presented the language learner as in a situation of total submission to an internalized external authority. All these pictures force us to choose between total freedom and total submission. The reason is that they cling to the idea of some ground that determines meaning, whether they affirm or deny its existence. When we overcome that idea of ground, we will see what should have been obvious from the start, namely, that meaning is created in a complex interplay between individual and community, which is not to be resolved by granting final authority to any of them. For as regards meaning, there is no final authority. That is why the child is a producer as well as a receiver of meaning, and also why there is a sense in which we are all like children in relation to our language, continuously learning it.

Although the learning of language in early childhood is by itself one of the most perplexing philosophical subjects, I do believe that what we have achieved in this essay has a significance that extends more widely in the philosophy of education. I will mention two such ramifications. First, it is only too easy when we philosophize to find oneself in a position where we feel compelled to choose between individual or society (or humanity as such) as the ultimate determiner of meaning, validity, or value. For instance, is education a matter of individual self-realization or of initiation into a culture? At the outset, we might have liked to answer that it is both, but in philosophy we often paint ourselves into a corner where that option is excluded. Second, it is equally easy when we philosophize to find oneself in a position where some crucial concept becomes problematic to the degree that we feel it must really be something else (“All education is really only indoctrination”). It will not do then to deny bluntly the

strange statement that the philosopher is attracted to. In both these cases, philosophical work is required to dissolve the illusions beneath the “intellectual cramps.” We will have to work ourselves back into a position where it is possible to keep the different aspects in view simultaneously and to do the phenomena justice. Hopefully, this essay has exemplified a way of doing that.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> “PI” followed by paragraph number for Part I and page number for Part II will throughout refer to *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> (Cavell, 1979, p. 172). This work, *The Claim of Reason*, will be abbreviated as “CR.” Cavell’s own interpretation of the quoted example is importantly different.

<sup>iii</sup> Versions of social pragmatism are quite influential in commentaries on Wittgenstein. In the following, Meredith Williams will be the figurehead of this kind of reading, as her interest in language learning is especially pertinent to my concerns (Williams, 1999, Part II).

<sup>iv</sup> Williams’ strategy here is akin to that of John McDowell (McDowell, 1996, pp. 94-95).

<sup>v</sup> *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (McKean, 2005).

<sup>vi</sup> I am not saying that we cannot imagine such people; if we met them, we would perhaps succeed in understanding how this synthesis of “kitty” and “fur” fitted into their lives. Perhaps kitties had some special ceremonial function in relation to the flaying of animals.

<sup>vii</sup> I suspect that this is a quote, but I have not been able to find the source. Yet since that is typical of speaking as such, it will perhaps be excused in a text on language learning.

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