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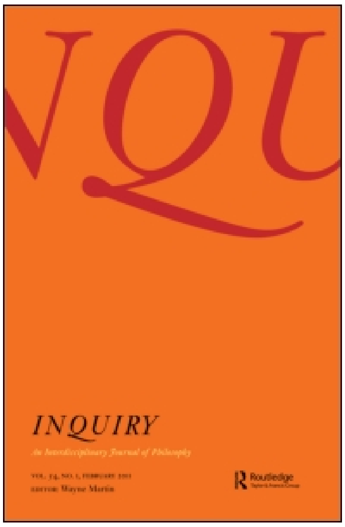

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ON THE VERIFICATION OF STATEMENTS ABOUT ORDINARY LANGUAGE[1]

by

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In this paper I shall discuss certain difficulties which seem to me to stand in the way of understanding or properly appreciating the work of the so-called "ordinary language" philosophers. These difficulties concern the interpretation of the various seemingly factual statements which such philosophers make about language. I am mainly interested in the question of how one would go about verifying these statements; insofar as meaning is bound up with verification, this is also a question of their meaning. Of course, it is possible to pretend that no clarification is required at all, that the sense of assertions about the ordinary use of language is perfectly obvious, or at least sufficiently so for the purposes at hand. But I do not think that such optimism is justified. Even among those who can claim to be "in the know" or to "get the point" there are wide disagreements both as to the truth and as to the meaning of given assertions of the sort under consideration, and these disagreements are by themselves a basis for scepticism. When in addition it is seen that such assertions play a crucial role in the discussions which are supposed to answer, dissolve, or somehow get rid of the traditional problems of philosophy, a philosopher may perhaps be excused for looking at the matter a little more closely.

First, a parenthetical remark about terminology. As is always the case when one attempts to formulate objections to a philosophical position of scope and subtlety, there is here the problem of finding a convenient vocabulary which does not beg too many questions. I shall make use of such terms as "analytic", "synthetic", "meaning", "sense", "denotation", in the hope that I am not thereby drawing a number of red herring across the trail, and in the belief that if necessary I could reformulate my points without the use of these terms, though with a considerable loss of compactness. For instance, when I ask whether a given statement about ordinary language is normative or descriptive, and whether it is analytic or synthetic, I am not asking questions to which the alleged difficulties with the fringes of these terms are decisively relevant. Instead, I merely wish to know with what attitude the given statement is to be confronted; for instance, is it to be regarded as a recommendation, so that an appropriate query is "What will be gained by following this advice?", or is it to be regarded as true or false? And if it is to be taken as true or false, does the author intend it as true by virtue of the meanings of the terms involved, or does he consider himself to have made a statement the truth-value of which depends upon matters of fact? The answers to such questions will fundamentally affect our understanding of the given statement, and they do not, so far as I can see, need to involve us in any of the philosophical tangles which are supposed to be connected with the terms "normative" and "analytic". I believe that somewhat analogous comments apply to the other cases in which I make use of notorious philosophical terminology.

It will be useful to have before us some examples of the type of statement under consideration. Accordingly I quote a passage from Prof. Gilbert Ryle's treatment of the Freedom of the Will:

"It should be noticed that while ordinary folk, magistrates, parents and teachers, generally apply the words 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' to actions in one way, philosophers often apply them in quite another way.

"In their most ordinary employment 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' are used, with a few minor elasticities, as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone's action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his fault... In the same way in ordinary life we raise questions of responsibility only when someone is charged, justly or unjustly, with an offence. It makes sense, in this use, to ask whether a boy was responsible for breaking a window, but not whether he was responsible for finishing his homework in good time...

"In this ordinary use, then, it is absurd to discuss whether satisfactory, correct or admirable performances are voluntary or involuntary...

"But philosophers, in discussing what constitutes acts voluntary or involuntary, tend to describe as voluntary not only reprehensible but also meritorious actions, not only things that are someone's fault but also things that are to his credit. The motives underlying their unwitting extension of the ordinary sense of 'voluntary' ... will be considered later...

"The tangle of largely spurious problems, known as the problem of the Freedom of the Will, partly derives from this unconsciously stretched use of 'voluntary' . . ."[2]

These, then, are examples of the sort of remark I wish to consider. They may not be the best examples that could have been chosen, but they do have the not inconsiderable merit of being relatively lucid. Prof. Ryle seems here to assert that the ordinary use of the word "voluntary" is quite different from the philosophic use. He does not mean merely that the ordinary man seldom talk philosophy. The difference between the ordinary use and the philosophic use hinges rather upon the alleged that the ordinary man seldom talks philosophy. The difference between sively to actions which ought not to be done, while the philosopher stretches it to cover meritorious actions as well. Now although the question whether Prof. Ryle is right or wrong in this particular case is not essential to the point of the present paper, I will say at once (1) that I very much doubt whether as a matter of fact the ordinary man does apply the term "voluntary" only to actions which (he thinks) ought not to be done, and (2) that even if this were shown to be the case, it would not have decisive relevance to a determination of the ordinary use of the word "voluntary". Some other factor, such as perhaps a disposition on the part of the ordinary man to talk more about things of which he disapproves than about things of which he approves, could by itself account for a relatively frequent application of the word "voluntary" to disapproved actions, even if the word were simply being used in one of its dictionary senses, e.g., "proceeding from the will or from one's own choice or full consent". In short, at first glance it seems that Prof. Ryle's assertion about the ordinary use of the word "voluntary" is false, and, moreover, that it is based upon doubtful evidence which would be entirely insufficient even if it were sound.

When one comes to so drastic a conclusion about an assertion seriously made, it is time to reconsider the possibility that one has not understood what was asserted. For further light we may consult an article entitled "Ordinary Language",[3] in which Prof. Ryle attempts by means of a distinction between use and usage to indicate why empirical studies like those of the lexicographers or philologists are irrelevant to the truth of statements about the ordinary use of language. Such studies have a place in determining the *usage* of a word, he says, but not in determining the *use*. Uses are ways or techniques of doing the thing, the more or less widely prevailing practice of doing which constitutes the usage. He explains further that "ordinary use" is to be contrasted with "non-stock use", and that in general "use" contrasts in these contexts with "misuse". Now it seems to me that Prof. Ryle fails to make good the alleged distinction between use and usage, and still less the point that through confusion in this matter philosophers have misunderstood the character of claims that the ordinary use of a word is this or that. Nevertheless, his discussion is not without significance for the matters we are considering: it appears to indicate that for him there is some sort of normative element in assertions about ordinary use. If the opposite of use is misuse, then use must be somehow right, proper, or correct. It is not easy to see how this can be applied to statements like those quoted about the word "voluntary", but perhaps Prof. Ryle's discussion in that passage comes down to an assertion that to predicate the word "voluntary" of praiseworthy actions is to misuse the word, presumably in some sense of "misuse" which cannot be defined statistically. But if this is the way the wind blows, it would be instructive to have an indication of the standards or goals with reference to which the term "misuse" is applicable. What authority deems it wrong to use the word "voluntary" as the philosopher does? What unwelcome consequences would attend the proscribed use? Surely the point is not merely that if you use the word "voluntary" just as the philosopher does, you may find yourself entangled in the philosofic problem of the Freedom of the Will.

Despite Prof. Ryle's own explanations, I am reluctant to believe that the expression "ordinary use" is really a normative term for the ordinary language philosophers. The way in which they use it seems better explained on the hypothesis that it is a rough descriptive term, employed with little definiteness of intention, and that there is in addition a *belief,* not part of the meaning of "ordinary use", to the effect that it is somehow wrong or inadvisable, or at least dangerous, to use ordinary words in ways different from those in which the ordinary man uses them. It is further supposed, and often expressly asserted, that in daily life words function well enough and lead to no great problems. In any case, although all forms of "nose-counting" are deprecated in these quarters, it often happens that when support is offered for an assertion that the ordinary use of a given word is thus and so, this support takes the form of ann attempt to remind or convince us that the use in question is indeed quite frequent among "ordinary folk, magistrates, parents and teachers". In other words, the statement is taken as having a factual basis and presumably as refutable by observation of the ordinary folk, magistrates, parents and teachers.

This brings me to the question of how one might verify a statement about the ordinary use of a word or phrase, when the statement is interpreted neither as a piece of advice nor as a claim that the use is sanctioned by authority. It is necessary here to make passing mention of a point of view, or rather a dodge, which cannot be taken very seriously. This is the comfortable suggestion that the average adult has already amassed such a tremendous amount of empirical information about the use of his native language, that he can depend upon his own intuition or memory and need not undertake a laborious questioning of other people, even when he is dealing with the tricky terms which are central in philosophical problems. Such a assertion is itself an empirical hypothesis, of a sort which used to be invoked in favor of armchair psychology, and it is not born out by the facts.[4] It has been found that even relatively careful authors are often not reliable reporters of their *own* linguistic behavior, let alone that of others. (Indeed, this is hardly surprising in view of the fact that most of the time we use language in a more or less automatic manner). The weakness of the hypothesis is further revealed by the fact that the intuitive findings of different people, even of different experts, are often inconsistent. Thus, for example, while Prof. Ryle tells us that "voluntary" and "involuntary" in their ordinary use are applied only to actions which ought not to be done, his colleague Prof. Austin states in another connection: "... for example, take 'voluntarily' and 'involuntarily': we may join the army or make a gift voluntarily, we may hiccough or make a small gesture involuntarily ..."[5] If agreement about usage cannot be reached within so restricted a sample as the class of Oxford Professors of Philosophy, what are the prospects when the sample is enlarged?

Let us now look at the question of how to verify an assertion that a given person uses a word in a given way or with a given sense. It seems to me that, roughly speaking, there are two basic approaches, which I shall call the "extensional" and the "intensional", though any really adequate procedure will probably have to be a combination of both. In the extensional approach one observes a reasonably large class of cases in which the subject applies the word, and then one "sees" or "elicits" the meaning by finding what is common to these cases. For some reason or other this method, with all of its obvious difficulties, is thought by many people to be more scientific than the intensional approach. In the latter, one asks the subject what he means by the given word or how he uses it; the one proceeds in Socratic fashion to test this first answer by confronting the subject with counterexamples and borderline cases, and so on until the subject settles down more or less permanently upon a definition or account. The difficulties with this method are also very considerable, and I hold no particular brief for it. I only wish to say that it has just as legitimate a claim to be "right" as the extensional method has. Things become interesting when, as will often happen, the two approaches give different results. What the analyst sees in common among the cases to which the subject applies the term may have little or nothing to do with what the subject says he means by the term; and, further, the subject may in fact apply the term to cases which lack the characteristics which he himself considers essential for proper application of the term. In whatever manner these conflicts are to be resolved, I wish only to repeat that the outcome of the intensional approach is as much a characterization of ordinary usage as the outcome of the extensional approach, assuming of course that the same subjects are involved. Thus, even if Prof. Ryle had determined that ordinary folk in fact apply the word "voluntary" only to actions which ought not to be done, while philosophers apply it to meritorious actions as well, he would be far from establishing that philosophers and ordinary folk apply the word "voluntary" in different ways, i.e., attach different senses to it[6] For if he had proceeded by the intensional route he might have found that both philosophers and ordinary folk tend to give the same sort of definition or account — perhaps something similar to what one finds in the dictionary — and this would have been evidence that they use the term in the *same* sense. Both approaches may lead to interesting results, but I do not see that one is scientific and the other is not, or that one is useful and the other is not.

Now the ordinary language philosophers, I believe, tend toward an armchair version of the extensional method, though sometimes they read the dictionary for intensional guidance before surveying the cases in which they know or suppose the term would be applied. This extensional approach appears in the quoted passage from Prof. Ryle,[7] and it may also be seen in the following quotation from J. O. Urmson's article, "Some Questions Concerning Validity":

"In his popular book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, . . . Eddington said in effect that desks were not really solid. Miss Stebbing, in her book *Philosophy and the Physicists* (showed) that this way of putting things involved illegitimate mystification; this she did by simply pointing out that if one asked what we ordinarily mean by *solid* we immediately realise that we mean something like 'of the consistency of such things as desks'. Thus she showed conclusively that the novelty of scientific theory does not consist, as had been unfortunately suggested, in showing the inappropriateness of ordinary descriptive language."[8]

I interpret (perhaps erroneously) Urmson and Stebbing to be saying that if you look and see to which objects people regularly apply the word "solid", you will find that by and large these objects have the consistency of such things as desks. But from this it does not follow that by "solid" we *mean* something like "of the consistency of such things as desks". If you want to know what we mean by "solid", you should in addition ask us; the answers will very likely be inconclusive, but they will be relevant. Perhaps they will tend to converge on several senses, one of which could be "not hollow, having its interior entirely filled with matter". If you follow out *this* strand of the ordinary use of "solid" it will no longer appear so obvious that Eddington was using "solid" in a new or mystifying sense when he said that desks are not really solid. Indeed, the effectiveness of Eddington's remark seems to derive from the fact that the properties which one is inclined to regard as the defining properties of solidity do not really belong to the objects to which we customarily apply the term "solid", and the interest of this fact is in no way diminished by repeating "Oh, but we *do* apply the word 'solid' to such things as desks". Of course we do, but we also say that by "solid" we mean "having its interior entirely filled with matter", or something like that. The collision is *within* ordinary usage, and not between it and scientific theory.

I should like now to mention some of the difficulties which attend the two methods I have discussed. Only when one gets down to cases do these problems appear with clarity, and in this general account I can list just a few. In connection with the extensional approach we have the problem of deciding which occurrences of the word are to be considered (especially when the word is thought to have different senses) and what are the relevant *features* of the objects to which the word is applied or of the situations in which it is applied. Much depends upon how these objects or situations are described (or "thought of") in the data from which the meaning is to be "elicited".[9] Further, shall we describe the objects and situations in terms of the properties which they really have, or in terms of the properties which they are thought by the subject to have? (If the latter alternative is chosen, then even the extensional approach might lead to the conclusion that tables are not really solid, in the ordinary sense of "solid"). When it comes to seeing what is common to the various items which make up the extension, the difficulties become still worse. The objects in any collection will have infinitely many properties in common; furthermore, two words with quite different senses may happen to have the same extension or, even more likely, their extensions may happen to coincide in the domain investigated. Thus perhaps Prof. Ryle happened to consider only some part of the extension of "voluntary act" which is also a part of the extension of "voluntary act that ought not to be done". On top of all these problems is the problem of determining what will justify the conclusion that a word has more than one sense or use. We shall never find a case in which it is not true that all items of the extension have *something* in common, even when on other grounds we are inclined to say that the word in question has two senses. Some principle is needed for singling out the "real" or "important" properties, but it is not easy to state what that would be. In view of all these matters it becomes apparent that the task of looking at the applications of a word and "seeing" what it means is not so simple, after all.

Before describing some of the difficulties attending the intensional approach I should like to add one more observation which pertains mainly to the extensional approach. We have all heard the wearying platitude that "you can't separate" the meaning of a word from the entire context in which it occurs, including not only the actual linguistic context but also the aims, feelings, beliefs, and hopes of the speaker, the same for the listener and any bystanders, the social situation, the physical surroundings, the historical background, the rules of the game, and so on ad infinitum. There is no doubt some truth in this, but I fail to see how it helps one get started in an empirical investigation of language. At the very least, provisional divisions of the subject have to be made somewhere. It seems to me that there is much to be said for the well-known syntax-semantics-pragmatics division, and that often many of the factors which the ordinary language philosophers find in common among the cases in which an expression is employed belong more to the pragmatics of the expression than to its semantics. In particular, most of the facts which are expressed by statements of the form "He wouldn't say that unless he..." belong in the category of the pragmatics of the expression and should be avoided when "eliciting" or "seeing" the meaning. To take an example, consider all the fuss about the sentence "I know it, but I may be wrong", which has been called everything from "contradiction" to "nonsense". Perhaps it is true that ordinarily I wouldn't say "I know it" unless I felt great confidence in what I was asserting, and it might also be true that ordinarily I wouldn't say "I may be wrong" unless I felt only a small amount of such confidence. So that if I say "I know it, but I may be wrong" the listener may be momentarily befuddled before he hits upon the right diagnosis of the form "He wouldn't say that unless he . . .". But all this does not suffice to show that "I know it, but I may be wrong" is contradictory or nonsensical according to ordinary usage. The confidence I signify by saying "I know it" does not have to be mentioned in giving a semantical account of the word "know", but only in describing its pragmatics. Likewise, when I say "I may be wrong" I do not *imply* that I have no confidence in what I have previously asserted; I only indicate it. If I do have the confidence and yet say "I may be wrong", I have not told a falsehood, though I may indeed have misled someone. Limitation of time prevents my going further into this matter, and I only bring it up so as to be able to formulate the following: it seems to me that not only do the ordinary language philosophers tend toward an armchair version of the extensional method, but also they are inclined to overlook the semantic-pragmatic distinction when they find what is common to the situations in which a given word is used. If, in the example concerning "voluntary", Prof. Ryle means that the ordinary man applies the word only to actions of which he disapproves, while the philosopher applies it to approved actions as well, and that hence the philosopher uses the word in a stretched, extraordinary sense, then this would be an example of the sort of semantic-pragmatic confusion which I am here trying to describe.[10]

The intensional approach to the problem of verifying assertions about meaning or use seems to involve us in a conceptual difficulty of its own. If we are to do justice to the notions (1) that what an individual means by a word depends at least in part upon what he *wants* to mean by that word, and (2) that he may have to think awhile before he discovers what he "really" means by a given word, we are led to consider a test which will amount to a sort of Socratic questionnaire. That is, there will have to be prodding questions aimed at drawing the subject's attention to borderline cases, counterexamples, and various awkward consequences of his first and relatively off-hand answers. If as a result of these questions he is inclined to give a different answer from the one he gave at first, we may describe the phenomenon in various ways: we can say that he has changed his mind or learned something new, or we can say that he has now managed to find a better way of expressing what he really means (and perhaps has always meant) by the word. In general, it does not seem possible to differentiate in a practical way between *finding out* what someone means by a word, and *influencing* his linguistic behavior relative to that word. A philosopher who had been brought up on Plato might be inclined to think that when a group of persons were subjected to a Socratic interrogation their answers would at first be very diverse and later would tend to converge on one, or at most a few, definitions of the term in question. It would be interesting to know whether questionnaires could be designed which would have this effect, and also whether one could design a sort of anti-Socratic questionnaire which would tend to lead subjects to greater and greater disagreement.[11]

On the whole, it seems to me unwise, initially at least, to try to limit oneself either to the intensional or to the extensional approach. It will in practice be difficult to separate the two when one is designing a concrete test for determining the ordinary sense of a given word; they are rather to be thought of as different moments or tendencies which actual methods will combine in varying proportions. It could easily happen, however, as it has in certain well-known analogous cases, that experience would teach us to revise our conceptual framework, or at least to change our estimates of what is important and valuable.[12] It may turn out desirable to distinguish different senses of the expression "ordinary use", corresponding to different methods of verifying statements in which this expression occurs, and one would then wish to know in which, if any, of these senses it would be true and important to say that in philosophic problems words do not have their ordinary use.

NOTES

[1] This paper and the one which succeeds it, by Prof. Cavell, were read as parts of a symposium at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Coast Division, on December 19, 1957.

[2] Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1949, pp. 69 ff.

[3] Ryle, Gilbert, "Ordinary Language", *The Philosophical Review*, vol. LXII (1953), pp. 167 ff.

[4] I do not deny that the armchair method is adequate for many purposes. Perhaps it is adequate even for deciding the correctness or incorrectness of statements like those of Prof. Ryle about "voluntary". I would not trust it, however, to decide such a question as whether the ordinary use of "inadvertently" is the same as that of "automatically" (as applied to actions). (Cf. Austin, J. L., "A Plea for Excuses", *Arist. Soc. Papers*, 1956–7, p. 24). Of course, even in these cases I do not propose to dispense with it, but only to add to it.

[5] *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

[6] Note Ryle's use of the word "sense" in the passage quoted.

[7] i.e., he tries to show that the philosophic sense is different from the ordinary sense, using as evidence information that the philosophic extension is different from the ordinary extension.

[8] Urmson, J. O., "Some Questions Concerning Validity", *Rev. Int. de Phil.*, vol. 7 (1953), pp. 217 ff.

[9] e. g., in Ryle's case they could be described or taken as actions which ought not to be done, or as actions proceeding from the will or from the individual's own choice or full consent, or in any of a number of other ways.

[10] Consider the sentence, "Jones disapproves of playing golf on Sunday". In this sentence the word "Jones" occurs directly, while the expression "playing golf on Sunday" occurs obliquely. Thus, the truth-value of the given sentence may be reversed when the expression "playing golf on Sunday" is replaced by an expression having the same denotation but different sense. Now since I use the word "property" in such a way as to satisfy Leibniz' Law (in the form: if *A* is the same as *B*, then any property of *A* is a property of *B*), I regard the given sentence as expressing a property of Jones but not as expressing a property of the act of playing golf on Sunday. Consequently I am led to hold that although the properties of an act will in general be relevant to the semantics of any expression referring to that act, the approval or disapproval of an act by someone does not constitute one of its properties.

[11] If the latter were possible, it would obviously be awkward to interpret the Socratic method as a method of *finding out* what the subject means, as against *teaching* him something new.

[12] Thus, the concept of "definiteness of intention", introduced by Professor Arne Naess (cf. "Toward a Theory of Interpretation and Preciseness", *in* Linsky, L., *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 256 ff.), seems to have a devastating relevance to many of the characteristic assertions of the ordinary language philosophers.