Meaning and Action

There is a fact, both curious and important, concerning Ludwig Wittgenstein's work, which deserves to be pointed out, namely, that having been studied in a systematic way for more than half a century it has given rise to two completely different attitudes: on the one hand, it is universally respected – except for some misguided professional philosophers, who feel that they have to put publicly into question one or another of Wittgenstein's *dicta* not to pass completely unperceived – but on the other hand it is basically ignored. As always when we deal with general or rough assessments like this one, we can point to exceptions, to special cases that it would be silly to deny. It is obvious, however, that my remark is supposed to have a larger scope, a so to speak "cultural" one. It is indeed a **fact** that, in spite of the efforts deployed by some important philosophers, contemporary philosophical culture is not only alien but openly hostile to the Wittgensteinian way of thinking. Now instead of trying to show at all costs that this is not so, what we should ask ourselves is rather why this is the case and try to explain its being so. The advantage of such suggestion is that, were we to follow it, we would be in a better position to investigate deeply into Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and into the consequences it brings with it. Perhaps we could then understand that there is an important sense in which, particularly soon after 1929, Wittgenstein simply stopped being concerned with philosophy, as usually understood and practiced. This may sound as utterly false or openly silly. In my view it is neither and what has to be understood is that Wittgenstein invented a new kind of intellectual activity, an activity which has two defining features:

> 1) it is different both in goals and methods from conventional
>   philosophy, but
> 2) it is crucially relevant for the problems of traditional philosophy.

As a matter of fact, the genuine Wittgensteinian philosopher may, if he wants to, ignore standard philosophical products, since at least in principle he should be able to practice philosophy on his own the way Wittgenstein taught; *par contre*, the conventional philosopher just can't ignore the results Wittgenstein arrived at or the results practitioners of Wittgensteinian philosophy **may** get at **if** they do know how to employ Wittgenstein's conceptual apparatus and **if** they properly apply the research methods that he elaborated and used to dismantle a whole range of inherited philosophical problems. Among the allegedly "eternal" problems which were actually dissolved by Wittgenstein we could easily mention at least the following ones: the problem of universals, the mind-body problem, the problem of the foundations of mathematics, the problem of the self and the problem of scepticism, to mention only the most representative ones. Since the Wittgensteinian way of thinking cannot be accommodated within the framework of traditional

philosophy, it becomes terribly uncomfortable for "normal" philosophers. That's why neither Kripke nor Quine nor Dennett nor any other first rate conventional philosopher knows what to do with Wittgenstein. I think it is high time to make a serious collective effort to understand the present situation and it seems to me that one way of making progress in this direction is by way of contrast, actually seeing that we do two completely different things when we do philosophy the old way than if we do (or try to do) Wittgensteinian philosophy.

I'm inclined to think that when developed until its last consequences, the idea that analytical philosophy is the philosophy which formulates or reformulates the inherited philosophical problems from the perspective of language, implies something very important, namely, that philosophical problems are complications that have their source in the complexities of language (or, more generally, of symbolism) **and** in our misunderstanding of such complexities. Wittgenstein, the analytical philosopher *par excellence*, was perfectly aware of how difficult it is to get out of any grammatical swamp, but his Ariadne's thread not to get lost in the labyrinth of language was just precisely the idea that he was dealing with nothing but puzzles, with real pseudo-problems. Thus a decisive difference between Wittgenstein and other philosophers who have dealt with exactly the same subjects or themes, for instance the theory of meaning, is that Wittgenstein never lost sight of that aspect of language – or of the sign system he would examine – that could be called its 'practicality'. Already in the *Tractatus* for Wittgenstein, in contrast with what Frege and Russell used to think, logic, for instance, always was the logic **of** language. For him it was clear that logic has always to be in touch with its application, for as he says "if this were not so, how could we apply logic? We might put it in this way: if there would be a logic even if there were no world, how then could there be a logic given that there is a world?".[1] In the same way, logic is the logic **of** the world, which it pervades: "Logic is *prior* to every experience – that something *is so*.

It is prior to the question 'How?', not prior to the question 'What?'.[2] Whether or not the feature of Wittgenstein's philosophical meditation I called its 'practicality' is due to a healthy engineer's mentality is unimportant, but what does matter is that thanks to that feature Wittgenstein was able to neutralize abstract philosophical speculations, no doubt intellectually exciting but always cut off from the utility of signs. This is a difference of which Wittgenstein knew how to take advantage.

What I've been saying adopts a clear manifestation as soon as we philosophically consider language itself. It is relatively easy to see how Wittgenstein proceeds and then to contrast what he does with what the conventional philosopher

[1] L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 5.5521.
[2] *Ibid.*, 5.552 (b).

would do. To put it in a crude way, what the latter aims at is to develop a "semantics", to construe a "systematic theory of meaning", a theory of meaning "for a whole language", etc. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, the theory of meaning could only be a description of the concrete usefulness a particular expression lends within a given linguistic community. In this sense, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language neither is nor aims at being a sort of "semantics", a mere abstract theory, not even a doctrine of speech acts, whose categories ultimately are purely formal, but is rather a reflection on a special activity carried out by human beings, characterized in **a** particular way, that is, **as speakers**. The Wittgensteinian sort of meditation **is** therefore a reflection whose goal is to point to a disfunction of an aspect in the life of human beings, an aspect which may easily be distorted, *viz.*, the philosophical use of language. In this sense, his work certainly possesses an anthropological flavour. However, since Wittgenstein occupies himself neither with stones nor with bones nor with dressing rules or economic exchange rules and so on, it would be an oversimplification to classify his work as "anthropological", without adding nuances of some sort. That's why I think that a non controversial way of referring to the kind of research he envisages, to distinguish it among other things from the common philosophical kind of speculation, is to refer to it as "grammatical anthropology". I must say I'm not totally satisfied with the label (after all we already have Wittgenstein's own expression, *viz.*, 'grammatical investigation') and therefore I don't cling to it. I just believe that it is a useful one at least for the particular goals I have in mind here.

As I already suggested, probably the best way to bring out the peculiarities and the virtues of the Wittgensteinian approach is by contrasting it with alternative explanations of the same phenomena. It's obviously not one of my goals in this paper to offer a detailed reconstruction of any of the standard theories of language that can be found in the literature and which were or are in fashion, "en vogue", be it Davidson's, Dummett's, Chomsky's, Lewis' or Quine's, to mention just some of the most representative leaders of the conventional way of doing conventional philosophy of language. So I'll limit myself to enumerate some of its most prominent features to compare them afterwards with those of the Wittgensteinian approach. Broadly speaking, in spite of being extremely abstract, conventional theories of language supposedly incorporate, one way or another, some apparently empirical hypothesis, like the Chomskian one about innateness or Dummett's view about the prerequisites for the understanding of the language. Here Wittgenstein's *dictum* to the effect that "The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations"[3] is totally corroborated. But apart from being put forward almost always as grandiose proposals though purely speculative ones, it is also the case that they lack concrete outlines for the specification of meaning, while giving time and again the same kind of explanation

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[3] L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), sec. 458.

for the same linguistic phenomena, like the utterance of sentences (assertion). From this point of view, sentences like 'Anastasia was murdered on Lenin's orders' and 'the wolf ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother' are explained in exactly the same way. Language is conceived as a self-contained structure (which can even be axiomatized) and its functioning explained in terms of one or another kind of objects and of individual, mental faculties. I won't go into the details, but I do hold that regardless of how well structured they might be, what standard theories of meaning, language and so on, in one way or another exemplify is the Augustinian conception of language. This perhaps explains their inevitably circular character. With Dummett, for instance, who surely represents an improvement with respect to Davidson, we pass from "meaning" to "truth-conditions", from "truth-conditions" to "understanding" and from "understanding" we are back to "meaning". Circularity and similar defects infect any standard theory of language, however famous it may be.

The Wittgensteinian approach is radically different. The goal in this case is not just to theorize, in some pejorative sense of the term, but to describe the human activity carried out through or in connection with the employment of signs. Given that language is seen as a tool, or rather a box of tools, we immediately become aware of the fact that we practically never do exactly the same thing with them, just as we don't always do the same thing with, say, a hammer. Of course, linguistic activities are normally uniformized by surface grammar. That's precisely where the danger lies, for a huge variety of different sort of applications associated with signs, applications intimately related to human activities, become covered up by what is one and the same linguistic disguise. Grammatical analysis aims at uncovering the real meaning of what we say, understanding by 'meaning' the linguistic counterpart of the act actually carried out. Obviously, for this kind of analysis the only conceptual apparatus which could possibly be useful is the one constituted by notions like language-game, form of life, family ressemblance, seeing as, depth grammar, and so on. Wittgenstein's approaches actually **forces** us to carry out concrete analyses of concrete linguistic moves, avoiding the all too easy generalizations, the abstract *dicta*, the kind of theories that in this age of globalization could fairly be labeled 'global theories of language'. Naturally, for this kind of analysis surface grammar, just as all its offsprings, like quantification theory or, more generally, any kind of formalism, is not only useless, but harmful. This is important, for lots of criticisms of the Wittgenstienian mode of thinking arise from ignoring this simple but profound difference.

Based on a view of language as a collection of tools, what Wittgenstien carries out is a special kind of investigation. I would say that the *Philosphical Investigations*, *Zettel*, the *Remarks of the Foundations of Mathematics* and *On Certainty* are the paradigmatic manuals of the still new way of doing philosophy. What, for instance, in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein does is to introduce his new

conceptual apparatus as well as a set of research methods so that afterwards we, the pupils of this new kind of investigation, shall be in a position to emulate the teacher, who already showed the way, to do in our turn the same kind of thing with respect to the philosophical puzzles we choose to face. It is evident that we don't do things with words. What we do is to **act** through or by means of or in connection with words. So what traditional philosophers do boils down to a misunderstanding and a distortion of what we do when we act linguistically. It is obvious that if what we want is to understand what we do when we speak (not necessarily through well formed sentences. Sometimes one asks things like 'Oh really?' and the other speakers understand perfectly well what is being conveyed), we shall obviously have to consider something more than mere words or mere signs, just as we are unconcerned with what happens inside the speaker. What matters to us are the actual moves in the language-games and these just can't be understood if we don't reconstruct the forms of life in which those move fit, to which they belong. Now with this in mind, I'll try to illustrate what Wittgenstein does by means of a few simple examples of my own.

It is evident that if what we are interested in is the Wittgensteinian way of thinking, so to speak, in action, what we have to do rather than quoting from here and there what he actually said is to try to emulate him, just as a pupil of primary school does when he imitates in a rudimentary way what his teacher does well. So let me begin with an example of Wittgenstien's himself. In the *Investigations*, as we all know, he makes it explicit that although we don't have any direct access to "other person's mind", whatever that means, we nonetheless refuse to believe that he is a robot. So we say that he has a mind or a soul. Now this expression enables us to indicate not that the person in question has something special inside, or that he is made out of a very special stuff, or things like that. To say that we believe that someone "has a mind" or a soul is a description neither of the other person's "inner state" nor of a state of mind (since we are speaking of what we believe). It's rather what one would normally say if, for instance, we were forced to treat someone in an outrageous way. Let's suppose that we are visiting a racist country and for some reason someone wants us to beat a child of the alienated ethnic group and that we refuse to do it. A way of manifesting our rejection of such a proposal would be to say: "But look, I can't do that: he also feels, he has a mind or a soul, just as you do". What would be we saying? In other words: what would be the meaning of our saying that? Would we by chance be trying to state something that, taken as a factual pronouncement, could in principle surprise someone, could tell someone something new? Of course not. If that is what I am taken to mean with that expression, I'm afraid I would be wasting my time and making others waste theirs. What I want to make explicit is something different, namely, my attitude towards the person referred to. As Wittgenstein famously puts it: "My attitude towards him is an

attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul".[4] It is pretty obvious, I suppose, that this clarification is neither reducible nor equivalent to something like "'he has a soul is true" if and only if he has a soul'. This is just the logical condition for the statement to be accepted, but such condition, which unsurprisingly reappears in exactly the same way in any other case, does not amount to a clarification of meaning, since 'logical' in this sense just means 'trivially necessary'. It would be like saying that because we know that in 'the rabbit ate all the carrots', we can ascribe something to the rabbit because we know that 'rabbit' is the subject of the sentence. That might be considered by more than one a great discovery, but surely it is philosophically worthless.

One of the morals of Wittgenstein's attack on the Augustinian conception of language, a conception which one way or another comprehends or embraces practically all theories of language, from Plato to Dummett, is that language just can't be understood independently of its usefulness, that is, of its application. To understand a language is nothing but to understand the linguistic exchanges in which as a matter of fact people take part. The proper understanding therefore requires the knowledge of both the linguistic contexts in which they take place as well as the goals speakers set for themselves. Otherwise the meaning can't be determined. From this perspective really clarifying explanations of what we do when we speak can be generated. Let's consider a simple case. Let's suppose that someone rightly asserts that 3 is a prime number. This is something that can only be said in the appropriate context. Nobody wakes up in the morning and asserts it just for its own sake, say, having breakfast. To say something like that requires the appropriate context: it may be a class of arithmetic, to explain something to someone who makes some kind of mistake, and so forth. Let's suppose that we ask for a clarification of the meaning of our sentence. Once more, it's tautological (and therefore trivially true, even if necessary) to say that "'3 is a prime number" is true if and only if 3 is a prime number', but the issue is: what would we gain by this reminder? From the perspective of surface grammar what is being said can only be understood if we ascribe to the speaker the idea that "there is" an abstract entity, that is, the number 3, which has an essential property, namely, that of being prime. But is that really what the speaker wanted to say? Was it to say that that he said what he said? Do normal speakers wish to speak of abstract entities and strange properties? Not at all! That is nothing but philosophical interpretation, which is not equivalent to the kind of benefice that speakers expect to obtain from their using the expression. It seems to me that, depending upon the particular linguistic context in which one finds oneself, the speaker may be meaning something different. It might be something like 'that that we call "number three" and which is represented by the sign "3" is used in such a way that with it you just can carry out certain operations, but not others. Such number, for instance, can't be divided by 2 and give as a result a whole number'.

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[4] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), Part II, sec. *iv*, p. 178.

That is the kind of information that the speaker might be interested in conveying and, therefore, that is what he could **mean**. The assertion's meaning has to do with practical arithmetic, not with any sort of imagery concerning ethereal entities.

Let's quickly review one more case. Let's examine a simple expression like 'I remember now that my father used to wear boots when he went out for a ride'. Once again: nobody abruptly, with no communicative sort of justification, says something like that, out of the blue, just for the pleasure of stating it, even if it is true. Such an expression has to be employed within the context of a particular, concrete conversation, and so it presupposes a concrete, conversational, communicative background. It is only out of this context of linguistic exchange that someone may mean something by it. And now our question is: what could I possibly mean by that? What could possibly be my meaning? That it is true if and only if what is stated is the case? What could I possibly be pursuing by means of this linguistic tool? Was it my goal to induce the listener to depict for himself a particular picture (about which I haven't got the least idea myself), as if he were a kind of Leonardo or Michaelangelo who immediately proceeds to obey the received order? If the listener didn't even know my father: how could he ever represent the situation for himself? But if we agree that that sort of explanation just leads nowhere, then what's the point to appeal to the notion of truth-conditions if the latter just doesn't help to clarify the meaning of any expression whatsoever? If (trivially) to state such conditions were the goal of using expressions like the mentioned one, then we would be dealing with a completely failed linguistic action : I could never know whether or not what the listener represented "in his mind" does correspond to what I wanted him to reproduce. I infer that that just can't be the kind of explanation we are looking for.

So let's rephrase our question concerning the meaning of my sentence: what could I possibly wish to do with such an assertion? If the question concerns an atomic sentence, that is, an expression used totally out of context, my answer is: I haven't got the least idea. To provide an answer, therefore, we have to assume or presuppose a particular discourse context, whether real or imaginary, for the sentence may mean different things even it its truth conditions are always exactly the same. I might be, for instance, talking to someone about myself, about my past, etc., and that I could be sharing with a friend a certain state of mind, a certain mood. In such a case, I might be willing to arise in my friend a feeling of nostalgia similar to mine, I might feel like sharing with him certain personal truths concerning my life, my past, etc. Paraphrasing the *Tractatus*, the linguistic tool just can't anticipate its application. This tool, like any other, may be used for a variety of ends and these just can't be fixed up *a priori*. But if this is true, then theories like the Davidson/Dummett one are just a philosophical fiasco: they just clarify no meaning at all.

I'd like to give one more simple example. Let's suppose that I affirm 'I see a red patch'. According to the traditional view, I know the meaning of 'I see a red patch' if and only if I'm actually seeing a red patch. But how does this reminder make me advance in understanding? I just don't know. There's a whole range of questions which could be raised in connection with that assertion. Questions which are relevant here for the clarification of its meaning are questions like 'what did you use this linguistic tool for? What did you want to achieve? What are the communication benefices that the use of this tool in this particular occasion reported to you? Obviously, it would be absolutely pointless to re-state its "truth-conditions". Accordingly, our answer has to be different. So let's ask first: which could be our context? Well, if I'm speaking seriously with a colleague about, say, elephants, and suddenly in the middle of the conversation I say to him that I see a red patch, he would be entitled to think that I'm just making fun of him or he could think that there's something wrong with my sight and therefore that I'm complaining. I can imagine that I'm at the oculist's cabinet and that he's making me pass a test. In that case, my linguistic move would be a kind of report and its point would be to call attention upon some part of my eyeball or upon some of my eye's functions. At any rate, it should be clear that the meaning, what we are interested in, can only emerge as the last link of a chain of presuppositions. Incidentally, what is beyond doubt, I think, is that nobody would say 'I see a red patch' in order to describe, say, a red car.

If what I've been saying is reasonable, then it follows that the kind of clarification that is usually offered in the standard philosophy of language is radically different from the kind of explanation that springs from the Wittgensteinian way of doing philosophy and indeed is quite useless. The former corresponds to the usual game in philosophy in which surface grammar dictates the issues. This is a well known fact, whose consequences are equally well known and therefore I don't think I should go here and now into the details. What I'm interested in is to determine, assuming that what I've said really is in effect related to the kind of analysis we find in Wittgenstein's works, what kind of clarification are we given when what is at stake is the Wittgensteinian way of doing philosophy? On the one hand, it is evident that it is relevant for the kind of discussion and speculation that normally takes place in traditional philosophy, since if the Wittgensteinian kind of remarks are right, then the involved philosophical theories are just absurd (not false), but on the other hand it is also evident that something more than purely clarification of meaning is being achieved. This "something more" comes out from the peculiar class of clarifications that Wittgenstein carries out. Now what could that be?

In my view, what Wittgenstein teaches is to describe a particular facet of human life. This kind of description is available only upon the basis of an understanding of language not as self-contained or self-subsistent machinery, but as a very complex machinery which functions only in connection with human beings' needs and activities, activities which in turn language contribute to conform, to

conceptualize. But then what Wittgenstein does is really a kind of anthropology, what as I suggested above could be called 'grammatical anthropology'. It is in this sense that the invention of a new way of thinking consists. What Wittgenstein does is anthropology, for in the last analysis his is a reflection not upon signs (it's not semiotics), but upon Man or upon human beings or, if you prefer, upon the linguistizised and therefore socialized and acting Man. It is difficult, if we see Wittgenstein's work as a whole, not to see it in this way or at least in a very similar way. I'll try rather quickly to illustrate what I'm saying.

Let's consider the language of neurophysiology. Let's imagine a scientist speaking freely about neurons, synapses, neural networks, hypothalamus, cortex and so on. What we want to know is what his assertions, made by mean of this lexicon, mean. Now once again to determine such thing is not tantamount with giving us their "truth-conditions". To say something like "'pleasant sensations are produced when the hypothalamus is stimulated or excited' is true if and only if pleasant sensations are produced when the hypothalamus is stimulated or excited' takes us nowhere, elucidates nothing. It is equally useless to have a grasp of what should happen inside the scientist's head in order for him to utter such sentence. Language doesn't belong to him and therefore, what is being said just can't be about his inner processes or states, whether physical or mental. It therefore has to be about something which others can share, something public or of public access. Accordingly, it has to be about actions, about behaviour. Let me paraphrase the *Tractatus* in this connection: what has to be clarified is what is done when we use a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world. If we don't put upon 'projective relation' any kind of subjective or idealistic or mentalistic meaning, the only thing that could be meant is something like 'the propositional sign in its practical application upon that sector of the world in relation to which it is employed'. That is human activity. Thus, the meaning of each linguistic move, of each move of the language-game, emerges as a socialized and coordinated activity, that is, out of a previously existing form of life which was not configured once and for all, but which is modifiable, or perfectible depending upon what speakers do. Even if our subject matter are not the activities themselves but only the special activity realized by means of the tool we employ in connection with them and required by them, nevertheless that kind of study surely is anthropological in character; given that such activity is carried out by using signs, in accordance with rules that we have taught each other how to follow, etc., then the activity is linguistic. And given that the approach of this peculiar activity is "grammatical ", in the Wittgenstienian sense of course, then what we do when we do or try to do Wittgensteinian philosophy is what could be called 'grammatical anthropology'.

The distinction between the two kinds of philosophy of language carry with them different notions of meaning and the absurd. For instance, for the conventional philosophy of language, the absurd has to do first of all with syntactic rules and the

usual grammatical and semantic conventions; for the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language the absurd appears rather with what totally lacks practical application, with the impossibility of doing anything whatever with our linguistic tools. In his brilliant essay, 'Language Game # 2', Prof. Malcolm describes very accurately the reactions associated with the lack of sense, with the absurd or the *Unsinn*. Of course that what is absurd for traditional philosophy (a formal contradiction, for instance) is in general absurd for Wittgensteinian philosophy too, but it is obvious that their respective notions don't necessarily coincide. Actually, standard philosophical discourse is for normal philosophers perfectly meaningful, while for Wittgensteinians it's just nonsensical. It's important not to lose sight of this dichotomy, if we want to avoid rather rough mistakes of understanding and to utter unfair and worthless criticisms of Wittgenstein's thought and teaching.

Grammatical investigation can be carried out at any time on any symbolism whatever: natural language, musical notation, mathematical symbolism, neurophysiological expressions, etc. In all these cases, the normal users of the sign system in question, trained as they are in order to be their users, can easily distinguish between meaningful and meaningless expressions, even if they are unable to make explicit the rules that govern their use. Nonsense is public and notorious, as lawyers say. No normal speaker makes mistakes about it. What becomes difficult to determine, however, is the peculiar nonsense which arises when different symbolisms are mixed up, as happens, for instance, when the language of neurophysiology is incorporated by natural language and interpreted by it. Inside neurophysiology, as inside mathematics, any scientist **knows** perfectly well which formula, which assertion, etc., is absurd and which isn't. But what he certainly is unable to do is to determine whether or not what a philosopher says about the contents of his science is or is not meaningful. He is completely defenseless against him, for anything the conventional philosopher affirms is asserted in accordance with the rules of surface grammar and therefore anything he says is at first sight at least perfectly correct and meaningful. He explains the scientist that what he does is to speak about certain entities and certain properties and relations between them. A tacit agreement easily grows up between classical philosophers and scientists, for what the standard philosopher says is what the scientist wishes to hear, the only thing he's spontaneously prepared to accept. The Wittgensteinian philosopher, on the other hand, is rather a wet blanket. His message is much more difficult to convey and to grasp. He teaches the scientist that what he wants to say shows itself in his work, that his assertions fulfill a definite practical function that he, more than any other, is in a position to retrieve, as long as he doesn't allow the surface order of sentences to speak for themselves.