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“Meaning is Use” and Wittgenstein’s Treatment of Philosophical Problems

Abstract

What is the relation between later Wittgenstein’s method of dissolving philosophical problems by reminding us of how we would actually *use* words, and his famous statement that “meaning is *use*” in *Investigations* §43? The idea is widespread among readers of Wittgenstein that a close relation obtains between the two. This paper addresses a specific type of answer to this question: answers which have drawn on remarks of Wittgenstein’s where he explicitly establishes a connection between this method and certain misconceptions about *meaning* – remarks such as *Investigations* §117. The paper will discuss answers which have advanced the following claim: Since it is places such as §43 which play a main role in debunking misconceptions of this kind, Wittgenstein’s statement that “meaning is use” must be taken as directly related to the method of asking for the use of words. Drawing on so-called “therapeutic” readings of Wittgenstein, what I intend to show is that this seemingly straightforward answer fails to fully accommodate the fact that §43 is itself a reminder of how we would actually *use* a word. The paper sets out to show how truly acknowledging this forces us to rethink the relation between “meaning is use” and this method of Wittgenstein’s.

Introduction

In §43 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously wrote: “The meaning of a word is its use in the language”. In that same book, Wittgenstein also declared: “What *we* do is to bring words

back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (§116). Now this attempt to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use is characteristic for one of Wittgenstein’s ways of dissolving philosophical problems. That is, it is typical for Wittgenstein to approach a philosophical problem by asking: Would we ever *use* the words which figure in the formulation of the problem this way in everyday circumstances? So what we have then, in the *Investigations*, are these two things: (1) A method of dissolving philosophical problems by reminding us of everyday *uses* of words, and (2) a statement of Wittgenstein’s relating the meaning of words to their *use*. The question is: How are we to conceive the relation between the two?

In this paper, I wish to address answers to this question which have drawn on remarks of Wittgenstein’s such as the following:

You say to me: ‘You understand this expression, don’t you? Well then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with.’ As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application.

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

In this section, immediately following his programmatic statement of §116, Wittgenstein mentions an idea about the meaning of words and then criticizes it – namely, the idea that the meaning of a word is something which the word carries with it like an atmosphere into every context of use. Now from the context of this remark one thing appears to be clear: that Wittgenstein thinks that his criticism of this idea is directly relevant to the method which he outlined just one section before – namely, bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. In the light of this and similar remarks, commentators have given an answer to our initial question characterized by the following key elements: (a) Wittgenstein believed that there are general misconceptions about meaning the debunking of which is of direct relevance for the method of asking for how words are actually used; (b) Wittgenstein’s statement “The meaning of a word is its use in

the language” in §43 plays a key role in dispelling such misconceptions; (c) therefore, statements of this type about a relation between the meaning of words and their use are of direct relevance for this method of dissolving philosophical problems.¹ In other words, what these commentators are claiming is this: Whatever relation holds between misconceptions about meaning such as the one figuring in §117 and the method of asking how words are actually used also holds between “meaning is use” and this method – because it is sections such as 43 which play a main role in debunking this conception.

¹ Cf., e.g., the views of Peter Hacker and Hans-Johann Glock. In his exegesis of *Investigations* §117 in *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, Hacker counters the misconception about meaning which Wittgenstein mentions there – which Hacker takes to be directly connected to the method of §116 (cf. Hacker 2005b: 254) – by stating that “The meaning of a word is not something *attached* to it” (254/5). The same expression (of the meaning of a word being something “attached” to it) is used by him to characterize one of the things which Wittgenstein’s grammatical remark of §43 is directed against (cf. Hacker 2005a: 150). What Hacker thinks about the relation between the misconception mentioned by Wittgenstein in §117 and his dictum that “meaning is use” in §43 comes out yet clearer if we take a look at the misconceptions listed by Hacker under the label of the “Augustinian conception of language” in the essays part of *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*. As one of the elements of the Augustinian conception he there names the idea that “[t]he meaning of a sentence must be determined by, or be a function of, the meanings of its constituent words” (2005a: 12) – which includes the corollary idea that “one arrives at an interpretation of another person’s utterance by deriving the meaning of the sentence from one’s knowledge of the meanings of its constituents and their mode of combination” (14). Crucially, what Hacker takes Wittgenstein to primarily pit against this idea – an idea arguably closely related if not identical to the “atmosphere” conception of PI §117 – are (as against other elements of the Augustinian conception of language) “grammatical clarifications of the concepts and reticulations of concepts of name, word, meaning of a word, meaning something by a word, [...]” (14/5) – i.e. remarks such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” in §43 (cf. 15, also 74, 129, 174/5). In his *Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Glock takes a similar line: Wittgenstein’s criticism of “compositionalism” (the idea that “[t]he sense of a proposition is [...] determined exclusively by the meanings of its constituents and the mode of their combination”, 87) is tied to his method of dissolving philosophical problems – in that metaphysical theories and questions are to be approached, not by “invok[ing] a canonical system of rules” (261) determining the bounds of sense, but rather in an “undogmatic procedure” (ibid.) of drawing attention to *circumstances* of use of words (cf. 261-2, 88). And, like Hacker, Glock takes Wittgenstein’s grammatical remark of §43 to be a primary means of debunking compositionalism (cf. 88, 376-7, 44, 260).

In the following, I wish to further investigate this influential view. What I will draw on are so-called “therapeutic”² readings of Wittgenstein. I will especially draw on two main aspects of these readings: First, on what they have said about how to understand Wittgenstein’s method of asking how words are actually used, and about the role of his criticism of misconceptions such as that of §117 for a correct understanding of this method (in the following, I will use the term “atmosphere conception of meaning” for the type of misconception that therapeutic readings have in mind here.) Secondly, I will draw on what these readings have said about how to conceive the status of Wittgenstein’s famous remark in §43. What I would like to show is that if we take to heart what therapeutic readings have brought out about these matters, the above-mentioned view about the relevance of “meaning is use” for this one method of Wittgenstein’s cannot really be sustained. This, as I will try to show, concerns especially the following element of this view: that it is places such as §43 which play a main role in our coming to see what is mistaken about the atmosphere conception about meaning. What I wish to show is that therapeutic readings’ findings – when taken seriously – point to the fact that what is at issue in places such as §43 cannot – for purely internal reasons – play the privileged role in debunking these kinds of misconceptions about meaning which this view assigns to it.

I will proceed as follows. In the first section of this paper, I will give a brief introduction into one main view within therapeutic readings of how to understand the method of asking how words are actually used. Following this, I will give a short introduction into how these readings conceive the role of Wittgenstein’s criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning for a correct understanding of this method. In the second section, I will give an introduction into what these readings have said about how to

² By “therapeutic readings” I here mean broadly the readings of James Conant and Cora Diamond, as well as readings inspired by or otherwise in some kind of agreement with these two authors. The term “therapeutic” for these kinds of readings has been used by Alice Crary in her introduction to *The New Wittgenstein* (2000: 1), and it has become more widespread ever since. For this reason, I have decided to use this term throughout this paper. However, it should be noted that some of the authors whom I am drawing upon do in fact reject this term as a label for their readings of Wittgenstein.

conceive the status of Wittgenstein's remark "The meaning of a word is its use in the language" in §43. In the third section, I will turn to the consequences of these findings for the above-mentioned view of the relevance of "meaning is use" for the method of asking how words are actually used.

1. Therapeutic Readings on the Method of Asking for Actual Uses of Words

Therapeutic readers have typically presented their understanding of Wittgenstein's method of asking how words are actually used in the form of a criticism of the views of Peter Hacker. One major object of their criticism has been Hacker's claim that this method of dissolving philosophical problems involves the diagnosis of cases where the rules for the use of expressions of our language have been *violated*. One of Hacker's examples for such a violation which therapeutic have discussed is "The brain selects certain features of retinal images." According to Hacker, this sentence contains a violation of a rule for the use of the word 'select': this word – like verbs of perception and verbs of cognition – can only be applied to the whole human being, and not *parts* of it such as the brain. To say of the brain that it 'selects' something, according to Hacker, is as confused as saying of my eyes and ears – instead of *me* – that they 'see' or 'hear' something. Therapeutic readers have contested the claim that the treatment of philosophical confusions involves diagnosing such "violations" of the established ways of using words, and have employed various arguments against it. One of them starts with pointing out that we can easily come up with ways of speaking which do not conform to the rule Hacker cites, but involve no confusion at all. There is, for example, as therapeutic readings have highlighted, nothing confused about saying "My ears and brain must have perceived the sound although I did not notice it". Rather, this can be an immediately intelligible way of speaking. If we take a look at Wittgenstein's practice of treating the things we are tempted to utter while in a philosophical confusion, therapeutic readers hold, what we see is not the citing of rules in order to prove the nonsensicality of these utterances, but rather Wittgenstein asking: "Do you mean *this*? Or *that*?" This reflects Wittgenstein's

view, therapeutic readers continue, that if there is anything confused about someone saying “The brain selects certain features of retinal images”, it is not this person having strayed from the one right way of using the word ‘select’, but rather his vacillating – or hovering – between different ways of using this word without realizing it. *One* way of using this word is the one which Hacker cites: to apply it to the whole human being. In this use of ‘select’, it makes sense to ask for the *reasons* someone might have for selecting something. And there would also be ways of *determining* such reasons by e.g. looking at what this person says or writes. *Another* use of ‘select’ would be one along the lines of “My ears and brain must have perceived the sound although I did not notice it”. Here, ‘perceive’ figures in a description of the *causes* for my later remembering something. Similarly, “The brain selects these features of this retinal image” could be the description of a purely causal process inside our head. There would be nothing confused about such a use of ‘select’. The only thing which would be confused, therapeutic readers hold, is if the person uttering this sentence were to claim that the brain ‘selects’ these features *in the same sense* a scientist selects data from a set of experiments. For that would mean to obliterate the *difference* between these two uses – characterized by the fact that the one involves ways of determining the reasons for someone ‘selecting’ something, whereas the other does not. (After all, it seems that a brain considered by itself does not say or write anything...) Accordingly, the way of treating philosophical confusion which therapeutic readers have advocated is this: laying out possible ways of using words with the intention of showing to the confused individual that he has failed to clearly settle on *one* of these uses. If this kind of description of ways of using words assumes the form of naming rules, then this is only in such a purely descriptive manner. The aim is to make the person ask himself: “Did saying something like ‘The brain selects certain features of retinal images’ appear to make sense to me only because I was attempting to use ‘select’ in these two ways *at once*?” What is crucial for therapeutic readers is that it is only the person uttering these words *himself* who can answer this question. Against Hacker, therapeutic readers have held that therefore, a philosophical confusion cannot be treated by showing that a string of words

deviates from established ways of using these words (cf. Gustafsson 2006: 23-33 / Conant 1998: 244-9, 2004: 186-90).

Now according to therapeutic readings, Wittgenstein's criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning matters for a correct understanding of the method of asking how words are actually used for two reasons. First, because he, in remarks such as §117, explicitly ties this criticism to this method: As we should read him, the belief that a word carried its meaning like an atmosphere into every context of use is one of the things that makes philosophers not mind the uses which they would make of words in actual circumstances (cf. e.g. Conant 1998: 240-1, 246-7). Secondly, because therapeutic readings think that certain widespread ways of understanding this method of Wittgenstein's are implicitly committed to such a conception of meaning. One way therapeutic readings have tried to bring this out has been to take issue with a certain understanding of *On Certainty* – especially, of what is involved in Wittgenstein's diagnosing certain utterances of sentences such as “Here are two hands” or “This is here” as nonsensical. A widespread idea of why Wittgenstein thinks that when uttered by Moore in a philosophical lecture, these words lack any sense is that given what these words mean – what rules hold for their use – these words do not *fit* into the context of use that Moore envisages for them. One way of spelling out this understanding of why Wittgenstein thinks that Moore is actually speaking nonsense when uttering the words “Here are two hands” while holding up his hands in a well-lit lecture hall is to say that this is because it is so *obvious* that there are two hands here. Therapeutic readings have pointed out that this understanding commits one to the following idea: that in such a situation, although it is nonsense to *say* “Here are two hands”, it is still clear enough what the thought that here are two hands *is* to say that *that* is obvious here. This, they hold, is an incoherent idea which should not be ascribed to Wittgenstein. According to therapeutic readings, what Wittgenstein is criticizing in such a Moore-type utterance is, not that given what these words usually mean, *what* they mean does not fit into this context – but rather, that in the absence of one of these usual contexts of use, it is simply unclear what “Here are two

hands” – said or thought – would mean *here*. The difference to the (“substantial”) conception of nonsense which therapeutic readers criticize is that according to this understanding of Wittgenstein, it is not that the meaning of the words “Here are two hands” is already fixed and then imported into this context of use – resulting in a clash between meaning and context – but that we are lacking here a context which would fix a meaning for “Here are two hands”. Yet, therapeutic readers hold, the idea that the meaning of words is fixed prior to their being employed in concrete contexts of use is just what Wittgenstein explicitly criticizes in §117 (cf. Conant 1998: 222-31, 239-44, also 2004: 177-80). Now according to them, not only the “substantial” misreading of *On Certainty* is committed to this, but also Hacker’s idea of *violations* of rules of grammar. What therapeutic readers are drawing on here is that Hacker also says of cases such as “The brain selects features from retinal images” that their nonsensicality is the result of an *illegitimate combination* of concepts (here: ‘select’ and ‘brain’): the rules for the use of ‘select’ *forbid* its combination with parts of a person instead of the person itself – hence, this sentence is nonsense. In other words, what the violation of the rules for the use of ‘select’ consists in is in the combining of this word with the word ‘brain’ in one sentence. What therapeutic readers have criticized is that for this idea of words being *illegitimately combined* to make sense, the meanings of these words need to be conceived as fixed prior to the use which is made of them in specific situations – which is just a version of the atmosphere conception of meaning (cf. Gustafsson 2006: 12-22, 26-7 / Conant 1998: 247-50).

2. Therapeutic Readings and “Meaning is Use”

One main context where therapeutic readings have raised the issue of how to understand Wittgenstein’s dictum “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” has been that of arguing against the idea that the prime objective of the *Investigations* had been to provide a general answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?” Therapeutic readings have criticized readings which take the *Investigations* to be primarily a contribution to one area of philosophy – the philosophy of language. They have

rejected the view that it is the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?” which constituted the point of departure for Wittgenstein’s investigation, and that the book formed a series of attempts to approach this particular question from a large a variety of directions as possible – in the service of delivering a maximally accurate and detailed answer to it. Rather than aiming at such a general account of the conditions of meaningful speech, therapeutic readers have insisted, Wittgenstein’s prime objective in the *Investigations* had been that of introducing ways of dissolving philosophical problems. While these do involve concerns with the meaning of words – in that they involve asking ourselves what we *mean* by our words when philosophizing – therapeutic readings have insisted that these ways of dissolving philosophical problems must not be seen as themselves *relying on* any account of how linguistic meaning comes about (cf. e.g. Diamond 2004: esp. 210-1 / Conant 2004: 185-9).

Now one of the ways in which therapeutic readings have argued against the idea that later Wittgenstein aimed at supplying an answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?” has been to question the widespread reading of Wittgenstein’s famous dictum “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” as being just such an answer. Therapeutic readings have held that a close look at the exact wording of this paragraph – as well as its surrounding – is apt to question this view. What they have been drawing upon in their interpretation of §43 are the words with which Wittgenstein preceded his oft-quoted remark:

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

What therapeutic readings have highlighted is that Wittgenstein is talking here about cases where we *employ* the *word* ‘meaning’. And of these, only of a “large class”. As they take it, what Wittgenstein is concerned here is the employment – i.e. *use* – which we make of the word ‘meaning’ – or, more precisely, the expression ‘meaning of a word’ – in actual circumstances. That is, what he is doing in §43 is issuing one of his typical reminders of how we would use a word in actual circumstances – in this case, the word ‘meaning’. As

they take it, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” must consequently be read as shorthand for something along the following lines: “One use which we make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word in the language’”. And such an answer to the question “How would you use the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances?”, therapeutic readings hold, is far removed from an answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?” (cf. Conant 1999: 2).

Now as therapeutic readings have also highlighted, the fact that Wittgenstein, in §43, is concerned with the grammar of the expression ‘meaning of a word’, not only makes clear that he is not after an answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?”, but also that the grammatical remark “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” must – like any grammatical remark – be seen as instrumental in dissolving a specific philosophical problem. In other words, what therapeutic readings have highlighted is that Wittgenstein, in the paragraphs leading up to §43, not only is not concerned with laying the foundations for the method of asking for the actual use of words, but conversely, what he is doing there must be regarded as a case of this method *at work* (cf. Kuusela 2008: 157-8). Now the specific problem at which his reminders of how we would use ‘meaning’ in actual circumstances are directed is of course that of the name ‘Excalibur’ becoming meaningless once the sword of this name is broken up (§39). What Wittgenstein is first directing against this apparent problem is that if we think that ‘meaning of a name’ must mean something like ‘the thing that corresponds to the word’, then we are confounding the use of this expression with that of the expression ‘bearer of the name’ (§40). In the light of how I had described therapeutic readers’ understanding of Wittgenstein’s method above, we can say that Wittgenstein’s diagnosis is that we have the ‘Excalibur’ problem because we are unwittingly hovering between two uses of ‘meaning (of a name)’. One is that which we find compelling while under the pressure of philosophy: there, we believe that ‘meaning of a name’ *must* mean something like ‘bearer of the name’. The other is a more everyday use of ‘meaning of a

name': the one, as Wittgenstein tries to capture it in §43, where by 'meaning of a name (or word)', we mean something akin to 'use of the name (or word)'. Only if we become aware that we have not settled on *one* of these uses of 'meaning of a name (or word)' can the problem of §39 dissolve for us.

Now as I had mentioned above, therapeutic readings have criticized the idea that the dissolution of particular problems – by means of one or more of the various methods that Wittgenstein proposes – should be conceived as *relying on* any account of Wittgenstein's of how linguistic meaning comes about. On the contrary, as I had pointed out in the previous paragraph, therapeutic readings take it that questions such as "What is the meaning of a word?" are themselves symptoms of our being in the grip of a philosophical problem – a problem to be treated (among other things) by our minding *actual uses* we would make of expressions such as 'meaning of a word' or 'meaning of a name'. Now another thing with which therapeutic readings have concerned themselves is the question whether Wittgenstein thought the dissolution of problems of this sort – e.g. those involving 'meaning of a name / word', 'to mean', or 'to follow a rule' – to be of any special relevance to the method of asking how words are actually used. Could it be that Wittgenstein took the dissolution of problems involving 'meaning' or 'following a rule' to be something which mattered to the dissolution of *any other* philosophical problems by means of this method? In other words: did he think the results of grammatical investigations central to the dissolution of these problems – such as "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" or "following a rule is a practice" – to be something of special relevance for the dissolution of other problems – e.g. that of skepticism? The answer that therapeutic readings have given is that Wittgenstein's rejection of such a hierarchical view is an earmark of his later philosophy. As they take it, one of the things which later Wittgenstein criticized the *Tractatus* for was that there, he had unwittingly let the dissolution of *single* problems – such as that of the nature of the proposition – assume a fundamental significance for his proposed ways of dissolving philosophical problems. (The engagement with these problems,

although then taken by him to have resulted in his showing how they are not really problems at all, had still – by the lights of later Wittgenstein – informed his early conception of philosophical clarification.) What therapeutic readers take this to show is that later Wittgenstein not only did not intend his later methods of philosophical clarification to be *based on* any philosophical account of meaning (or sense), but furthermore, that he would be acutely aware of the danger of any of the particular problems to be dissolved by these methods implicitly assuming some kind of foundational role for the dissolution of *any* such problems (cf. e.g. Diamond 2004: 207, 208-11, 213 / Kuusela 2008: 65-9, esp. 99-102, also 215-28). This, as therapeutic readings have pointed out, comes out clearly already in quotations of Wittgenstein's from the early 1930s such as this one:

There is a problem connected with our talk of meaning: Does such talk indicate that I think meaning to be the subject matter of philosophy? Are we talking about something of more general importance than chairs etc., so that we can take it that questions of meaning are the central questions of philosophy? Is meaning a meta-logical idea? No. For there are problems in philosophy that are not concerned with the meaning of 'meaning', though perhaps with the meaning of other words, e.g. 'time'. The word 'meaning' has no higher place than these. (*Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932-35*: 31)

3. "Meaning is Use" and the Atmosphere Conception of Meaning

Let us now turn to the consequences of what therapeutic readings have brought out for the idea which we are discussing. The idea was this: Since Wittgenstein thinks that his criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning is directly relevant to the method of asking how words are actually used, and it is places such as §43 which play a main role in our coming to see what is mistaken about the atmosphere conception, his statement "The meaning of a word is its use in the language" must also be directly relevant to this method. As I had said, in my mind, what therapeutic readings have brought out is especially apt to question

the middle part of this reasoning – namely, that remarks such as §43 should be thought of as being the primary means of debunking the atmosphere conception of meaning. That is, I would agree with this element of the idea under discussion: that the “atmosphere” conception which Wittgenstein mentions in §117 can be thought of as directly relevant to the method outlined in §116 – but, against this idea, I would insist that it is by no means clear that what is at issue in statements such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” can be conceived as a primary means of freeing us from the grip of this conception. Now the reason for this is that I also agree with what therapeutic readings have said about the status of §43 as a remark on the grammar of ‘meaning’. As I would like to show now, if we take seriously the fact that “meaning is use” has the status of an answer to the question “How would you *use* the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances?”, the thought that it can be a chief instrument in moving us away from the atmosphere conception of meaning must appear questionable.

Speaking on a general level, the reason why this appears doubtful, in my mind, is that, on the one hand, we are now reading “meaning is use” as an answer to the question after an *actual use* someone would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ – and that on the other, we had taken the atmosphere conception of meaning as something which makes us not mind such *actual uses* of words. If we want to uphold the idea that what Wittgenstein intended to counter the atmosphere conception of meaning with was a reminder of one use we would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances, then what should be conceivable is the following case: someone who is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning is moving away from it as a result of minding *this particular use of ‘meaning of a word’* – namely, the one where he is using this expression in the sense of ‘the use of the word’. The question is: Is such a case conceivable? For an answer, let us try to spell out such a case. Let us imagine someone whom we are engaged with in a philosophical discussion and who is not minding the uses in actual circumstances of a word he is employing – let us say the word ‘to know’. And let us also imagine that when we tell him that we think it to be questionable whether this word as

employed by him still has the sense which we all know, he responds in the same way as Wittgenstein's interlocutor in §117: "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with." And from this, we conclude – like Wittgenstein – that he is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning. Now let us further imagine that we tell him this: "You seem to think that the meaning of a word is something like an atmosphere which the word carries with it into every kind of application. But think of uses which you would make of the expression 'meaning of a word' in actual circumstances! Then you will see that this conception of meaning is not truly yours at all." Let us now imagine that he responds: "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should really take into account actual uses which I would make of the expression 'meaning of a word'. What uses were you thinking of?" Now at first glance, what this seems to lead up to is just the case which we had wanted to spell out: Someone who is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning is now ready to take into account the uses which he would make of the expression 'meaning of a word' in actual circumstances. Now, it seems, there is no obstacle – given that he sees that one use which he would make of this expression is to use it in the sense of 'the use of the word in the language' – that he will move away from the atmosphere conception of meaning. But, as I would insist, this is only at first glance. Because the question is: Is he – in this moment – still adhering to the atmosphere conception? That is: Would we, in this moment where he is willing to consider the *uses* which he would make of the expression 'meaning of a word' in actual circumstances, still say that he is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning? It seems we would not – since we had taken Wittgenstein to think of this conception as making people not mind the uses they would make of words in actual circumstances. So how could we say of someone who now *is* ready to mind these uses that he is still adhering to this conception? But *if* we say of him already in this moment – where he is willing to *consider* such uses of 'meaning of a word' – that he is not adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, then this is not a case of someone moving away from it *as a result of minding a particular use which he would make of the expression 'meaning of a word'*. For he had

already moved away from the atmosphere conception of meaning *before* minding just *which* uses he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’. It was the openness to minding actual uses of an expression (namely, ‘meaning of a word’) that made us say that he was not any more adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, not his minding *what exactly* these uses are (that is, not his minding that one of these uses of ‘meaning of a word’ would be to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word’).³

What this consideration points to, as I take it, is that the case which the view under discussion needs to conceive – namely, that of someone moving away from the atmosphere conception of meaning as a result of minding a particular use which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ (i.e. the one where he is using this expression in the sense of ‘the use of the word’) – is actually not so conceivable once we make an attempt to get it into clear focus. This is so, it appears to me, because there is a regress structure involved in what we are trying to conceive here: The reminder that one use which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word in the language’ can effect the result which we had imagined for it to effect – freeing him from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning – only if this result has already been achieved. One may want to ask now: If the idea that someone can be removed from the grip of the atmosphere conception by making him mind this particular use which he would make of the word ‘meaning’ lacks the coherence that we thought it had, how can this goal at all *be* achieved?

For an answer, we need just go back to my argument. In the exchange with the person adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, there was a point where we said to him: “But think of

³ This has to do with the fact – which I had attempted to bring out in my dissertation, drawing on Conant 1999 (cf. section 2 above) – that in §43, the notions of ‘employment’ and ‘use’ figure on two distinct logical levels (cf. Giese-wetter 2011: 204-7). There, I also tried to show how this two – level structure is mirrored in Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule – following (123-35). However, I then drew the unwarranted conclusion that this two – level structure pointed to the existence of two kinds of remarks on meaning and use in Wittgenstein. What I would now say is that there these remarks are all of one kind – namely, remarks on the grammar of ‘meaning’.

uses which you would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances!” Of course, in that scenario, this was just a preparatory step for making him mind that one use he would make of this expression is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word’. But as I had then tried to show, there is something incoherent about the idea that it is his minding *that* which does the trick in removing him from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning. Still yet, this moment in my argument contains the answer to our question: Because if we had to name something which – in the scenario of my argument – in effect *did* remove our interlocutor from the grip of this conception, that must have been our saying to him: “But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances!” For after all, *that* was which prompted him to respond: “Maybe I should really take into account actual uses which I would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ – What uses were you thinking of?” That is, it was this “But think of uses ...!” which prompted him to express the readiness to *consider* such uses – which, in turn, made us say that he was no longer in the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning.

So one of the things that *can* move someone away from the atmosphere conception of meaning is asking him to consider actual uses of the word ‘meaning’. But what should be clear now is that it need not be actual uses of the word ‘*meaning*’ which he would have to consider. For of course, we would also say of him that he had freed himself from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning if he were to express his readiness to consider actual uses of the word ‘to know’, the word ‘I’, or the word ‘being’. In other words, even if in the scenario of my argument, the trick in moving our interlocutor away from the atmosphere conception of meaning had been done by our saying to him “But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘*meaning of a word*’ in actual circumstances!”, the same thing could equally well have been achieved by saying to him: “But think of uses which you would make of the word ‘*to know*’ in actual circumstances!” And is it not actually the latter which we had wanted him to do all along? After all, it was an employment of the word ‘*to know*’ which he made in a

philosophical discussion that had struck us as strange – prompting us to think that he should mind uses which he would make of this word in *actual circumstances* (in order to see if he really thought that ‘to know’ as employed by him in his philosophical example still had the sense which we all know). Issuing a reminder of a particular use which he would make of the word ‘*meaning*’ was an idea which we had only hit upon because of this manifest adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning. But, as I had tried to show, this reminder cannot not do anything for the purpose of countering this conception which a reminder of actual uses of ‘to know’ could not do.

The upshot from my argument, as I take it, is then this: *Any* grammatical remark – through its issuing an invitation to mind a *use* we would make of a word in *actual circumstances* (“But think of uses...!”) – must be thought of as being equally able to counter the atmosphere conception of meaning mentioned by Wittgenstein in §117. That is, invitations to mind uses which we would make of the word ‘to know’, the word ‘I’, or the word ‘being’ in actual circumstances must all be thought of as being able to move someone away from the atmosphere conception of meaning in the same way as remarks on the grammar of the word ‘meaning’. Remarks on the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ – such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” – cannot be thought of as playing a *privileged role* in doing this.⁴

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, if we take seriously what therapeutic readings have brought out about central elements of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, the idea that the grammatical remark “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” plays a privileged role in freeing us from the grip of the atmosphere conception of

⁴ I say “privileged role” here because – as we have seen in my argument – it is not that they cannot play *any* role. Since they too are invitations to mind a use we would make of a word in *actual circumstances*, they also must be thought of as being capable of moving someone away from the atmosphere conception of meaning in the same way as reminders of actual uses of ‘to know’, ‘I’, or ‘being’.

meaning cannot be so easily sustained any more. And this, I would continue, therefore also holds for the idea that what Wittgenstein says in §43 (and elsewhere) about a relation between the meaning of words and their use has the same relevance for the method of asking how words are actually used as his criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning in §117. Contrary to a widespread view of the matter, in later Wittgenstein, the atmosphere conception of meaning and “meaning is use” cannot be conceived as direct opposites – they are not structurally on a par with each other. As I take it, this outcome is in line with central tenets of therapeutic readings. It highlights the fact that problems involving expressions such as ‘meaning of a name’ or ‘meaning of a word’ are *specific* problems – to be approached by the usual means of dissolving philosophical problems, including the method of issuing reminders of how we would use words in actual circumstances. However, in my mind, it also makes clearer what it means to fully appropriate the anti-hierarchical view which Wittgenstein articulates in the passage I had quoted from his 1930s lectures. After all, if we think of the atmosphere conception of meaning as having the general relevance for the method of asking how words are actually used that Wittgenstein thinks it has, and then take remarks on the grammar of ‘meaning’ such as that in §43 to be the primary means of moving us away from this conception, it seems hard to see how we could uphold an anti-hierarchical view of the kind articulated by Wittgenstein already in the early 1930s. For if one of the things that makes us not mind actual uses which we would make of our words is the belief that the meaning of words is like an atmosphere which they carry with them into every kind of application, and minding actual uses of ‘meaning’ were the one thing that Wittgenstein thinks would remove us from the grip of this belief, wouldn’t this mean that actually *all* problems are – albeit indirectly – concerned with the meaning of ‘meaning’ – since we may be confronted with this belief about the meaning of words in the course of the attempted dissolution of *any* such problem (i.e. any problem which we attempt to dissolve by means of the method of asking how words are actually used)? Now if this were so, the dissolution of problems involving ‘meaning’ would indeed appear to have assumed a kind of fundamental relevance for the

dissolution of *any other* problem.⁵ Yet, as I hope to have shown, the thought underlying this question is not as coherent as it might first

⁵ An example of how difficult it is to safeguard an account of Wittgenstein's philosophy against this impression can be found in Paul Horwich's recent book *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy* (2012). One of Horwich's main aims there is to show that Wittgenstein's way of treating philosophical problems does not rest on any particular view of meaning – especially not on a “‘use’ account” of meaning (cf. 2012: vii, ix-x, esp. 69-72). Rather, he sees the scope of remarks such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” as limited to specific problems involving ‘meaning’—the treatment of which he sees as “simply one application of the general therapeutic methodology [...]” (x, cf. also 55, 105-7). However, already in his first exposition of this therapeutic methodology by way of an example—involving a possible puzzlement over a mathematician's assertion that “Every straight line intersects every circle—but sometimes only at imaginary points” (cf. Wittgenstein's example from LFM 16)—we find this:

But again, the source of confusion is not difficult to identify. As just illustrated, we tend to forget that the meaning of a word is something we bestow, not usually *explicitly* by means of a deliberate stipulation, but often *implicitly*, merely by using the word in certain ways; so that a change in its meaning does not require overt redefinition, but may come about through a shift in its fundamental pattern of deployment. (10)

The remedy, quite clearly, is not to be mesmerized by the *word*, but to appreciate how distinct uses of it, hence somewhat distinct meanings, may evolve and proliferate. (11)

What Horwich wants to show in his example is how our feeling of puzzlement about the mathematician's assertion arises from our not realizing that the mathematician is not using the words ‘intersect’ and ‘imaginary’ in the sense which we are accustomed to. So one of the things Horwich does there is point out the relevant differences in use concerning these words. But in the passages just quoted, Horwich goes one step further than this: He is bringing in remarks of the type “The meaning of a word is its use in the language”. Now since he says that he takes Wittgenstein in remarks such as PI §43 to do nothing more than report a triviality regarding “features of our practice (or of *one* of our practices) with the word ‘meaning’ [...]” (114), it appears that we can take it that what Horwich thinks he is bringing in here are reminders of one of the ways in which we would ordinarily employ the expression ‘meaning of a word’. But if that were the case, this example would strongly resemble my example above involving ‘to know’. Just as our imagined interlocutor there, Horwich here would be attempting to dispel a state of confusion comparable to being in the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning—namely, that of being “mesmerized by the *word*”—not by issuing more reminders about actual uses of the words figuring in the philosophical problem at hand, but by issuing reminders about how we would actually use the word ‘meaning’. Yet then, of course, the same question regarding my example would arise: If reminders of how we would actually use the word ‘meaning’—reminders of which Horwich also says that they play a role only within the treatment of *specific* problems involving ‘meaning’—can be thought to be the thing that must be brought in to address this kind of confusion *here* (within the dissolution of a problem involving the words ‘intersect’ and ‘imaginary’), how can we still uphold the view that the dissolution of particular problems involving ‘meaning’ is *not* fundamental to Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach as such (a view which, as it appears, Horwich would

appear to us: If in the course of an attempt at dissolving a philosophical problem, we take someone to not mind actual uses of a word figuring in the formulation of his problem – such as ‘to know’ – *because* of his being in the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning, reminders of actual uses which he would make of the word ‘meaning’ cannot be thought of as being in any way privileged in the attempt of moving him away from this conception – i.e. privileged over further reminders of actual uses of ‘to know’ or other expressions figuring in the formulation of the problem itself. This, as I take it, is a vital element of what it means to say – as therapeutic readings have done – that the dissolution of specific problems involving ‘meaning’ has no special relevance for the whole of the method of asking how words are actually used.⁶

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be rather reluctant to retreat from)? As I have attempted to show, the answer is that there is no *need* to bring in remarks on the grammar of ‘meaning’ in order to address the atmosphere conception of meaning or confusions similar to it.

⁶ A near-final version of this paper was presented to the Research Seminar of the Philosophy Department at Åbo Akademi University, Finland, in April 2013. I would like to thank the participants for their helpful comments, particularly Yrsa Neuman. My special thanks go to Martin Gustafsson for inviting me there. Throughout the many stages of its development, this paper has greatly benefited from discussions with James Conant, David Löwenstein, Oskari Kuusela, Maja Jaakson, Martin Gustafsson, Gisela Bengtsson, and Avner Baz, as also from the comment of one anonymous reviewer for this journal. I would like to thank all of them.

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