The Reaches of Words

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The Reaches of Words

Avner Baz

Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts two ways of going on from Wittgenstein and, to a lesser extent, Austin. The first is Charles Travis’. The second is Stanley Cavell’s. Focusing on our concept of propositional knowledge (‘knowing that such and such’), I argue that Travis’ tendency to think of language and its concepts as essentially in the business of enabling us to represent (describe, think of) things as being one way or another and his consequent neglect of the question of what, in the Austinian sense, is being done with the words have led him to give an inaccurate account of the context sensitivity of ‘knowing that’. By contrast, Cavell’s treatment of the concept – while fully hospitable to Travis’ ‘occasion sensitivity’ – is attentive to the limitations of the representationalist conception, and takes the question of what is being done with the words, as it relates to the question of the intelligibility of the speaker, as primary. This fundamental difference between Travis and Cavell, I finally suggest, explains the stark contrast between the ways in which each has responded to what he calls ‘scepticism’.

Keywords: Travis; Cavell; Wittgenstein; propositional knowledge; scepticism; representation

The game with these words, their employment in the linguistic intercourse that is carried on by their means, is more involved – the role of these words in our language other – than we are tempted to think. (This role is what we need to understand in order to resolve philosophical paradoxes).

(Wittgenstein, 1963: remark 182)

Introduction

In Philosophical Investigations, remark 569, Wittgenstein writes: ‘Language is an instrument. Its concepts are instruments.’ In remark 570 he adds: ‘[Concepts] are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest.’ Consider two different interpretations of these remarks – ones which proceed from two different conceptions of what concepts, essentially, are
The prevalent interpretation begins with the assumption that the primary role of any of our concepts is to enable us to represent the things of our world and the ways they are or might be. One who thinks about concepts in this way is likely to think that language is essentially an instrument for producing representations. If this is how one conceives of what concepts, essentially, are for, one is likely to understand Wittgenstein’s second remark above along the following lines: Concepts do their work by enabling us to classify—to group things together in various ways and distinguish them from other things. They thus enable us to parse the things of our world in ways that we have in one way or another found useful, or otherwise valuable. What ways of classifying the things of our world are enabled by our concepts is revelatory of our interests in that it shows what (sorts of) differences and similarities have mattered to us. Our concepts direct our interest, in turn, by making readily available certain classifications and not others.¹

To the above prevalent philosophical tendency to think of language—and hence of the way that, qua speakers, we relate to the world—as essentially representational, one may respond, and some have responded, by attempting a wholesale rejection of it: proposing, for example, that instead of thinking first and foremost of language in general, and of the relation between our minds and our world in general, in terms of representations, we think of them first and foremost in terms of (say) social practices.² The danger with this type of response is that we might end up replacing one set of overly simplistic and general and therefore misleading theories or sets of metaphors with theories and sets of metaphors that, however liberating, may be no less simplistic and general and consequently misleading, and no less captivating.

For this reason, the second interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks that I wish to propose does not proceed from any general conception of language. Rather, it proceeds from the (relatively) non-contentious observation that language is an instrument not only for the noting and recording of differences, but rather more generally for the intelligible, rationally assessable, making of differences—where describing or representing things as being one way or another, even if we include in this the raising of questions and the drawing of inferential links between one representation and another, only constitutes a portion, however significant, of all of the ways that we have for making differences by means of language and in the light of concepts. Concepts thought of in this second way guide and inform behaviours and practices not merely by enabling us to form representations. For example, our possession of the concept of ‘apology’ guides and informs, and therefore manifests itself in, not only our representing, counting, people or ourselves as apologizing, or not, or as having or not having apologized, but also our apologizing properly, effectively, and felicitously under various circumstances, and our properly, effectively, and felicitously accepting or...
rejecting an apology, and so on. As Austin was at pains to remind us, ‘I apologize’, while superficially of an ‘assertoric form’, is not normally used for describing myself as apologizing, or even for speaking of an apology; and yet, from the perspective of the second, more open and open-ended, way of thinking about the sort of instruments that concepts are, it would seem an unreasonable begging of the question to deny that its competent utterances, and the competent responses to these utterances, are nonetheless exercisings of our concept of apology, or anyway manifestations of our knowledge of what ‘apologize’ means.

Concepts, thought of in this second way, express our interests not only by enabling us to represent the differences that we have found worth representing (describing, noting, recording, wondering about, calling for, etc.), but also by guiding and informing behaviours and practices that bespeak, and are responsive to, the different ways in which we care about people and things. We can, for example, learn something about what human being are like and what matters to them and how, not only from the fact that under various circumstances they count, or refuse to count, certain patterns of human behaviour as ‘apologizing’, but also, even first and foremost, from the fact that they apologize, and demand, and respond in particular ways to, apologies, etc. – that they have made these particular forms of behaviour available to themselves (in various ways) in certain kinds of situations.

This is how I propose that we understand the above remarks of Wittgenstein’s. I believe that one who reads the Investigations from within the bounds of the first way of understanding them is going to miss much of what is deepest in this text as well as the radicality of its break with the tradition of western philosophy. In this paper I shall not argue for this exegetical claim, however. Nor shall I be developing anything like a comprehensive defence of the second way of thinking about concepts. Rather, I shall use the distinction between the two ways of thinking about concepts as a construction line in developing a critique of Charles Travis’ ‘contextualism’, which he claims to derive from Wittgenstein’s later writings, but which is also representative of other contemporary contextualist positions that do not derive from Wittgenstein. I shall ultimately focus on Travis’ account of knowledge and scepticism, and I shall contrast his account with a few key moments in Stanley Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein.

In his Dewey Lectures, entitled The Threefold Cord, Hilary Putnam speaks of Cavell and Travis – in one breath, as it were – as the champions of what he describes as a new ‘picture of how language functions and what meanings are’. I agree with Putnam that there is an interesting link here. The things that Cavell has said, in interpreting Wittgenstein, about how it is essential to what we call ‘words’ that they be projectable into new contexts – be capable of being put to new uses that can be found to fit hitherto unanticipated circumstances and needs – do seem to underwrite the sort of
phenomena that Travis has named ‘occasion sensitivity’. And one could also see some particular moments in Cavell as offering further evidence for Travis’ ‘occasion sensitivity’: for example, when Cavell considers the conditions under which, if at all, the question ‘Did you Φ the whole of it?’ makes sense, and gets us to see that ‘eating the whole apple’ might require that you eat the core and the stalk and the pips as well (if, for example, the words are used by someone like Geppetto, who tries to teach someone like Pinocchio that he shouldn’t count on having enough to eat in the next moment).\(^5\)

And yet there are also fundamental differences between Travis’ reading of Wittgenstein and Cavell’s – not only the obvious differences in manner and style but also differences in substance. Part of the aim of this paper is to present those substantive differences conspicuously. That despite some seemingly deep and undeniable affinities Cavell and Travis end up responding in very different ways to what they each call ‘scepticism’, I shall finally suggest, is due to the fact that Travis thinks about our concept of knowledge, and interprets Wittgenstein, from within the bounds of the first conception of concepts, whereas Cavell’s way of going on from Wittgenstein is alive to the limitations and philosophical dangers of that conception, at least when it comes to concepts such as our concept of ‘knowing that (such and such)’.

### 1 Stage Setting

I begin with some necessary stage setting: briefly introducing Travis’ notion of ‘occasion sensitivity’ and the way it connects with his understanding of what makes for the possibility of nonsense and his account of ‘knowing that’. Here is a typical formulation of what according to Travis is ‘the essentially new view that Austin and Wittgenstein introduced of the relation of language to what is said in using it’:\(^6\)

> The role of a sentence … is not to be the expresser, in its language, of such and such thought, but rather to be usable in many different circumstances for expressing any of many thoughts, each with its own condition for truth.\(^7\)

There are, so far as I can see, three main features of Travis’ position that make it stand out with respect to other contextualist positions. First, what Travis speaks of as ‘the occasion sensitivity of semantics’ refers, throughout, not just to utterances and what is being said in them, but equally to thoughts, and beliefs, and to what we might call knowings, and to expectations and orders, and, in short, to every essentially ‘representational’ human stance that depends on words for its articulation. So, according to Travis, and pace at least very many in contemporary analytic philosophy, it is not the case that while sentences can express different thoughts (or ‘propositions’), the thoughts they express, once identified, have their semantics
occasion insensitively. Second, and relatedly, when Travis speaks of ‘circumstances’ (or ‘occasion’) he is talking not only about the circumstances under which an utterance was made or a thought was thought, but also about the circumstances under which we attend to the question of what was said or thought, and ask, in particular, what the world would have to be like for it to be true, and whether or not it is the same as something else that can be said or thought (or believed, or known, etc.). The third feature is that Travis, following Wittgenstein and Austin, is interested in the possibility of nonsense in a way that other contextualists typically are not.

Given his basic contention concerning the occasion sensitivity of semantics, Travis has a ready and compelling way of thinking about what makes for the possibility of nonsense – in particular, philosophical nonsense: since any well-formed sentence of an assertoric form is capable of expressing different thoughts (or ‘propositions’ – truth-evaluable entities), depending on the circumstances of its employment – at least in the sense that it can sometimes be used for saying what is true of a particular thing at a particular moment and sometimes be used for saying what would be false of that very same thing at that very same moment – it is also possible that the words might be uttered, or otherwise relied upon, in circumstances that fail to select among the different thoughts they might express. In such circumstances, no determinate thought would be expressed by our words; and this is precisely what is liable to happen to us when we engage in philosophical reflection, according to Travis. In The Uses of Sense Travis describes this possibility as something that is ‘of fundamental importance to Wittgenstein’.

Travis takes what he calls ‘the occasion-sensitivity of semantics’ to have far-reaching implications for virtually every field of philosophy. For one thing, he believes that an appreciation of it can, and ought to, dramatically change the way we think about knowledge:

A speaking sensitive account of knowledge explains how philosophical perplexities arise: They do so when ‘language goes on a holiday’; when we are not speaking in surroundings where we would actually express a thought in saying N to know F, but suppose that we must be expressing one anyway. It thus also details precisely what misunderstanding skepticism is.

What according to Travis makes it possible for philosophers to express, or to reflect upon, no thought at all when they say the words ‘N knows that F’, or reflect upon them philosophically, is that there are different thoughts expressible by these words, different ‘knowledge ascriptions’, as he sometimes puts it, each with its own set of truth conditions. More specifically, Travis maintains, as more recent ‘relevant alternatives’ contextualists also maintain, that every (successful) knowledge ascription comes with a distinction within the space of possible or conceivable doubts between real
doubts on the one hand and mere doubts on the other, and that how exactly that distinction is drawn depends on the circumstances of the ascription. For every F said to be known by N, N would only need to have discharged the doubts as to F that count as real on an occasion of considering his knowledge of F, if the knowledge ascription is to be true. The problem with the sceptic, again according to Travis, is that he fails to take the distinction between real and mere doubts into consideration, and fails to see that it is essential to the semantic identity of knowledge ascriptions. Travis’ sceptic believes that any and every doubt he could raise with respect to some purported knowledge ascription would have to be discharged if the ascription were to count as true. As against this, Travis argues that in ignoring the distinction between real and mere doubts and the role that it plays in constituting the content (truth conditions) of particular knowledge ascriptions, on an occasion, the sceptic, in his insistence that we can never know this or that – like virtually all of the anti-sceptics up to Austin and Wittgenstein, in their insistence that we do in fact know this or that – has ended up reflecting very hard on words that express nothing, or anyway nothing determinate enough to be either true or false.\textsuperscript{15}

2 Travis’ ‘Green Leaves’ Example

The affinity between Travis and other contemporary contextualists shows itself not just in his views, but also in his method of argumentation. Like other contextualists, Travis relies heavily on examples of supposedly everyday utterances that are made under various circumstances. The purpose of those examples is to elicit our intuitions – typically, about whether what is said is true or false – and thereby, assuming that our intuitions are close enough to his, to validate Travis’ views about the relation between words and what is said in using them. What I want to do next is to consider one of Travis’ examples, and use it as a springboard for my comparison of Travis and Cavell.

Pia’s Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is the color of leaves, she paints them. Returning, she reports, ‘That’s better, the leaves are green now.’ She speaks truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. ‘The leaves (on my tree) are green’, Pia says. ‘You can have those.’ But now Pia speaks falsehood.\textsuperscript{16}

Does Travis’ story of Pia, or set of two stories, provide us with believable examples of human utterances? Arguably it doesn’t really matter. Arguably all that Travis needs from these and similar examples is that they will prompt us to grant him that the same words, even if spoken with reference to the same object at the same point in time, may sometimes have one set of
truth conditions and sometimes another, depending on the circumstances of
the utterance. And let me say outright that I find myself inclined to grant
him this. I also find, however, in the case of this and at least some of Travis’
other examples, that the question of truth and falsity is somehow unnatu-
ral, or not fully naturally, being raised – that I am somehow forced to
answer it.

One thing that we might have learned from Wittgenstein, and that Travis,
for one, has been calling for on behalf of Wittgenstein (and Austin) for
years, is to question our sense that we understand a grammatically well-
constructed stretch of familiar words – our sense that we know perfectly
well what the words say – apart from our seeing the specific application, or
use, of those words.17 And I could accordingly begin to locate my worry with
respect to Travis’ examples and the conclusions that he draws on their basis
by posing the following question: Has Travis given us enough for us to be
able to tell what, if any, use Pia has made of her words, and to assess her
words in terms of, for example, truth and falsity?

Who is Pia, and what must have gone through her head, for her to be
moved to do something as bizarre as painting the leaves of her maple green?
What did she seek to accomplish by that? What might it be for her, or for
anyone, to believe that green is the colour of leaves and to believe that it
doesn’t matter how they come to be green? And to whom is she imagined
to be reporting her accomplishment, and why, or what for?18

I must confess that I have found this human moment, as Travis describes
it, hard to make real to myself. And so I supplemented and amended it by
means of a little fantasy of my own: Pia is most unhappily married. She’s
been depressed for a long time, and, as a result, has been neglecting things
around the house – no doubt, partly because the imminent collapse of her
marriage has made those things seem to her not to really matter. But her
husband does not see or acknowledge her depression. Instead, he is
constantly on her case, is always disappointed with her, and is critical of
everything she does. In particular, he always complains about the way she’s
been neglecting their plants. ‘Look’, he shouts, ‘the leaves are dry and
yellowish; I’ve forgotten the days when they were green.’ Pia feels that she
no longer can stand it; she feels that her husband’s criticisms are blind and
cruel; she wants him to see and acknowledge her misery, but to no avail.
At some point, after another round of humiliations, she runs to the store,
buys green spray paint and sprays the plants, including the Japanese
maple. ‘There’, she cries to him, ‘the leaves are green now. And much
good will this do us.’

Did Pia, as I just described her, say something true or something false?
I suppose one would be pulled in different directions here, and for more or
less obvious reasons: one would not want to say that she said something
false, because after all the leaves are painted green and would, for some
imaginable purposes, reasonably count as being green; but one would not
want to say that she said something true either, partly because the state of the leaves is not what one would normally expect of leaves that were, under normal circumstances, said to be green, and partly because we know that their state is not what her husband had in mind in his complaints. All of these considerations are ones that Travis’ account of the occasion sensitivity of semantics seems perfectly capable of accommodating. But note that Pia’s use of the words, as I presented it in my story, would play no role in shaping, let alone fixing, one’s intuitions in this case. I submit, in other words, that one would have the same intuitions – would be pulled in the same opposite directions – if asked, in the context of having just read my description, not about the truth or falsity of her words, but directly about whether the leaves in the story were or were not green.

And yet, the fact that we would not quite know how to settle the question of truth and falsity in this case is by no means a reason for taking Pia’s words to make, or have, no sense, or no clear sense. As far as an understanding of Pia’s words is concerned, the question of truth and falsity which Travis and other contextualists (and anti-contextualists) have invited us to consider in the face of their examples is really out of place. And I do not merely mean by this that it would be insensitive actually to raise that question in the face of Pia’s agony. I mean that the philosopher’s question of truth and falsity is irrelevant to an understanding of Pia’s words as I imagined them. Her words – I mean, she – cannot very happily be said to describe the leaves, or to call them green, or to express the thought that they are green. Or, at any rate, it is not clear what someone who wished to say any of those things of her (words) would in fact be wishing to say. And it is important that this does not prevent Pia’s words from making perfect sense, for someone who is ready and willing to see it. Nor does it prevent them from standing in various, more or less specifiable, rational relations to Pia’s world in general, and to the painted leaves in particular. Her words make perfect sense, albeit not a representational one.

Pia’s ‘The leaves are green (now)’, as it features in my story, is not in the business of representing the leaves as being green. In particular, she is not telling her husband that the leaves are green – presumably, he sees them as well as she does (and if he does not for some reason, her words would not inform him of their state). Rather, her words and her act of painting the leaves form an expressive whole, as it were, against the background of her story: the leaves she has just painted are part of what enables her words to mean what they mean in her mouth – to say what she wishes to say. And let me emphasize that Pia’s words mean what they mean in her mouth not because she wants or intends them to mean it. What they mean, and what she says, is no less a function of the context (and way) in which they are uttered than it would be in cases where the words were used to convey a useful piece of information. In both types of cases, the words mean what a sufficiently informed and reasonable one of
us would take them to mean. With respect to this last point, Travis and I are in perfect agreement.  

If anyone wanted to argue that my Pia story was overly dramatic, and not representative of the ways in which we normally would use ‘The leaves are green now’, I would not object (though I might say in response that (overly?) dramatic examples may be less dangerous and more enlightening, philosophically speaking, than surrealist ones, or ones that are overly simplistic). And I certainly do not mean to suggest that my story teaches anything very important about our concept of ‘being green’.

My story was only meant to begin to motivate two thoughts. The first thought, which I have already begun to develop, is that there are ways for words to stand in various rationally assessable relations to the world that are not ones of representing it. This is something that Austin emphasized in his elaboration of the conditions of the felicitous performance of speech acts. It is also, I believe, a point that Wittgenstein symbolizes, as it were, early on in the *Investigations*, when he proposes that it would be most natural, and least confusing, to reckon the colour samples that A and B, ‘the builders’, use in their communication ‘among the instruments of their language’. Part of what enables the builders to form representations of what they want and what there is, is things (the colour samples) which are part of their world, and yet are not themselves being represented. This, as we shall see, points to a quite interesting way of thinking about and responding to scepticism. The second, related, thought I have tried to begin to motivate, by means of my discussion of Travis’ example, is that there is a dimension of the understanding of human utterances that is being neglected in his argument for occasion sensitivity – the dimension, namely, of what, in the Austinian sense, is being done with the words, and what the conditions are for doing one thing rather than another with one’s words. It is to this second thought that I now turn more fully.

### 3 Travis’ Contextualism and the Question of What is Done with the Words

Throughout, Travis – just like virtually everybody else in the debate between contextualists and anti-contextualists, inside and outside of epistemology – focuses on sentences that, in his terms, ‘express thoughts’, or anyway are assumed to be meant to; so he focuses on what may most generally be described, again in his terms, as language in its ‘representational’ capacity. The illocution Travis typically focuses on is that of ‘describing’; and the *pragmatic* dimension then enters his story in terms of ‘the point of (giving) a description’, which in turn is typically couched in terms of what, under given circumstances, would make the description *useful* to its intended audience. The question of what someone *does* with her words and what the conditions are for doing one thing rather than another with
one’s words therefore does not play any significant role in Travis’ contextualism: he typically assumes the illocutionary force of the utterance and focuses on the question of whether it succeeds in expressing a determinate thought – determinate enough to be assessed in terms of truth and falsity.

For this reason, Travis’ examples work best when they depict a context in which the protagonists have some clear and immediate practical concern – such as needing milk for their coffee, shopping for ink, baking pizza, or looking for a car in the parking lot – and in which their words can naturally be heard as meant, or purporting, to convey a piece of information that is relevant to the matter at hand. When it comes to such examples, Travis’ contention that the correct understanding of an utterance is a function of what a reasonable audience (who believed the speaker) would be led to expect of the world (or of the speaker’s desires or expectations, etc.) on the basis of that utterance, given the circumstances in which the utterance was being made, is extremely compelling. It is with examples such as the ‘green leaves’ example – examples that cannot naturally be heard as ones in which the speakers are communicating purportedly useful information to each other, or are otherwise engaged in giving or offering a description of this or that – that one may begin to feel that the question of truth and falsity, as it is raised by Travis from outside the depicted situation, is forced and at least potentially philosophically misleading, even when raised about an utterance of words of an ‘assertoric form’.

Travis’ focus on language in its representational capacity and his consequent neglect of the question of what exactly is being done with the words show themselves very clearly in his account of what makes for the possibility of nonsense. So he speaks, for example, of someone ‘calling a lake blue’ – thereby assuming, however roughly, the illocutionary force of the words – but ‘in circumstances which do not decide whether what was thus said (if anything) lies among the true things, or the false ones’. Or he says, this time with respect to sentences featuring ‘know’:

Suppose that ‘know’ may make any of many distinct semantic contributions to wholes of which it is a part, and varies its contribution from one speaking to another. Then, describing someone as he is at a time – thereby assuming, however roughly, the illocutionary force of the words – but ‘in circumstances which do not decide whether what was thus said (if anything) lies among the true things, or the false ones’. Or he says, this time with respect to sentences featuring ‘know’:

Suppose that ‘know’ may make any of many distinct semantic contributions to wholes of which it is a part, and varies its contribution from one speaking to another. Then, describing someone as he is at a time – thereby assuming, however roughly, the illocutionary force of the words – but ‘in circumstances which do not decide whether what was thus said (if anything) lies among the true things, or the false ones’.
For Travis, then, the conditions of sense are conditions of giving this or that description of the world, making this or that statement, expressing this or that thought, not conditions of, for example, describing the world, or stating something, or expressing a thought, as opposed to doing any other thing with our words or doing nothing at all with them. The different ways in which words could humanly be meant, and the conditions of meaning our words in one way or another, therefore do not come into view in Travis’ account, just as they do not come into view in the writings of other contextualists (and anti-contextualists).

This limitation of scope may seem unobjectionable, and may even seem methodologically necessary: one could presumably focus on whatever one chooses; and someone like Travis, who, unlike many who proceed from an admiration of Wittgenstein, insists on engaging with the mainstream of analytic philosophy, may have no choice but to focus his efforts on showing philosophers that even their most cherished form of semantic assessment – the assessment in terms of truth and falsity – involves or requires more than what their theories are capable of capturing. The limitation of scope might also be an overreaction to Searle’s (1999) charge that the so-called ‘ordinary-language philosophers’ were conflating meaning and use – the conditions of ‘expressing a proposition’ fit for assessment in terms of truth and falsity and the conditions of felicitously performing an illocutionary speech act. My aim will be to show that at least when it comes to our concept of ‘knowing that’, Travis’ focusing on language in its essentially representational or descriptive capacity, and his consequent neglect of the question of what is being done with the words – which is really the question of how exactly they are being used – does lead to a distorted view of the concept under investigation. Travis, in other words, has been fighting the tradition from too close, as it were. Or so I shall argue.

4 Cavell’s ‘Green Jar’ Example

At this point I should like to bring Cavell into the story, by considering one of his examples – the ‘green jar’ example from the second part of The Claim of Reason. Like Wittgenstein’s ‘sick person’ example in On Certainty, remark 10, this one too is designed to get the philosopher in us to insist, in the face of what strikes him as the perverse denial of the obvious, that someone knows something – here, that Cavell knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk. And here too what is under investigation is the way we come to insist, in the course of doing philosophy, on the truth (or falsity) of a string of words that are uttered, or written, or reflected upon, apart from the normal or natural circumstances in which they would ordinarily be used. What Cavell initially says, in response to the philosopher’s insistence, is that no one would have said of Cavell, ‘He knows (or knew) there is (or was) a green jar of pencils on the desk’, apart from some special reason which makes
that description of Cavell’s ‘knowledge’ relevant to something Cavell (or
someone else) did or said or felt, etc., or is doing or saying or feeling, etc.34

Now, Cavell knows he cannot hope that this little reminder about the
need for a reason to say the words would satisfy the philosopher (in him)
who takes himself to have identified a clear and undeniable fact and who is
taking his words to be recording it. The ‘traditional philosopher’ is bound to
be outraged by the proposal that his words might fail to record his fact
simply because there is no reason for him to say them. Before considering
Cavell’s continuation of this philosophical moment, however, let us pause
here and remind ourselves of how Travis would have responded to the
philosopher’s insistence.

Travis’ response, which on the face of it is more elegant and clear cut than
Cavell’s, would be to show the philosopher that the words ‘Stanley knows
that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk’ can have different proper
understandings – that is, truth conditions – under different circumstances.
We can imagine an occasion on which the words would prove false if it
turned out that Cavell had not looked at the green jar for half an hour, and
an occasion on which the words would still be true even if Cavell had not
looked at the green jar for half an hour; or again, we could imagine circum-
stances in which the words would be false if Cavell hadn’t actually tried the
pencils and made sure that they weren’t fake, and circumstances in which
the words would be true even though he had never tried using the pencils;
or again, we could imagine circumstances in which the words would count
as false if the jar was only painted green, and circumstances in which they
would be true even though the jar was (merely) painted green…

The upshot of those reminders would be that there are different thoughts
expressible, and hence different facts recordable, by the words ‘Stanley
knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk’ and that the philoso-
pher, by uttering or insisting upon them apart from circumstances that
would select among the different possible understandings of his words, is in
fact saying nothing, or nothing clear. Another way of putting this would be
to say that Cavell and the green jar, as they stand, do not provide the philos-
opher with a fact to record, but rather with any number of facts as to Cavell’s
knowledge of the green jar, or his lack thereof. And the point is not only, or
simply, that each one of those facts is only recordable, or expressible, on
certain occasions, but not on others; the point is that each one of them only
counts as obtaining on some occasions of considering the matter, but not on
others.

Cavell is no less interested than Travis in the question of the comprehen-
sibility of what is said.35 But in contrast with Travis, he seems to focus not
on the identity of the philosopher’s fact, but rather on what we might call
the philosopher’s relation to the fact that would account for his choice to
seek to record or express it with his words. Cavell’s emphasis is not on what
the philosopher’s words mean, but on what he means;36 not on the words’
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intelligibility, but on the speaker’s intelligibility, or point, in uttering them; not on what the speaker says, but on his saying it, and what it – the saying – means or implies, and hence on what he is doing with his words. To the philosopher’s anticipated objection that while the conditions may indeed be lacking in his context, as he himself conceives of it, for asserting that Stanley knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk, he could nonetheless be ‘simply remarking’ it, Cavell responds by reminding us that remarking too has its conditions: not just anything we do with our words would count as a remark; and we cannot – by sheer act of will, as it were – make our words a remark.

But then, isn’t Cavell’s response to the philosopher weaker than Travis’ (and open to a Gricean dismissal in the way that the latter is not)? For suppose the philosopher is unmoved by Cavell’s ethical, or existential, fervour; suppose he says ‘You know, forget the words, and forget my relation to my words and to the fact that I seek to record by means of them; right now we are interested, not in words and the intelligibility of their utterer, but in knowledge, in what happens when someone knows something, or fails to know it.’ (This is more or less how Barry Stroud has responded to Cavell.) Then it would seem that Travis’ analysis strikes at the roots of the philosopher’s reflection in a way that Cavell’s analysis does not; for it seems that it is Travis’ analysis, and not Cavell’s, that shows the philosopher to have gotten knowledge wrong, and so to be reflecting, if not exactly on nothing, then at any rate on the wrong thing. And when they each move to respond to scepticism, the thought would go, then again Travis is on firmer ground than Cavell: for Cavell, it appears, merely shows the sceptic either that he hasn’t managed to undermine anyone’s knowledge claim or, if he has managed that, that he hasn’t thereby shown anything about the validity of all knowledge claims, whereas Travis shows the sceptic that he hasn’t managed to undermine anyone’s knowledge (of some particular matter of fact).

Now, I believe that it is true, and important, that Cavell’s discussion leaves itself open to a particular kind of dissatisfaction, which Travis appears to address head on. But this is partial, or would be if we let it constitute our final assessment of these two philosophers’ thinking about knowledge and scepticism, and about how to go on from Wittgenstein. The most immediate reason for not allowing the matter to rest here is that the dissatisfaction that I am anticipating here in response to Cavell appears to be rooted in, or expressive of, the very frame of mind that he has come to call ‘scepticism’; for it rests on the sense, or fantasy, that it should be possible for us to speak philosophically of the phenomena of our world – of knowledge, for example – apart from a consideration of the sort of things that can intelligibly be said with respect to these phenomena, and of the conditions that must be in place if we are to refer to these phenomena with words in one intelligible way or another.
I can think of more than one way of pushing our assessment further. One of those ways, keeping in mind that both Cavell and Travis, in their discussion of knowledge, are preparing the ground for their response to what they each call ‘scepticism’, would be to ask whether any sceptic worth his name – be it, for example, the Descartes of the First Meditation, Hume in his discussion of causality, or Othello from sometime in scene 3 of act 3 of the play – is likely to recognize himself in Travis’ diagnosis. For each one of those sceptics, it seems to me, it is not so clear that he is simply, and rather perversely, taking it that any conceivable doubt with respect to just any putative fact would have to be ruled out if we are to count as knowing that fact. Rather, for each one of them, it seems, his situation is one in which there is a very specific possibility that he has to consider, given his very specific, even if global, concerns – a doubt that, given his circumstances, just is real. I am not saying that this is where the story with each one of those sceptics should end. What I am saying is that I don’t know that Travis’ way of ending the story ought to satisfy us, or the sceptic in us. Taking it to be just obvious what the sceptic wants to say, and what prompts him to want to say it, as Travis does, misses out on the opportunity that scepticism offers us to rethink our concept of knowledge in its relation to other concepts (concepts not only such as those of certainty and doubt, but also such as those of authority and trust, assurance and dependence, responsibility and blame, acknowledgment and confession). Are we willing and ready to trust that we see clearly enough what knowing our world, or another mind, or this or that thing or fact, might be or mean?

I said that Cavell leaves himself open to, and even invites, a certain kind of dissatisfaction – one rooted in the sense that instead of talking about the things themselves he is talking about the conditions of saying something intelligible with respect to those things – instead of talking directly about what is required for knowing something, he talks about what is required of us if we are to use the word ‘know’ intelligibly. I think there is good reason why Cavell should leave himself thus vulnerable: for if essence is expressed by grammar; and if the grammar of a word gets revealed in the various language-games in which we employ it; and if the language-games we play even with seemingly innocent words like ‘reading’, not to mention not so innocent words like ‘knowing’, are ‘difficult to describe even in rough outline’; then the danger is that if we tried to bypass our everyday language-games and get at the thing – reading or knowing – itself, we would at best end up with a partial, and therefore potentially misleading, view of what we were trying to understand. At worst, we might end up with just a picture of what, say, reading or knowing is, or requires. I take it that this is the danger to which Cavell wishes to alert us by speaking not of his knowledge of the green jar, but of his “knowledge” of it; as if to suggest that our very form of questioning – When is someone knowing something? When does someone truly count as knowing something? – inevitably runs
the risk of distorting the very phenomena it wishes to understand. I next turn to indicate how this might happen. This will prepare the ground for a final word about scepticism, and what it may mean.

5 The Uses of ‘Know That’ (and its Cognates)

In the previous section, I contrasted Travis’ and Cavell’s respective ways of responding to the traditional philosopher’s insistence that ‘Stanley knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk’, when said in reference to Cavell and to the green jar on his desk, makes perfectly clear sense and is assessable in terms of truth and falsity regardless of how (if at all) it is being used. Travis’ response, I said, has the merit of bearing more directly and straightforwardly on the traditional philosopher’s concerns as he, the philosopher, conceives of them. I then suggested, however, that this very strength of Travis’ way of engaging with the tradition may ultimately also be its weakness. In encouraging the assumption that anyone who wishes to speak of knowledge must speak of something arrived at by the ruling out of doubts, and the twin assumption that anyone who wishes to deny our knowledge of this or that must be meaning to say that there is some (real) doubt or set of doubts that is undischarged for us, Travis ends up encouraging the very picture of knowledge that lies at the roots of the philosopher’s insistence.

Consider Cavell’s examples of perfectly intelligible uses of ‘Stanley knows that there is a green jar of pencils on the desk’ – the very words on whose truth the ‘traditional philosopher’ is insisting, even though there is nothing clear for him to be doing there and then with those words:

[Saying ‘Stanley knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk’] may, e.g., be a way of saying ‘That’s all he knows’ (I haven’t told him about Mrs Greenjar’s sensitivity; or he is too stupid, or callous, to care about the implications of his actions). And here ‘know’ contrasts with something he does not know or realize, as it does normally. Or it might be an exasperated way of saying ‘He ought to know better’ (than to put a green jar in the same room with my pet bull). And here ‘know’ contrasts with something he might be expected to know or remember.48

In Travis, it seems that the only way ‘N knows that such and such’ may pass from nonsense to sense is by being placed in a context that would enable us to distinguish between the doubts as to the obtaining of such and such that would need to be discharged for N and the ones that would not need to be discharged for N, if N is to count as knowing that such and such. But I see no reason to think that anything of this sort is happening when the sentence that had no clear sense in the mouth of the philosopher is given sense in Cavell’s examples. In each of the two cases sketched by Cavell,
some contrast is drawn or made between the state Stanley is said to be in and some other state he might have been in; but in neither of the two cases is the contrasting state that of there being some doubt or set of doubts that is undischarged for him.

Now, the allegedly Wittgensteinian claim that knowledge can only intelligibly be spoken of when there is ‘doubt in the offing’ has been contested by many; and examples have been proposed which seem clearly to prove the claim false.\(^4^9\) Travis’ own way of responding to these objections, in *The Uses of Sense*, is to argue that in each such case – in which ‘know’ seems perfectly intelligibly to relate a person and a (putative) fact even though no doubt is ‘in the offing’ – we could easily imagine situations in which there would have been doubts which would have been relevant to the question of whether that person knew that fact.\(^5^0\) This response seems to me forced and, furthermore, not in line with Travis’ own contextualist position. As far as Wittgenstein is concerned, however, the above-mentioned objection is altogether misguided. For it is not part of his teaching that ‘know’ and cognates come with a list, specifiable in advance, of conditions for their legitimate employment – such as the condition that some doubt or set of doubts will be in the offing.\(^5^1\) The point that matters to him, and which he makes perfectly clear in the *Investigations*, in anticipation precisely of the above objection, is that to know what is being said by means of a sentence featuring ‘know’ within a particular context is to see the point of the words within that context.\(^5^2\) Apart from the point, all we have is familiar words, and various ‘pictures’ that we associate with them; and there is no telling in advance how philosophically misleading and therefore troublesome these pictures might turn out to be.

When it comes to Fregean concept expressions such as ‘is (are) green’, it might philosophically harmlessly be said, with Travis, that the expression (normally) speaks of being green, and is (normally) used for saying of something that it is green, or for calling something green.\(^5^3\) When it comes to expressions such as ‘know that’ and its cognates, however, presupposing them to be essentially instruments of representation, and ignoring the variety of things that may be done with them – the variety of ways in which they might be meant, or used – is bound to distort our understanding of the concept they express or embody.\(^5^4\)

Go back to Cavell’s second example above of an intelligible use of ‘Stanley knows that there is a green jar of pencils on his desk.’ I said that the question of which doubts as to there being a green jar of pencils on his desk are real and which, if any, of the real ones are discharged for him, does not arise in this context and is irrelevant to an understanding of the utterance. This is not a linguistic accident, as it were, but rather a function of the particular use of the words that Cavell invites us to imagine. Nor is the use he invites us to imagine esoteric. It is, on the contrary, central to our concept of (propositional) knowledge.
The use of ‘know(s) that’ of which Cavell is reminding us may roughly be referred to as that of charging someone with knowing, or having known, something. It points, as I said, to a central, and yet philosophically much neglected, region of our concept of knowledge – one in which knowledge is not necessarily, or even typically, something people naturally desire, but rather is a sort of liability, sometimes even a burden, and is the basis not for deference and respect, but for reproach, accusation, and blame. Whereas philosophers have almost invariably spoken of utterances of the form ‘I know that such and such’ as knowledge claims, knowledge thought of in this second way is not something to claim, but rather is something to admit, confess, or acknowledge; and in the second and third person it is something more aptly said to be imputed, rather than, say, attributed. This region of our concept of (propositional) knowledge is, arguably, at least as central to it as the region that has predominated in the tradition, and it is quite thought-provoking, I think, to find that it has virtually been ignored by contextualists and anti-contextualists, sceptics and anti-sceptics, alike.55 (Consider, for one, what happens to our understanding of scepticism if we think of it, not as denying us the knowledge that we would ordinarily claim, or wish to claim, for ourselves, but rather as aiming to disburden us of knowledge that it is difficult, or shameful, or painful to possess.) When someone is charged with knowing, or having known, a fact that (in the context of the charging) is taken by all sides to obtain, the question of whether he has, or has had, what Travis calls ‘good enough assurances’ quite naturally does not arise, or anyway not in the way that Travis’ account would lead us to suppose.56 The question of whether or not someone knows or knew something is very often precisely the question that concerns us in such cases, but what competently answering it involves is not what Travis’ account would lead us to expect.57

Consider, on the other hand, an importantly different use of ‘know that’ and its cognates, and one that would appear closer to the tradition’s preoccupations. I am thinking of utterances of sentences of the form ‘I know that such and such’ which are claims, or are at least akin to claims, and are in the business of assuring someone else that such and such obtains.58 Here, it would seem, the question of whether or not someone has proper assurances as to the obtaining of such and such naturally belongs. And indeed it does. But I believe that a close examination of such cases would reveal that the question of the truth or falsity of the knowledge claim, as Travis and other contextualists (and anti-contextualists) think of it, is normally out of place in such contexts. And this, in turn, is due to the fact that competent speakers know that, conceptually speaking, a knowledge claim cannot (normally) be more solid than the basis upon which it is made can make it. Sometimes the basis would be obvious (we see the person checking his itinerary and finding the desired flight information on it); sometimes the knowledge claimer would offer it without being prompted (‘I was at the bank two weeks ago on
a Saturday and it was open’); and, quite often, the person would be prompted to provide his audience with his basis, normally by being asked ‘How do you know?’ In any case, once it is clear to all participants on what basis the claim (or ‘claim’) was made – and competent knowledge claims would (normally) have a basis that the claimer would be able to provide – the philosopher’s question of whether the claimer knows that such and such, or whether he can truly be said to know, normally becomes moot, and is anyway not a question that the participants would (need to) attend to. Once the basis is known – that is, once it is clear to the participants what information they possess in common (for if the basis is not itself in doubt, as usually it is not, there is no longer reason to think of it as the claimer’s) – the question normally becomes whether it (the basis, as opposed to anything about the claimer) provides the participants with sufficient assurance as to the obtaining of such and such. The answer to that question would normally depend, among other things, on the participants’ sensibilities, basic attitudes, risk aversion, etc., and would not normally be aptly or felicitously assessable in terms of ‘truth and falsity’. Nor is there reason to think that there is always just one correct answer to that question.60

Concluding Remark: What ‘Scepticism’ May Mean

In the previous section I briefly discussed two central sorts of contexts in which we use ‘know that’ and its cognates.61 In contexts of the first sort, the question of whether someone knows that such and such, or whether it would be true to say of her that she does, may, and often does, naturally arise, but not in the way, or form, that Travis (and other contextualists and anti-contextualists) would have led us to expect. In contexts of the second sort, the question does not naturally arise at all in the course of normal practice. So Travis’ question, as he understands it, does not (naturally) arise in either of these two sorts of contexts, which are central to our concept of propositional knowledge, and does not arise because there is no need for it to arise. To possess our concept of propositional knowledge – to know what ‘know that’ and cognates mean – is, among other things, to know this. At least in the case of this concept, Travis, I am proposing, hasn’t gone far enough in appreciating the ways in which what philosophers have tended to think of as belonging to ‘semantics’ and what they have tended to think of as belonging to ‘pragmatics’ are intertwined.

No doubt, someone who is already committed to the idea that the semantic powers of each and every ‘referring term’ must be separable from its other powers would find ways of explaining away this apparent intertwining. The most one could reasonably try to do in the face of such a commitment, I think, is to point out its philosophical price, and show that it has a viable alternative and is therefore not forced on us. Following Wittgenstein and Cavell, as I understand them, I have tried to effect such a shift of philosophical
orientation with respect to our concept of propositional knowledge. Instead of asking first what propositional knowledge is, or what ‘knowing that’ means, and moving from there to the question of what may intelligibly be done with ‘know that’ and its cognates – assuming the first question to be answerable apart from a consideration of the second, and taking the correct answer to the second question to be constrained by the correct answer to the first – I have proposed, in effect, that we begin rather with the question of what may intelligibly be done, and what normally is done, and how, with ‘know that’ and its cognates, and take the answer to that question to tell us all that we might reasonably have wished to know when we raised the first question. If we do so, we may find that certain traditional philosophical puzzles about knowledge no longer seem inescapable and intractable. Or we may just find them appearing in an altogether different, and philosophically fruitful, light. Scepticism is a case in point.

Theoretically, Travis is not only willing to allow, but is in fact insisting, that we might for all we know find ourselves, for example, ‘impressed by as yet unimagined reasons for taking something to be, or not to be, copper’.

Elsewhere he insists that our thoughts are not transparently available to us, in the sense that we could conceivably, for all we know, discover ourselves to have been wrong all along even about what ‘bachelor’, for example, requires of the things of which it is true. But in practice, when it comes to ‘know that’ and its cognates Travis is unopen to the possibility that the sceptic might get us, not necessarily by design, to realize something about these words – something that we haven’t, or haven’t fully or adequately or correctly, realized. For all of his insistence on the occasion sensitivity of semantics, he still takes knowledge to be some very definite sort of ‘cognitive achievement’, and he takes the sceptic simply to be meaning to deny us that achievement. And then he says about scepticism that ‘an analysis of knowledge which has us being that wrong about what the notion applies to could not be right. It is as if someone claimed that no one has ever worn shoes except for some obscure band of Buddhist monks’.

If this is how we must hear the sceptic’s words, then his claim would seem just as outrageous as Travis takes it to be. Why would anyone be moved to (try to) mean his words thus? A short answer on behalf of Travis to this question would go something like this: ‘Because he fails to acknowledge the occasion sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions. Seeing correctly that knowing that such and such requires the ruling out of all relevant doubts as to the obtaining of such and such; and seeing also, and correctly, that any and every conceivable doubt could on some conceivable occasion be relevant; but having committed himself at the same time to the mistaken idea that what on one occasion counts as a doubt relevant to someone’s knowledge of some particular fact at some particular moment must so count on all occasions, the sceptic “discovers” that the only principled way of drawing the distinction between real and mere doubts would commit us to counting (nearly) all
conceivable doubts as real on every occasion, and consequently “discovers” that there is at best only very little we (can truly be said to) know."66

And suppose we further asked: Why would anyone be moved to deny the occasion sensitivity of knowledge ascriptions, or of semantics more generally? My proposed answer to this question, on behalf of Travis, would be: ‘Because occasion sensitivity bespeaks our shared and continual responsibility for the meaningfulness, or sense, of our words, and therefore bespeaks our being implicated, in any number of ways, by what, if anything, our words (can) mean; and there is a rather natural tendency, epitomized when we “do philosophy”, to repress our knowledge of precisely this fact about what making sense requires’. This, I am guessing, would not have been Travis’ answer – or anyway not his way of putting it. But it brings us rather close to Cavell’s ‘scepticism’.

Cavell sees, as clearly as Travis does, that the traditional sceptic is repudiating our everyday employment of ‘know that’ and its cognates: of course we do often, in practice, count ourselves or others as knowing this or that. The sceptic, Cavell reminds us, if he is worth engaging with, would be the first to acknowledge and account for this.67 But it is also true of our concepts that they (should?) sometimes allow for what would appear to be precisely this kind of repudiation. When the sceptic tells us that we don’t really know what we normally and ordinarily count ourselves as knowing, must he simply and straightforwardly be denying that which we affirm in our everyday ascriptions of knowledge of matters of fact? Mightn’t his claim be closer, for example, to Thoreau’s claim in Walden that the works of the great poets have never been read by mankind (which doesn’t mean that they haven’t, in some straightforward sense, been read), or to the later Heidegger’s claim that we are not (yet) thinking (which certainly does not mean that we don’t plan and calculate and solve practical problems, and take things to be or not to be green)?

Cavell does not take it that we can know in advance how the sceptic’s words ought to be understood. For him, making sense of the sceptic’s words requires that we make sense of him (if only as an aspect of ourselves) – of what he is trying to do with his words. And this ultimately leads him to hear the sceptic’s words along the above lines – that is, as an expression of dissatisfaction with our everyday practices of knowledge claims, attributions, imputations, confessions, etc., altogether, in the name of something that knowledge is, or was, somehow supposed to be, or to deliver.68 Now of course, anyone who wishes to repudiate our everyday applications of a concept in the name of something else to which the concept ought to have applied had better be able to get us to see what that thing, or state, is; and it is in the nature of things that this is unlikely to be a straightforward matter.

In Cavell, the sceptic, both in the case of the external world and in the case of other minds, is looking for an intimacy, a communion, with the world and with the soul of others, an intimacy or communion that knowledge – or
anyway what we in the everyday count as knowledge – strikes him as failing to deliver. What is ironic, and in the case of other minds may even be tragic, but what also in a way makes the position genuinely sceptical, is that the sceptic is, in a way, right: thinking of our relation to the world and to others in terms of knowledge – understood, as Travis and the tradition understand it, to be a matter of securing, or anyway securing reasonably well, the truth of our representations (thoughts, propositions, or what have you) – blinds us to, even represses our knowledge of, what intimacy here might, and does, sometimes look like.

Wishing to be able to speak – to make or challenge a knowledge claim, for example – ‘without the commitments speech exacts’, the sceptic has failed to realize, or to acknowledge, that the world is present to us not only as the object of our claims (and other types of representations), but also as that which provides all that must be in place if we are felicitously to claim something, or challenge a claim, and as that which determines what claim we could intelligibly make, here and now, and by means of which forms of words, and what commitments this particular speech act may reasonably be taken to exact from us. And he similarly has failed to realize, or to acknowledge, that other people are present not only as objects of actual and possible knowledge claims (and other types of representations), but also as those to whom our claim to knowledge is offered, and whose response to our claim would often determine what we would need to do or say next, and what the significance would be of anything that we might say or do next. I do not see that there is anything essential to the story Travis has wished to tell on behalf of Wittgenstein and Austin that should make him object to this understanding of scepticism and to this form of response to it. In fact, it seems to me very much in line with his own attempts to overthrow representationalist conceptions of perception.

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**Notes**

1 See Moore, 1997: p. 79.
2 I am thinking here in particular of Richard Rorty (1979).
3 Pace David Lewis (1983), who maintains, as many nowadays maintain, that performative utterances have truth conditions – and indeed that these are utterances that, when felicitously made, make themselves true. It should be clear that from the perspective of the second conception of concepts Lewis’ insistence is question begging, and is only supported by the superficial form of words that are
uttered. Ultimately, however, I don’t wish to say that Lewis’ insistence is wrong, exactly. Rather, it seems to me to be, where not just idle, misleading with respect to our concepts and what possessing them involves and requires. For one thing, it is liable to make us overlook the fact that our beholdenness to the world takes an altogether different form when we apologize, say, from when we describe someone, or ourselves, as having apologized.

5 Cavell, 1979: p. 196.
7 Ibid., p. 242.
8 This is the gist of the argument of Travis, 2000. The same point is made in Travis, 2006 in terms of the inability of what Travis calls ‘disembodied representations’ actually to represent anything as being thus and so.
9 This point is made in Travis, 2006 in terms of the occasion sensitivity of our concept of ‘same-saying’.
10 Indeed, as I said, I find it altogether striking that other contextualists have not found philosophically significant the possibility of nonsense that is implied by their view.
11 Travis, 1989: p. 35. See also Travis, 2006: pp. 6 and 152.
15 This is a brief summary of Travis’ account of the semantics of knowledge ascriptions and of his argument against scepticism in Travis, 1989: pp. 129–87. In Travis, 2005 we get an account that, so far as I can tell, is formally the same. It’s just that this time Travis does not speak in terms of conceivable doubts that should be divided into mere doubts on the one hand and real doubts on the other; rather, he talks in terms of a distinction between ways-for-p-to-turn-out-false-despite-all-one-knows that count as things that might (or may) be and ones that do not so count. Again the claim is that the determination of what might be is occasion sensitive.
16 Travis, 1997: p. 89.
17 See, for example, Wittgenstein, 1963: remark 117.
18 The second part of Travis’ example raises similar concerns. Who is this botanist friend? And why is he asking Pia if she has leaves suitable for his research? And suppose that it does somehow make sense for him to call her and ask her something like this, perhaps because of who he is, or because of the peculiarity of the circumstances in which he found himself, or because Pia is an old and trustworthy supplier of his, why then does Pia answer him in the way that she does, having just finished spraying the leaves with green paint? Is she joking? Is this her way of starting to tell him about her misery? In neither of those cases is it obvious that she would aptly be described as having ‘spoken falsehood’. Or is it that we actually are expected to be able to imagine Pia to be so naïve, or obtuse, or both, that she would be capable of thinking that her leaves were what her friend was looking for? But I find that in that case, the proper assessment of her words would be, not that she said something false, but that she misunderstood her friend.
19 See, for example, Travis, 2006: pp. 119–29.
20 In ‘Who Knows?’ (forthcoming), I argue that contemporary contextualists and anti-contextualists have proceeded on the basis of ‘examples’ of utterances of words of the form ‘N knows that such and such’ that would at best be extremely odd if made in the ‘contexts’ in which they are said to be made.
21 In Austin, 1999.
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23 For an insightful elaboration of this point see Brandom, 1994: p. 632 and p. 715, n. 28.
24 Contrast Wittgenstein, 1963: remark 304, who recommends that we make ‘a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts’.
25 See, for example, Travis, 2006: pp. 32–3.
26 Compare DeRose, 2005: p. 174, who glosses all that we may do with sentences of the form ‘N knows that such and such’ in terms of ‘describing situations’.
28 Though there is still going to be a question about the ‘truth conditions’ of the utterance. Travis’ anti-contextualist detractors are likely to charge that he is confusing the question of truth and falsity and the question of pragmatic felicity, as it were. I do not say that Travis has no good arguments with which to reply.
29 Travis, 2005: p. 299.
31 In Travis, 2006: p. 116 he does discuss what he there calls ‘personal meaning’, and speaks of it as referring to ‘how someone meant her words’. But he cashes that out in terms of ‘meaning one’s words to represent, in some specific way, things as being some specific way’ (p. 119). So his notion of ‘how someone means her words’ is narrow in precisely the way that I complain about in this paper.
32 This is the gist of Travis’ contention in Travis, 1996.
33 It seems to me clear that in accusing ordinary-language philosophers of conflating meaning and use and therefore committing the ‘assertion fallacy’ Searle is actually begging their question. He relies on the very conception of ‘(word or sentence) meaning’ that they were challenging. Ordinary-language philosophy, at its best moments, begins with the sense that some philosophical question or assertion makes no sense – not merely in the sense that the act of producing it makes no sense, but in the sense that its content – what is being asked or asserted – is unclear. To say in response, as Searle in effect does, ‘Forget the oddness. Just answer the question or say whether the assertion is true or false’ would be to miss the point entirely. See Glock, 1996 for a good discussion. Travis himself (1991: pp. 238–9) makes a similar point against Grice (1989). In a way, my only complaint against Travis is that in trying to show philosophers like Searle and Grice that what they wish to think of as pertaining to meaning cannot be separated from use in the way they assume, he has worked with a notion of ‘use’ that is too narrow.
34 Cavell, 1979: p. 205.
36 Ibid., pp. 206–7 and 215.
37 Ibid., pp. 206–7.
38 Ibid., pp. 208 and 214. To show that this does not mean that Cavell’s concerns lie with the ‘merely pragmatic’ dimension of speech is the burden of the remainder of this paper.
39 Ibid., pp. 210–11. Contrast Grice, 1989: pp. 18–20, who proposes that while asserting may indeed be a rather special speech act that requires, for its felicitous performance, quite special conditions, remarking requires no comparable conditions and may felicitously be performed even where ‘pointless’.
40 What Wittgenstein, 1969: remark 482 calls ‘knowing with a metaphysical emphasis’.
41 See Barry Stroud (2000).
42 That would appear to be the gist of Cavell’s concluding pages of the second part of Cavell, 1979. Unlike many other readers of Cavell, I am inclined to take very
seriously his disclaimer that what he offers is not any final and generally applicable response to any form that scepticism might take, but rather is ‘no more than a schema for a potential overthrowing or undercutting of skepticism’ (p. 220, my italics). For one thing, Cavell’s diagnosis is particularly tailored to a very particular way of putting the sceptical claim: one offered by a philosopher (call him Thompson Clark) who wishes to argue against the Austinian ‘ordinary-language’ response to scepticism – an attempt to dismiss the sceptic by appealing to our everyday practices of advancing and assessing knowledge claims – that the sceptical argument can be made to fit rather strikingly the everyday practice as Austin describes it. In ‘Knowing and Acknowledging’ (in Cavell, 1969), for example, Cavell’s response to scepticism takes a different form from the one it takes in The Claim of Reason.

43 See, for example, Cavell, 1989: p. 57; and consider in this connection Wittgenstein, 1963: remark 90. If I’m right, then the irony in Stroud’s objection to Cavell on behalf of scepticism is that his very objection betokens what Cavell would call ‘scepticism’.

44 Or, in the language of Travis’ more recent account (2005), a possibility that, given the philosopher’s concerns, strikes him as something that might very well be.


46 Wittgenstein, 1963: remark 156.

47 The allusion to Kant is intended. It should be clear that I am using the notion of ‘language-game’ here differently from the way that Travis is using it in Travis, 1989 and 2006. Travis speaks of language-games as ‘objects of comparison’, as indeed the primitive language-games from the early part of the Investigations ought to be taken. I, on the other hand, am using the term in the way that Wittgenstein is using it in, for example, remarks 24, 116, 249, 363, and on pp. 184 and 190 of the second part of the Investigations. Language-games, thus understood, are not objects of comparison, but rather are strands of significant and structured activity involving speech in which we engage in the course of everyday life, and which competent speakers can be brought to, and typically do in practice, recognize.


51 Of course, he is concerned with the connection between our concept of (propositional) knowledge and our concepts of certainty and doubt. But this is because he is responding to philosophers, either imagined or (in Moore’s case) actual, who wish to mean their ‘know’ as in the business of expressing certainty and ruling out doubt, and to do so apart from the conditions in which the word could thus be meant.


53 See Travis, 1997: p. 100.

54 That ‘I know’ is not (normally) ‘a descriptive phrase’ is a point that Austin makes in Austin, 1979: pp. 98–103.

55 The only exception I’m aware of is Warnock (1983). Warnock, however, takes the fact that assertoric sentences featuring ‘know’ and cognates are used in the performance of a great variety of speech acts, including those of charging someone with having known something and of admitting or confessing to having known something, as an indication that we should distinguish the question of ‘what to know something is, what “knowing” means’ (p. 49) from the question of ‘whether possession of a given item of putative knowledge is, on this or that occasion, claimed or disclosed, admitted or avowed, presupposed or advertised …’ (ibid.). But as I go on to argue, an item of knowledge, unlike, perhaps, an
item of clothing, is not something whose nature, and whose possession by someone, may philosophically safely be determined regardless of the specific point of the determination. Like Searle and Grice and many others, Warnock relies on a representational notion of word or sentence meaning that, at least in the case of ‘knowing that’, is importantly misleading.

The person charged with having known some fact may defend himself by appealing to doubts he had at the time. But in that case ‘doubt’ would mean something quite different from what it means in Travis, for whom ‘doubts (as to p)’ means pretty much what ‘possibilities in which not-p’ means for Lewis (1996). And the person would be saying, or implying, that he did not take it that the fact obtained; and if that indeed is the case, then he did not know – occasion insensitively – though perhaps he should have known.

I discuss the notion of knowledge as a liability, and argue in far more detail that it belies Travis’ account of the occasion sensitivity of ‘knowing that’, in ‘Knowing Knowing (That P)’ (forthcoming).

Outside of philosophy, this type of use of ‘I know that such and such’ is in fact quite rare, and for the very good reason that if the other is not satisfied that you are in a position to give her assurance as to the obtaining of such and such, then your claiming to be in that position is unlikely to help. The ‘new plunge’ (Austin, 1979: pp. 99–100) one normally takes in saying ‘I know’ in such contexts is therefore not epistemological, but personal.

The sort of cases broached, for example, in Keith DeRose’s (1992) ‘bank’ example and Stewart Cohen’s (1999) ‘airport’ example.

I argue this point in much more detail in ‘Who Knows?’

There are, of course, possible contexts of significant use of ‘know that’ and its cognates other than the ones I discussed. Most of these contexts lie even farther away from the tradition’s preoccupations, and fit its picture of knowledge even less well than the ones I discussed. Think, for example, of utterances of ‘I know that such and such’ that express acknowledgment, or moral conviction, or faith.

Travis, 1989: p. 54. In Travis, 2005: p. 290, he sums up this idea of semantic non-transparency by saying that ‘we are not masters in our own house’, a claim that he says he draws from Austin and Putnam.

References


