USE AND MEANING

ERNEST GELLNER

THERE is a tendency among some modern philosophers, mainly among those influenced, I suppose, by some of the views of Professors G. E. Moore and L. Wittgenstein, to appeal to the *use* of expressions in philosophic arguments. As this relevance of use tends to be an implicit rule of procedure rather than an explicit doctrine, it is difficult to pin it down for purposes of examining its validity. I should formulate it as the doctrine that the meaning of an expression *is* the manner in which it is used, or, less strongly, that the latter is at least a necessary criterion of meaning, i.e. that an expression cannot be said to mean something which would entail that the use of that expression is mistaken. I shall not distinguish between the weak and the strong formulations as the distinction makes no difference to my argument. I am thinking of slogans such as the one attributed to Professor Wittgenstein, 'don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use'.

I shall argue that the unqualified appeal to use has three serious demerits:

(1) It makes many traditional philosophic questions look non-sensical or silly by making the answers to them trivial; of course we use expressions such as 'see you later', 'I am sure', 'this is immoral', etc., and, *in that sense,* time is indeed real, we do indeed have certainty, there *are* ethical characteristics, etc. etc.

(2) The doctrine is profoundly misleading with regard to the nature of language, involving the 'Fido' — Fido Fallacy, to use an expression of Professor Ryle's — the assimilation of unsuitable expressions to names and a misplaced expectation of 'objective correlates' where there are none.

(3) Owing to certain general features of the use of language the appeal to it for purposes of deciding questions of meaning is self-contradictory, rather like a command ordering two incompatible performances.

Demerit (1) is of course sometimes taken to be a merit; but if I succeed in establishing charges (2) and (3) it too perhaps will be seen to constitute a weakness.

Of course, 'meaning' is an over-laden word, and we can if we wish sharpen its definition to make it mean something like 'the range of permissible uses of an expression' (or the rule determining that range) and then, 'to ask for the meaning is to ask for the use', can be translated into 'to ask for the use is to ask for the use'. But I take it that

D

the people who make the above recommendation are not basing it on this trivial tautology. What they are presumably saying is something resembling some of the following propositions: 'to ask for the use is the *only* possible way of asking for the meaning', or 'to ask for the use is the *most important* way of etc.', or 'by asking for the use we shall get more illumination about how a language works than by any other way'. In these senses the doctrine becomes non-tautologous, interesting and disputable. But there is another way of making the doctrine indisputable but trivial; that is, instead of sharpening the definition of 'meaning' to play about with the word 'used'. If *anything* said about an expression in attempts to find its meaning will count as saying something about how it is used, then of course . . . Instead of sharpening 'meaning' we can loosen 'use'; but I wish to limit the meaning of 'showing the use' to 'the describing of situations in which the expression is in fact used'. The 'tea-tasting' method is perhaps a good example; but the general criterion of 'use-showing' will be the making of usage-situations the final arbiter, of it being made senseless to say 'this is how the expression is used but it is wrongly used so'.

If use guarantees the meaningfulness of an expression analytically, i.e. if to say that an expression has meaning is to say no more than that it is in use, the point is not very exciting. One suspects, however, that the doctrine succeeds in combining plausibility with fertility in application by means of fluctuating between a synthetic and an analytic interpretation, in which respect it perhaps is not unique among philosophic doctrines. I suspect that the doctrine also gains something from the ambiguity of the word 'use', which can mean merely 'is frequently uttered', or, more strongly, 'performs some function'.

The crux is the belief in the infallibility, on the subject of meaning, of usage; *whose* usage being made clear from the context and the proviso being added that a unique answer can only be expected if usage is homogeneous and does not change. *My case against usage is not based simply on the fact that the conditions specified in the proviso frequently do not hold.*

I think the kind of situation by which the usage-idolators tend to be misled is something like this: imagine a society (in fact there have been such) in which people have names rather in the way in which we do, but in which there are no identity-cards, public or police-records, birth-registries, etc. To say in such a society 'Everyone always calls him Tommy, but that is not his real name' would be a silly, or at best a mystical pronouncement. He who is called Tommy *is* Tommy; that's what being Tommy means; and someone who denies that Tommy is Tommy is either making a mistake or agitating for the renaming of Tommy — which, seeing Tommy has a perfectly good

name, is a wasteful procedure. This is like the account sometimes given of philosophers who complain that we never have certainty, or that we never know about what goes on 'inside' other people, etc. $;_t$ for it is said that the kind of conditions under which in fact, we start being certain that Tommy won't pass the exam, or that he has a tooth-ache, are in a way what is meant by 'certainty', or by 'Tommy's tooth-ache'. Is he who denies it unacquainted with usage, or is he perversely trying to reform it, not realizing that the word he is trying to abolish is performing a useful function and that we shall have to invent another one to replace it if we abolish it?

Of course, it was noticed that philosophers maintaining odd usage-contrary theses were not merely making mistakes or agitating for reshuffling of meanings, but were doing something more; they were 'bringing out similarities' etc. In other words, the point of 'Tommy is not really Tommy' was roughly, 'Tommy is, in some ways, so much like Richard that we might have called *him* Richard'. I don't think either the 'mistake' or the 'similarity' account will do; the latter because it is too vague. Being so vague, it might of course be said to be a good figurative summary of whatever the true account is; but, alas, one cannot see the full true account from the summary.

If we revert from the possible society outlined above to the one we actually live in, we find that 'Tommy is not really Tommy' need be neither a mistake nor a suggestion for reform, but may be a very informative statement based on the discovery that Tommy's birth certificate says 'Theodosius', a fact that he has so far managed to keep secret. The point of this is that there are criteria for what a person's name is which are other than that of finding out what he is actually called; *and our linguistic behaviour is frequently such that when the various criteria conflict, the usage criterion, the answer to the question 'what do we in fact ordinarily call him?' is over-ridden by the other criteria.*

I shall write 'TOMMY', thus, in capitals, as an abbreviation for 'That which/who is in fact *called* Tommy', and similarly for any other expression. The mistake which usage-stressing philosophers make or at any rate are liable to cause their readers to make, is that 'X is x' is always true, presumably analytically so, and that 'X isn't really x' is silly and presumably contradictory.

Of course, if deference to definitions *as against usage* can be explained away in terms of *(a)* a *change* of language, analogous to a renaming of Tommy, or *(b)* perversion of language by magical or philosophical theories of words as labels tied to things independently of any natural language, then it will not bear out my point. If, however, it can most plausibly be described as a *correction,* by means of a criterion already somehow implicitly present, then it will. It is not just that use changes, but that use (range of situations in which

an expression is deemed applicable) changes *owing* to the (already present) meaning of the expression in some *other* sense of meaning.

This is a possibly subtle but nevertheless crucial point. Of course the stressers of usage admit that usages change; but the question is, how or why they change. The changes which can be described as changes *of the,* language concerned, or of its rules, do not undermine usage-based philosophy. But if changes in usage occur (this is my contention) in virtue of rules of meaning implicitly already present, rules over-riding 'usage' in the sense of 'range of situations in which expression is used', then usage is *not* a good clue to meaning.

To illustrate this point: consider the expression, 'The fifth house in our street'. A man may, owing to a miscalculation and subsequent inattention, use this expression for years when discussing what is, in fact, the *sixth* house. Despite very frequent use of this expression when mentioning the house, the expression does *not* become a name but remains a description, because, when one day the initial mistake is pointed out, the man withdraws the description as a means of referring to *that* house. Yet he had used the expression practically as a name for the house for years. If we had 'observed the situations in which he used the expression', we would have falsely concluded that the expression was the name of the house, i.e. that in his language it remains attached to the house whatever further discoveries were made about the house.

Usage-talk suggests that expressions have meanings merely in the sense of being attached to ranges of use-situations, and that understanding the meaning is to know the range, or the rules of its construction, *which rules can be inferred from the range. But this holds only for names* — not for descriptions, for a description can be misapplied whereas, in a sense, *a name cannot.* Usage-talk 'solves' philosophic problems by treating worrying expressions as kinds of names.

Consider, as an analogy, the possible use in natural or social sciences of expressions such as 'x does/do not exist', substituting for x expressions such as 'positrons', 'genes' or 'the Feudal System'. Such expressions are not perverse denials of the facts which had previously been interpreted with the help of these terms but indicate that a new theory covering those facts is being advocated, which new theory may, but need not, have been occasioned by the discovery of new facts. What I am suggesting is that common language resembles in some ways scientific systems; and philosophic attempts at its reform resembles those reforms. Expressions of ordinary language, especially philosophically interesting ones, *embody theories,* whereas the usage-philosophers think, or at any rate unintentionally or otherwise convey the impression, that these expressions merely attach to classes of situations, rather as 'Tommy' attaches to Tommy in **our**

simplified society. (This is charge (2)) They seem to be saying (or recommending) that many expressions, especially very generally used ones which lead to philosophic worries, such as verbs of cognition or ethical adjectives, function more like names than like descriptions (or should do). I know that they do not misinterpret them as names in the sense in which it leads to paradoxes concerning hypothetical false or negative propositions; but this is another sense, concerned with the permissibility or otherwise of saying with an expression 'x' which has an accepted use, that 'x does not really exist'. Substitute 'Tommy' for x in this expression in the imaginary simple society, and you get a silly or impermissible statement. Make the same substitution in our actual society, and you get an important synthetic proposition, and *not* a 'philosophic paradox'. In our language, 'TOMMY *is* Tommy' and 'TOMMY isn't really Tommy' are both synthetic.

The reason for this is that the *correct* use of the word 'Tommy' or of the philosophically worrying expressions, has a number of criteria, of which the *actual* use is only one; the 'theory embodied' in the word, to explain the metaphor occuring in the preceding paragraph, is that these criteria do not conflict, i.e. that the classes defined by them coalesce. Hence the importance of philosophical discoveries of the form 'x is not really x' or 'x does not really exist', the discoveries being *that these classes do not in fact coalesce,* the reason in the latter case being the extreme one that *one* of the classes has no members.

These two possibilities are characteristic of many cases of a philosophic doubt or worry. To stress usage is useful *in the beginning* as a means of showing *that* all this has occurred, but it certainly is not enough. What can sensibly count as a solution or-'resolution' is the description of the usage and the specification of the usage-conflicting criterion, plus a statement of their relative advantages; plus a sketch-history of the criterion — i.e. an explanation of why it should suddenly begin to appeal so forcefully and whether, as I think is often the case, it was in some way implicitly or even overtly present for some time; plus a statement of why its incompatibility with usage had not been noticed before.

It is not possible within the space of this article to attempt to deal with the question of how these usage-contrary criteria arose, of how philosophers and others come to discover or invent them. It would probably require a historical study of both successful and unsuccessful innovations inspired by philosophic theories. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that terms in a language are systematically connected, and that occasionally in cases when the usage-range of a term conflicts with its having a neat place in the system it is preferable to abandon usage rather than remodel the system. A general, provisional and tentative answer can perhaps be given; it is

that what happens is similar to some of those cases in science, or in the formulation of hypotheses by a detective in a crime novel, in which one theory replaces another but not as the result of any new evidence. It may also be that sometimes the promulgation and acceptance of a new usage-contrary criterion may be due to its 'enriching' language in the sense of enabling one to make distinctions where previously there had been none. But I do not for a moment pretend that I can give an answer to this important question; I am suggesting that it should be asked more often and that usage-talk makes against this.

The main fact leading to these considerations is the extremely *philosophic* linguistic behaviour of the 'ordinary man'; of all of us, in fact, except those under the influence of doubly-sophisticated philosophic theories. The mere fact that philosophy, in the sense of usage-contrary propositions not occasioned by empirical evidence exists, establishes this. If one, for instance, points out to an 'ordinary man' that 'knowledge' implies certainty and that this he seldom or never has, he will, in most cases, begin with an attempt to attack the arguments showing the absence of certainty in a strong sense. But if he comes to see that this cannot be done, he will not fall back on saying that an analysis entailing that he seldom, if ever, has knowledge must be false because the verb 'to know' is frequently affirmatively used; more probably he will admit that he does not 'really know' and attach the apologetic label *'not real knowledge'* to what he ordinarily claims to know, though of course he will not go on doing this for long owing to its cumbersomeness and will soon forget all about it. The trouble with *this* reform may be that it affects too generally a used word, but a history of language might show successful reforms affecting even words of similar generality. On the positive as opposed to the 'abolishing' side, Professor Price introducing a symposium at Bangor at the Joint Session of Mind Association and Aristotelian Society, 1949, gave an impressive list of very general words in common usage originating in philosophy.

The deference shown by some modern philosophers to actual usage has had, I think, various harmful effects. It has made it difficult to see why earlier philosophers have talked of 'concepts' in a sense *not* equivalent to rules of the actual use of a term; we should do well to be interested in 'concepts' in such a sense, and we need not fear that we shall thereby be commiting ourselves to 'hypostatised entities'. Moreover, it is liable to divert attention from what might be called the internal dynamics of language, i.e. the reasons and manner of linguistic changes *other than* those caused by extra-linguistic factors such as accretion of empirical knowledge, arbitrary fashions, etc., i.e. to those as it were internal to language, due to interplay of *already existing* criteria. And not only does it

give us a static view of language; it also acts, in philosophy, as a kind of linguistic conservatism, an apotheosis of the *status quo*.

But worse still. If I am right in saying that we behave philosophically, i.e. that in cases of conflict we frequently prefer a non-usage criterion to the actual-usage one, then the recommendation that we should observe ordinary use ('observe' both in the sense of 'obey' and 'note') becomes impossible to comply with — impossible because self-contradictory, through excessive generality. (This is charge (3)). It may be that in a sense the old philosophers perverted language when they came out with things like 'time is not real' or 'there is no such thing as beauty', but the usage-respectors pervert it at a second and as much or as little pernicious level. (Perhaps this paper is language-perversion at a third level, as usage-stressing did in its time have its points; the preceding remark at the fourth, and so on.) But for language, one could say, perversion is second nature. Another way of making this point would be to say that philosophy must account for philosophic talk, which is essentially previous-usage-independent, simply because such talk is so widespread and important in language. To talk philosophy is to use language — and it is a widespread kind of use, extending far beyond academic philosophy.

There are amusing historical parallels to the above self-contradictory recommendation. Such self-contradictoriness springs from making some source of pronouncements necessarily correct. Thus the seventeenth-century French Jansenists maintained the superior authority, for them, of the Pope as opposed to the French king and the Gallican Church. In the end they were told by the Pope to subordinate themselves to the latter. *Whatever* they did after that they were bound to violate their own tenets. The situation would be even worse nowadays, since the doctrine of the Infallibility of the Pope. What would happen if some Pope declared *ex cathedra* that doctrine to be false? The original doctrine did not contain a proviso that only first-order pronouncements were infallible.

A similar predicament befell the American Communist Party during the late war when its then leader, Earl Browder, advised its members amongst other things, to 'embrace Capitalism'. Members of Communist parties do not embrace capitalism but fight it; that is why they are members; but they also, from that very motive, loyally abide by Party decisions once these are made. The situation here might become even more desperate if one day some Party Congress decided that the Party would henceforth no longer be monolithic but will demand open disagreement. *Whatever* one did then one would be deviating.

The recommendation to honour and obey usage generates a similar paradox if use is indeed philosophical in the manner sug-

gested. Use has played the trick of lending its own authority to the denial of that authority, so to speak. To talk of use unperverted by philosophy is like talking of the Noble Savage (with which myth 'common usage' has indeed much in common); one cannot find it, and if this paper is correct then this is more like a logical than an empirical 'cannot'.

Another way of making this point is this: 'use' in 'use of an expression' is ambiguous, meaning either 'range of actual use' or, alternatively, 'rule of correct use'. Stressers of usage tend either to ignore this ambiguity, or dogmatically to treat the latter sense as derivative from the former. *But just in this they have gone counter to the manner in which we really use language;* our actual use of language entails, I am arguing, the separation of these two senses, and an occasional subordination of the former to the latter. We *use* language (in a general sense) in a way which disregards the way we 'use' language (in the range-of-use-situations sense).

The fallacy behind usage-talk is, I think, an extensional theory of language. I am not saying that language works intensionally, but that in fact some expressions function one way and some the other; and that consequently with regard to any one expression extensional functioning cannot justifiably be assumed but must be established. By 'extensional' and 'intensional' I here mean this: an expression functions extensionally if we know the class of situations in which it is applicable, and can only derive inductively the criterion (or 'analysis') by finding what features, if any, those situations have in common without sharing them with any other situations. An expression functions intensionally, if, consciously or implicitly, we operate with a criterion from which the applicable situation or situations are derived. (Compare the above case of 'the sixth house'.) Language derives its usefulness from the fact that it contains expressions functioning both ways, and not, as the usage theory of meaning suggests, only extensional expressions.

One line of defence is left to the usage-defender. He may admit that language contains expressions of both kinds, but claim that those very generally relevant expressions which are focal to philosophic problems are all extensional. This point is sometimes made in the following form: 'Suppose we admitted the weight of a sceptic's case against knowledge, other minds, etc. etc.; would we not then have to invent new words to do the job which the undermined ones had performed before?' The fact that we should answer this question in the affirmative is held to show that the words in question are tied to the kind of situation in which they are used and that analysis entailing that they are wrongly used is *ex hypothesi* mistaken; that, for instance, 'introspecting others' cannot be the meaning of, 'know-

ing what others think', seeing we never do the former but often speak of doing the latter.

The answer to this is that we do not in fact always answer the above question affirmatively. One well-established counter-example is sufficient to refute a generalization, and I propose to produce one. The existence of God is traditionally a philosophic question; yet the atheist is clearly not denying that religious assertions are used by believers in Church Services, prayer, consolation etc.; what he is denying is that they are truly or validly used. To interpret propositions asserting or denying the existence of God in terms of the ascertainable 'use' of these propositions is to commit a ludicrous travesty of them and to fly in the face of common sense for the sake of the usage theory. It has, however, been attempted.

Of course, in talking of usage-worshippers I may have been putting up a straw man. Perhaps nobody *quite* meant to generalize the theory, perhaps nobody *quite* fits the description.