ON WHAT AN EXPLANATION OF LANGUAGE MIGHT BE

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R. Nash

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CHAPTER I. LEARNING THE MEANING OF A WORD AS ESTABLISHING A MENTAL REFLEX.

Were we to ask someone, "What does 'catalyst' mean?", we would be concerned with the practical business of understanding what is said. We might test someone's understanding of this word by seeing whether he could substitute another form of words. And it is important here that some forms of words would be counted as incorrect accounts of the meaning of "catalyst"; so that we could say that someone did n't understand what the word meant, or, (which is a slightly different matter), that he misunderstood its meaning.

But we could not speak of learning what people mean by having someone explain by definitions the meanings of their words where this was a matter of teaching a child to speak. My teaching you the meaning of a word by giving a definition supposes some understanding of the language on your part. Definitions alone would not do for teaching a child to speak. (Here I am concerned with philosophical questions about meaning, in particular questions that have been asked about the 'justification' of meaning, or its 'explanation'; not with questions in , say, child psychology, about how children can be taught to speak,)

The answer might seem to be to point to the fact of ostensive teaching. It could be said that a (not too) common method of teaching a child what certain words mean is by ostentation. We would correct the child's subsequent use of the word until he understood what we were pointing to, (colour, shape, size, of an object),

and knew how to go on and use the word in the same way, mean the same thing by the word. So far, what is in question need be not so much an explanation of how words mean, but, much less, merely a description of what might be called a 'training' of a certain sort, though 'training' can be taken in a mis-leading way.[1] We need be saying no more than that we often do teach and learn the meanings of certain words by ostentation.

But, on a philosophical level, if the notion of an 'explanation of how words mean' is brought in, it seems that language is already presupposed by the possibility of teaching in this way. It is presupposed in the sense that it would be absurd to theorise about the fact of ostensive teaching in such a way that made it seem that a child could be taught to speak "from scratch" by this method. For, however simple its application, this method seems always to require that the child already have some knowledge of language.[2] In this sense, it is similar to giving definitions; though otherwise it is very different. This is not to turn a blind eye to the fact that ostensive teaching is often used to teach the meanings of some words, but it is a criticism of the role ostensive teaching has been made to play in certain philosophical theorisings about the facts, with the mistaken aim of affording some kind of explanation of meaning.

This suggests that it is just as much an unworkable simplification to say, in philosophy, that a child can be taught the meaning of certain words by ostensive teaching alone, as it was to say

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1 Cp. Chapter VI.

2 Cp. Chapters IV and V.

that definition alone would do. In both cases, meaning is already presupposed. Perhaps it would have to be said that ostensive teaching and definition are only two of the elements involved. Another element that seems to be involved is what might be called 'common reactions'.[3] And a peculiarity of 'common reactions', where these are taken to be what Wittgenstein called "agreement" in "judgments"[4] is that they grow up as part of the activity of speaking the language. It is not as though they were there in man before language ever began. 'Common reactions', like ostensive teaching and the giving of definitions, presuppose language, though they presuppose it in a different way from the other two.[5] The question this gives rise to is: What sort of explanation can be given of how words mean anything at all? and, if one cannot be given without presupposing language in some way, in what sense is it an 'explanation'? One kind of purported explanation of how words mean that has often been given has implied the notion that learning the meaning of a word is a matter of establishing a mental reflex of some sort. As against the view that ostensive teaching is only possible if language is already presupposed, talk of a mental reflex, or of a psychogenetic mechanism, seems to suggest that ostensive teaching is only possible if this mechanism is the case. The view that meaning and language are already presupposed is challenged by the view that only a psychogenetic mechanism is already there. As it is only this that makes meaning and

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3 Cp. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Pt.I, Paras., 241-2.

4 Ibid.

5 Cp. Chapter V.

language possible, we don't need to presuppose meaning and language from the very start. But the possibility of even stating this view presupposes language and meaning in the same kind of way that ostensive teaching and definition do. Definition is an activity in the language. Similarly we cannot even describe the psychogenetic mechanism without presupposing the meaningfulness of the words employed in the description. It would be intolerably vague to speak of a psychogenetic mechanism without describing it. And how else is it to be described but in a form of words? Against this it might be said that the words employed in the description of the psychogenetic mechanism are themselves only at all meaningful as a result of the workings of that mechanism. But, if language must to some extent be presupposed even to get the notion that learning the meaning of a word is a matter of establishing a psychical mechanism off the ground, then the psychogenetic mechanism seems superfluous in such an explanation. This is not to stop us talking of a psychogenetic mechanism of this sort, but it is to give up the idea that it can provide a 'justification' or 'explanation' of meaning. It is one thing to investigate concept development, as this is done in some branches of psychology, but quite another to employ the notion of 'psychogenetic mechanisms' with an eye to 'explaining' language. Psychological investigations of concept development throw a great deal of light on, say, the psychology of language learning. They can give explanations of how one stage of conceptual development leads to another. But the meaningfulness of language is unproblematically presupposed in these investigations. There is no reason why the philosopher should not refer to psycho-

genetic mechanisms, though perhaps all he can do by this is refer to the psychology of language learning, without pretension to 'justifying' language in any way. Psychology can afford explanations of how words are learnt, in a sense of 'explanation' having nothing to do with a philosophical notion of a 'justification' of language. Given that there is language and meaning, we can investigate in psychology how children learn language. But psychology cannot explain 'how words mean anything at all'.

The view that learning the meaning of a word is a matter of establishing a mental reflex of some sort can be challenged from another direction, by showing that it seems incapable of providing an account of language that is anything like language as we understand it (see later). Showing this will be a roundabout way of showing that once more we seem to be thrown back to presupposing language and meaning in some way. The next question is: Can we do anything but presuppose this? and Can 'explanations' of how words mean be given within this severe restriction that are not simply to be rejected as pseudo-explanations, because fundamentally begging the question at issue? Is 'meaning' fundamentally a pseudo-problem?

"It is quite true that we (often) <u>do</u> teach and learn the meanings of (certain) words by ostentation." Taken as it stands this statement seems to be quite clearly about the practical business of teaching and learning what words mean. But suppose it were also construed as an <u>explanation</u> of how we teach and learn the meanings of certain words, or, even, of any words whatsoever. This might come about by first saying that teaching by ostentation is a kind of drill,

and that this drill causes us to associate, for example, a mental picture of blue with the word "blue", when we hear it uttered or say it to ourselves. It might be said in support of this view that each of us knows we quite often do have the appropriate mental image when we hear a word spoken; that it is quite plausible to suppose that this is always so; and that this could quite conceivably be established by extensive investigation of some sort. It might then be claimed that the meaning of a word is the mental image we have learnt to associate with it; and that this is a quite reasonable hypothesis, based on the fact that we (often) do teach and learn the meanings of (certain) words ostensively; one capable of explaining how we mean or understand anything at all by the words we utter.

The use of "drill" and "association" here might suggest that the relation between word and mental image is analogous to that between stimulus and response in a conditioned reflex. Pavlov said of the reflex that "a stimulus appears to be connected of necessity with a definite response, as cause with effect".[6] By "necessity" Pavlov here meant no more than the whole process conformed to experimentally established laws. Just as the terms "reflex" and "reflex arc" have been used to distinguish between the observed mere conjunction of the stimulus and the response, and the 'chain' established by the physiologist, of receptor cells, nerve structures and effectors, that 'mediate' between stimulus and response, so it might seem that further investigation of some sort might establish the mental mechanism that 'mediates' between the sound uttered and the corresponding image in the mind of the hearer, and experimentally

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6 Pavlov, Conditioned Reflexes, P.7.

establish the laws of association.

Here it would seem of primary importance to distinguish between meaningful and meaningless uses of words, in terms of the explanatory mechanism. If a word might come to be associated with a mental image in just any way, meaning would seem something entirely arbitrary. (Just as, if any form of words that someone substituted for "catalyst" was acceptable, it would be hard to see how language could be at all possible). On this account, it would have to be said that a word only comes to be associated with a mental image as a result of particular psychogenetic processes. Meaningful and meaningless uses of words would be distinguished by appeal to the workings of the psychogenetic mechanism. On this hypothesis, learning and forgetting what a word means would be analogous to establishing a reflex arc, and its breaking down, or even to establishing an electrical connection between a switch and bulb, and this connection breaking down.[7]

One result of this hypothesis is that "learning", as used in the phrase "learning the meanings of words", would have to be given a new sense.[8] When we ordinarily speak of learning, say, of learning to drive a car, it makes sense to speak of taking instruction. Further, it would make sense to ask someone why he was starting his car, rather than mowing the lawn. (He might answer, "Because I want to get to the Beer Retail before it closes"). That is, it makes sense to ask, with

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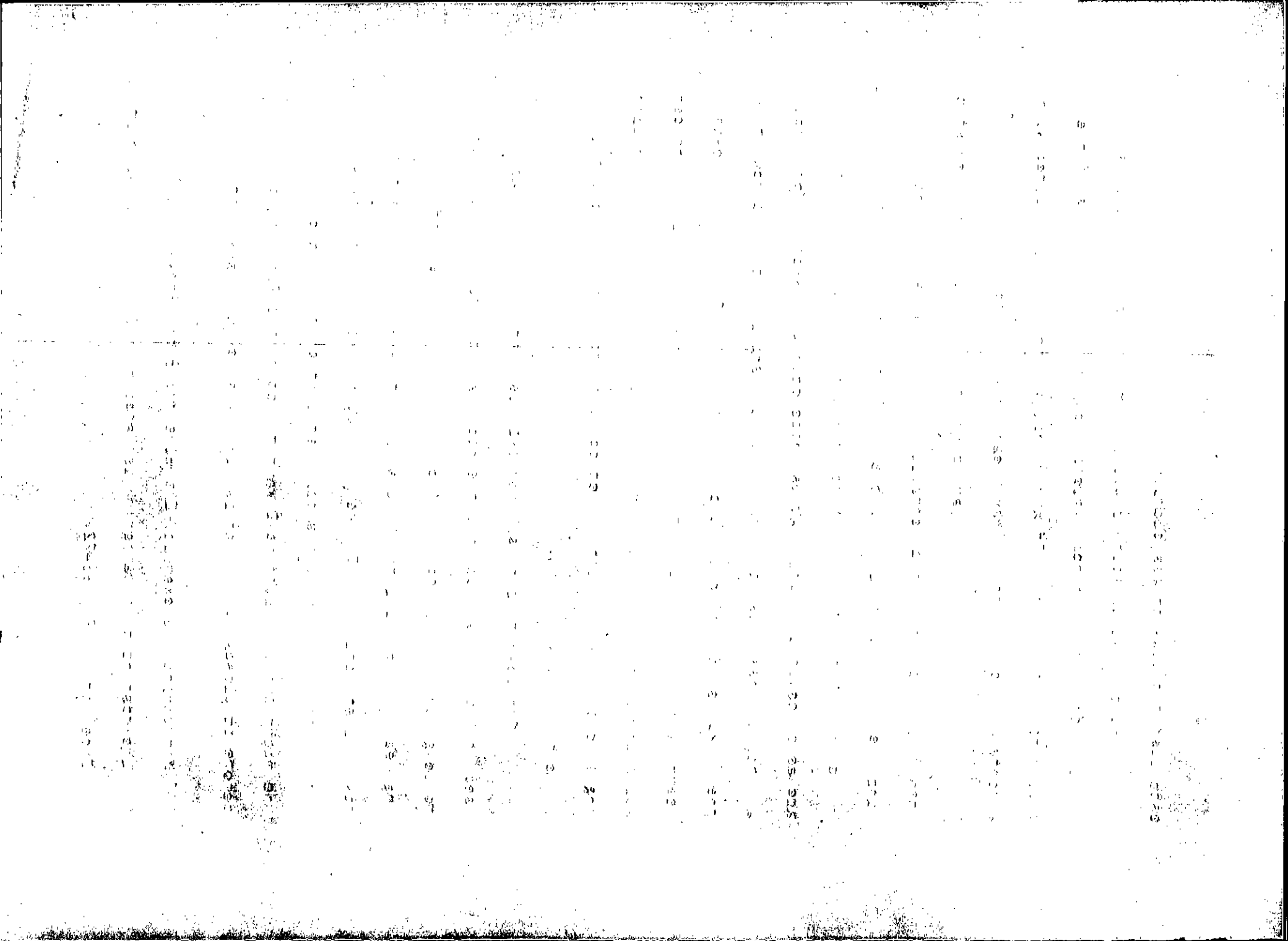
7 Wittgenstein's example, The Blue and Brown Books, P.12.

8 The rest of this paragraph is based on Meldon's discussion in Free Action, Pp. 66-72.



regard to a skill learnt and being performed, why someone is acting in that way. But in the case of an infant who blinks when a light is flashed in his eyes, the question, "Why does he blink?" is answered, not by stating what it is the infant wants to do, (in our everyday use of "wants"), i.e., not by giving any of our everyday sorts of explanations of human conduct, but by giving a physiological account. And it would make no sense here to speak of instruction. The new sense of "learning" can't be identified with the familiar learning of skills. "Learning" the meaning of a word is a matter of the development in the mental mechanism, as, analogously, if we were to speak of "learning" to blink, this would be a matter of physiological maturation in the nervous system.

There are difficulties with employing the notion of "physiological learning" to give an explanation of how words mean anything at all. In the ordinary employment of the notion, language and meaning are not at all in question. Language is itself employed in the technical descriptions given by the physiologist of physiological maturation. In the proposed employment of the notion, we cannot even specify what is to count as physiological or mental maturation, without presupposing the meaningfulness of the words used in the specification. This makes reference to physiological, or mental, maturation explanatorily superfluous for any 'justification' of language, for language is already in the account. It would be explanatorily superfluous too if we were merely to say that someone's correct use of a word was the criterion of his mental maturation in that respect. Here what counts as the 'correct' or 'incorrect' use of that word must be decided apart from any considerations of

mental mechanism, if it is going to provide a criterion in any ordinary sense.

Quite apart from the difficulty of circularity in purported explanation, it is quite clear that we cannot talk of learning the meaning of words as establishing mental reflexes in the ordinary sense of 'learning', in which we learn what we ordinarily understand by 'language'. If teaching by ostentation causes the associated mental image to occur, if something like a mental reflex is established, then it is conceivable that the mental image should occur without the person ever having been brought by ostentation to "call up" that idea by association. That is, it is conceivable that without ever having been taught the language, he might understand what my words meant.[9] For, on Hume's analysis of the notion of 'cause', it is just a brute fact that events are constantly conjoined, and perfectly conceivable that one of these events might occur alone. Just as a baby might blink when a light was flashed in his eyes, while still lacking the appropriately maturated physiological mechanism. Further, there are no a priori grounds for saying that the mental mechanism might not operate in quite different ways for different people, and differently for the same people on different occasions. It might be argued that it does, as a matter of fact, operate in the same way for different people, and in the same way, at different times, for the same person, on the grounds that we do, in fact, understand words. But, even so, and quite apart from questions of what an 'explanation' could be here, to talk of learning the language as establishing mental re-

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9 Cp. Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Books, P.12.

flexes seems to rule out any account of what we ordinarily understand by language; and makes it hard to see how what we ordinarily understand by language could be at all possible. We would not ordinarily say that someone might understand what I meant without having learnt the language. This might seem to throw us back to presupposing language and meaning in some way. And is n't that what is being presupposed in saying that the mental mechanism does, in fact, operate uniformly, for we do understand words? And it does have to be established, for we do not, in fact, understand words without having learnt the language.

CHAPTER II. A PRIORI STATEMENTS ABOUT WHAT IT MAKES SENSE TO SAY ABOUT LANGUAGE

On Locke's view, for man to say anything, in addition to the ability to produce the sounds used in language, "It was further necessary that he should be able to use these sounds as signs of internal conceptions, and make them stand as marks for the ideas in his own mind, whereby they might be known to others".[1] Men make themselves understood, and doing this is, "as it were, to bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others".[2] Locke was not suggesting that we might literally produce an idea for public perusal, as one might produce a photograph out of one's pocket. He said that, " there comes by constant use to be such a connexion between certain sounds and the ideas they stand for, that the names heard almost as readily excite certain ideas as if the objects themselves which are apt to produce them did actually affect the sense".[3]

Locke made it seem that if the listener is to understand at all what is said, then the right kind of idea must occur in his mind when he hears the word said; and that this is occurring at all is a matter of the idea being caused by hearing the appropriate sound, as a matter of association. And he made it seem that if we are to say anything at all, then our making the sounds which occur in

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1 Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Bk. 3, Chap. 1, Section 1.

2 Ibid., Bk.3, Chap. 1, Section 2.

3 Ibid., Bk.3, Chap. 1, Section 2.

speech must be accompanied by the appropriate ideas, which constitute the meaning of what we say, and that meaning anything at all is essentially a mental operation with these special objects. It seems that in considering the possibility of saying anything, we need consider no more than fundamental facts of human psychology, and whether they remain unchanged; and also that, in considering developments in language, say, accretions to the meaning of a word, we need consider no more than psychological developments of some sort.

There is undoubtedly a connection between the possibility of language and certain fundamental facts of human psychology, but a general criticism of Locke's account is that it is quite another matter whether an account can be given, in philosophy, of the possibility of language, in the light of this alone, if only because Locke finds that language presents a philosophical problem of some sort. It would be sidestepping any problem about language to approach this merely from a psychological direction. For the meaningfulness of language is unproblematically presupposed in psychological investigations. And why should n't it be? That problem is of no concern to the psychologist, has no bearing on the theory or practice of the science. Of course, Locke was n't simply doing psychology. Nevertheless, the meaningfulness of language must already be to some extent presupposed even to get his philosophical doctrine about mental association off the ground. For instance, we would have to describe the process, or mechanism, of mental association, which seems so analogous to a physiological reflex. And this is to sidestep the philosophical problem. If we are concerned with the derivation of the notions of 'meaning'

and 'language', the issue is avoided if we bring these in at the start. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that any method of tackling this problem, whatever its philosophical starting point, will presuppose what is at question; that, as we always presuppose language as we know it, and as we know perfectly well what speaking and understanding language is, the problem of meaning is a pseudo one.

The presupposition of 'language' and 'meaning' in any account of those notions may be shown merely by pointing to the tautology that "I gotta use words when I talk to you";[4] the tautology that a philosophical doctrine about language must itself be stated in words. Though this does have immediate bearing on the kind of 'explanation' Locke can give, and so is a tautology that it is worthwhile reminding ourselves of, it does have the disadvantage of being only a very plain tautology of which we remind ourselves. Nor does it show us anything of the logical mechanics which, in the course of an account of language on Locke's lines, would presuppose the notions of 'language' and 'meaning' at each turn, for the account to work. It would be philosophically more illuminating to suggest how certain a priori statements about 'language' and 'meaning' must be tacitly referred to all along in an account of Locke's sort, and then to show how this affects the possibility of accounting for the notion of 'understanding' what was said' on Locke's lines.

On Locke's account, it seems that making possible a mis-

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4 T.S.Eliot, Fragment of an Agon, in Collected Poems, 1909-1935.

understanding of exactly what it was you meant is no more blameworthy than, say, whistling a tune, or making any other sort of noise. One approach to the notion of 'misunderstanding what was said' is to say that the fact that we use certain words in a particular way in itself entitles people to draw certain conclusions from them as to what was meant. So that a misunderstanding is something for which it makes sense to say that the speaker was at least in part to blame. By contrast, Locke's view of language suggests that people are in no way entitled to draw any conclusions at all from the fact that words are used in a certain way. The exact meaning of a statement, or the fact that it has any meaning at all, cannot be determined from the way it is used. It is a matter of finding out , in some way, exactly what ideas, if any, the speaker has in his mind. Here the onus is on the hearer. It would seem to go together with his fully understanding what was said, rather than taking it, as a matter of habit, that an uttered word means so-and-so. For Locke, that a word is associated with a mental image, ("mental image" seems at least a plausible interpretation of what Locke meant by "idea", particularly in the light of his talk about "framing" ideas), seems to be a fact in addition to the fact that the word has a correct use in the language; even though the truth of the first fact seems in some wayto imply the truth of the second. That there seems to be this connection between these two facts, in terms of Locke's theoriding, shows a way in which it might be thought that mental images afford an explanation of the fact that we do teach the use of some words ostensively. It might be said that a child can go on and use a word correctly after a number of objects have

been pointed out to him only in virtue of a mental image which enables him to proceed independently to quite different applications; to identify, by means of the mental image, which of the new objects are the same as the objects the teacher had pointed out while teaching him the meaning of the word. Otherwise, and just talking in terms of the use of the word, it might seem quite inexplicable that he could go on to use the word correctly. The suggestion is that the methods of the child psychologist who is concerned with teaching backward children to speak, work only by virtue of this mental mechanism.

In the first place, how might this parallelism between speech and mental activity, be come to in this respect? If I listen to the radio, I understand what is said. Should I say that the radio speaks to me? If I said that you said something to me, but the radio did not, would I be making a very arbitrary distinction? In both cases, I understand what I hear. It might seem that although, when I listen to the radio, I understand what I hear, still I do not understand the radio,(as distinct from understanding what you said as a participant in a radio programme), because a radio is not something which I could understand or fail to understand. If this were not taken as a statement about the way we talk, to the effect that the phrase, "understanding a radio", seems absurd, that there is nothing we would call a case of understanding a radio, unless we allowed that phrase a special metaphorical sense, then it might seem that what is at question is a matter of performance, or capacity. That people, when they speak, do something which machines, and perhaps animals, don't. And corresponding to what people do

when they speak, is what they do when they understand what is said; when they, on Locke's account, associate the right idea, the idea corresponding to the idea in the speaker's mind when he utterred the word. This account assimilates 'understanding' to 'walking', in the sense that it makes understanding seem like a mental activity of some sort, that could be investigated in some way analogous to the way we might investigate reflexes employed in walking. It assimilates 'the meaning of a word' to 'the nail in the door', as though it were an object of some sort, that might play a part in processes of some sort, analogous, say, to rusting, and that both the object and any processes it might play a part in, were amenable to inspection of some kind.

I understand you but not the radio, because something is going on in you that is not going on in the radio. It is, of course, true that a great number of things do go on in human beings speaking and understanding language that do not go on in a radio. But it is another thing to say that 'language' and 'meaning' as we know them can be accounted for in terms of mental activity of any sort. Aside from any difficulties about what an 'explanation' could be here, can this claim make room for the notions of 'language' and 'meaning' without somehow presupposing them, which would be a comment on the kind of 'explanation' given here? To say simply that people, when they speak and understand language do something which machines, and perhaps animals, don't, might seem to leave it an open question whether a machine might not be designed at some time in the future which could, in a quite ordinary sense, speak; or whether dogs, as we know them now, might not suddenly start to speak. If speaking

and understanding language is a matter of performing in a certain way, it might be wondered, could n't machines be designed to perform in that way? Could n't dogs suddenly start performing in that way? And if it were felt that this just could n't happen, the force behind this "could n't" might seem to be no more than that of a technical insuperability in what was otherwise a quite intelligible programme, or the factual impossibility of what was otherwise a quite conceivable happening. Here it is salutary to ask of this purportedly intelligible programme, or this purportedly conceivable happening, "At what point would a machine be a human being", or, "At what point would dogs, as we know them, be capable of conversation?" At least one thing these questions do is to remind us that the phrases, "a machine which speaks and understands language" and "a dog, as we know them, which speaks and understands language" seem absurd, that there is nothing that we would call a case of either, unless we allowed the phrases a special metaphorical sense. Talking, in this respect, of an intelligible programme, or conceivable happening, embodies a conceptual confusion, and can be ruled out from the start, if taken in any literal way.

To say that there is nothing that we would call a case of "a machine which speaks and understands language", or of "a dog, as we know them, which speaks and understands language", in any literal sense of either of those phrases, shows that whatever it is that people do, (if we want to speak of these special doings) when they speak and understand the language, is something that machines logically can't do. It is a matter of what it makes sense to say, for instance, about learning to speak: "machines can't speak"; "dogs,

as we know them, can't speak". In bringing in what it makes sense to say about learning to speak we are bringing in the notion of 'language' and 'meaning' that are embodied in these statements. But to bring in these notions at all shows the explanatory superfluity of talking about mental doings here. The parallelism between speech and mental activity seems perfectly useless in that respect. This is not to deny that there are such things as mental images, and that they often accompany speech and understanding what was said. But it seems possible to explain language and meaning, as we know them, only by bringing in 'language' and 'meaning' at the start. Otherwise, it is hard to see how the suggestion might be avoided that what is explained is a language which machines, or dogs as they are, might learn to speak and understand. That 'language' and 'meaning' must be brought in at the start is a comment on the kind of 'explanation' given here. Psychologists might, for special purposes, investigate the connection between mental imagery and speaking and understanding what was said. But, if we were to talk of an explanation, in this respect, it would have nothing to do with the philosophical notion of a 'justification' of language; would not explain 'how words mean anything at all'. If the parallelism between speach and mental activity is perfectly useless explanatorily, not only would it seem philosophically superfluous to introduce it into the account at all, but a positive reason for leaving this parallelism out is the avoidance of the philosophical morass surrounding the problem of 'mind' and 'mental activity' in discussing 'meaning' in philosophy.[5]

I am not suggesting that the straight question, "Could a

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5 Cp. Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4·1121.

machine speak?" could plausibly be made to arise out of Locke's account. The doings accompanying speaking and understanding language are doings of a privileged status. They are mental events. And machines don't have minds. Clearly, in this sense, Locke did not imply that machines might learn to speak. In this respect, he did not imply that we could, (non-circularly), explain language and meaning by first introducing the workings of a machine, and then showing how the notions of 'language' and 'meaning' could be accounted for in terms of that. However, it is not so clear how Locke's purported explanation of language rules out the possibility that dogs, as we know them, might learn it; and this would not be an account of 'language' as anything like we know it.

Locke's inheritance of the mind-body dichotomy would make it unhistorical to raise the question, "Could a machine speak?" out of his account. Nevertheless, to the extent that this dichotomy was viewed as a factual one, i.e. between two kinds of substance, (though of a most striking and irreducible sort, one of the kinds of substance being totally unlike the other), it might seem just a striking and irreducible fact that machines don't have minds. But whatever the intricacies of the problem of 'mind', we would want to say not just that machines don't, but that they can't have minds. The sentance "machines might have minds after all" seems simply absurd in any literal sense; in any literal sense, we can't conceive of a use for it. Taken in this way, the statement, "machines can't have minds", points not to a factual dichotomy, but to a logical one, a dichotomy between 'forms of description', in terms of what 'forms of description' we can apply in particular cases, and still make

sense. (This is merely to indicate the philosophical geography of the problem of 'mind', without attempting to discuss it.) By contrast, "Pigs can't fly, but birds can" marks what is, in fact, the case. But we would still be making sense if we said, "Pigs can fly". We can describe pigs as flying and still make sense. A distinction between forms of description, and their intelligible use, is not being made here. If someone said he had found a flying pig, we would be inclined to smell his breath. But we would at least understand what he said. For instance, we would know what sort of evidence he would have to provide to prove his claim. Whereas, if someone said, "I've found a machine that converses", and wanted us to take it literally, we would be inclined to say that he was saying something simply nonsensical. No doubt the force of a logical distinction of this sort was somewhere behind the traditional mind-body dichotomy; but was there inchoately.

To say that "machines <u>can't</u> have minds" once again introduces statements about what it makes sense to say, amongst other things, about learning to speak; and in this way 'language' and 'meaning', as we know them, are brought in. We bring in these notions, too, if we say, "dogs, as they are, <u>can't</u> learn to speak". And it seems only by tacitly supposing a priori statements of this sort about 'language' and 'meaning' that we can rule out an account of language which machines or dogs, as they are, might speak. It might seem that Locke can only be read as explaining 'language' and 'meaning' as we know them, distinct from a 'language' which machines or dogs might speak, by bringing in 'language' and 'meaning' at the start. This is not only a comment on the kind of 'ex-

planation' given, but it is a comment too on what a consistent empiricism might be. - For it seems that certain a priori statements about language have to be assumed, where an account of language as we know it is concerned.

What account can be given of 'understanding what was said' on Locke's account of 'language' and 'meaning'? Determining exactly what someone meant, or whether he meant anything at all, seems to be in part a matter of finding out in some way what ideas, if any, he has. However, although Locke's account might seem to point to at least the conceivability of doing this, it is not emphasised as at all important for our actually saying things to each other and being understood. Locke did not suggest that we need literally produce an idea for public perusal. He held that we can understand what is said because, as a result of constant use, a speech sound comes to "call up" the idea it stands for, say, the mental image of a tree, almost as if I were actually looking at a tree. But, given that we all "call up" ideas after having heard the respective words a number of times, how can I know that the idea I "call up" is the idea you "call up"? That the mechanism of association is the same in every case? This would seem to throw us back on the need to find out, apparently literally, what someone else's ideas were. Locke might seem able to avoid this only by saying that the mechanism of association must operate in a standard way for each man, because it is a plain fact that we do understand each other most of the time. This makes it seem that my criteria for the occasional malfunctioning of your mental mechanism can be established only with the circularity of referring to the fact that, sometimes, you

do not understand me. All this is to bring in 'language' as we know it, and so to make talk of 'ideas' explanatorily superfluous. Insofar as Locke is talking of a mechanism, even of a mental kind, then it would seem to make sense to talk of the conceivability of its breaking down. But Locke introduces mental mechanism to provide an explanation, of some sort, of language. And in this respect, it might be said that it is demanded by the fact that Locke's account is theorising about the fact that we do usually understand each other, that the mechanism should not go wrong.

It is not at all clear that the view that determining what someone meant is a matter, in the last resort, of finding out in some way what ideas he has, can straightforwardly be attributed to Locke. Of definition Locke said:

> The meaning of words, being only the ideas they are made to stand for by him that uses them, the meaning of any term is then showed, or the word defined, when by other words the idea it is made a sign of and annexed to in the mind of the speaker is, as it were, represented or set before the view of another; and its signification ascertained.[6]

Here understanding what the speaker said seems not at all a matter of finding out what his ideas are. The use of his words seems enough, taken in conjunction with my apparatus of association. But this is not to imply the notion of 'use' as we ordinarily understand it in, say, the phrase "the correct use of a word". In terms of Locke's account, we might distinguish between 'use' in "the correct use of a word", and 'use' where this is a matter of the way a

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6 Locke, Essay, Bk.3, Chap. 1, Section 2.

word is "used" by the speaker in causal connection with a mental mechanism. In this second sense, it would make sense to say that a word might have various "uses", be associated causally with various ideas, yet still have the same 'use' in the first sense, which is connected with 'grammatical use'.

These two uses of 'use' are totally different. We might speak of "using" a tool in ways and for purposes for which it was not designed; using a chisel for planing a piece of wood, for instance. Here, if we speak of its "use", we may be giving information to the effect that it is to be used in this way rather than that. It would make perfectly good sense to say that it might be used in other ways, although this might be giving bad advice as to its use. Similarly, we might speak of "using" a word in association with mental images. If we said that this word is used in association with that idea, we would be saying something informative in the sense that, although it is, in fact, used in this way, it would make perfectly good sense to say it might conceivably be used in association with all sorts of ideas. This goes together with the conceivability of a mechanism working in different ways, or breaking down. But in this sense of 'use', there is no guarantee that I understand what someone meant, that I associate an idea corresponding to the idea the speaker associated with the word in question. It is quite conceivable that he may have meant something quite different, have associated a different idea. Just in the light of this use of 'use', we seem once more thrown back on the need to find out apparently literally what someone else's ideas were. But we would want to say "I can't have someone else's

toothache or mental image". There is nothing we would call a case of my having someone else's toothache or mental image. If what I meant was purely a matter of my mental images, then there is nothing we would call a case of someone else understanding what I meant. Nevertheless, as his discussion of definition shows, Locke wanted to maintain that in some sense we can understand the meaning of a word from its use. But this view is made possible only by his employment of 'use' as in "the correct use of a word".

When we speak of the 'use' or 'correct uses' of a word, this is not informative in the sense that we would say that it could conceivably be used in other ways, and still be a word that makes sense to us, means anything. If a word were used in enough different ways, so that it seemed quite a random matter, we would not even want to talk of a 'misuse' of the word. For we would not want to say it was a word, or meant anything, at all if it could be used in just any way. This is a matter of what we would call "a use of a word" or call a "word". It is not as if we could conceivably use a word in almost any way to have meaning, though as a matter of fact we use it only in this way, or these ways. If that were so, we could give an informative explanation of how words mean. Just as, although a hammer might be used quite arbitrarily, we might explain that it is used in this way, or these ways. But we cannot give an informative explanation of 'how words mean anything at all' by referring to their 'use' because 'use' in this sense presupposes the notion of 'meaning'. Words are used in particular ways to have meaning. Tools are only used. Meaning is presupposed in the sense that if a person had no idea how to use a certain word correct-

ly, we would say he could not know its meaning. This is not to deny that we might distinguish informatively between different uses of a word for stylistic effect, and so on, as a literary critic might do, where a 'justification' of meaning is not in question. As the previous sentence shows, the notion of 'use' even in connection with the use of words, is a complex, and a by no means clear one. But it does seem that in any sense that we might speak informatively of the use of a word, a 'justification' of meaning could not be given informatively too, for 'meaning' is presupposed by 'use'. Perhaps a misleading side of the analogy of words with tools is that if we say here that words have uses, it suggests we might give this 'justification'. Only insofar as he ran together two totally different uses of 'use' could Locke make it seem that we can give an informative explanation of meaning. Talk of ideas conferring meaning on the use of words by being associated with them becomes explanatorily superfluous insofar as Locke implies the use of 'use' as in "the correct use of a word". It is only insofar as he implies this that he obviates the unintelligible requirement of having someone else's ideas; or alternatively, makes his account an account of language as we know it, as distinct from its being a matter of languages logically private to each speaker. Locke wanted to maintain that in some sense we can understand the meaning of a word from its use. But in the one sense of 'use' that is at all related to 'meaning', (and talk of different people associating different ideas with the same speech sound seems incapable of providing an account of 'meaning' as we know it), 'use' already presupposes meaning. I am not suggesting, as against Locke, any form of

the view that 'meaning' can simply be equated with 'use'. The notions of 'meaning' and 'use' are not equivalent, if only because we speak of "correct" and "incorrect" uses, but not, ordinarily, of "correct" and "incorrect" meanings. But there are certainly more than the factual causal connections between the meaning and the use of words that are suggested by Locke's informative sense of 'use'; where a word may be "used" in association with this, but conceivably, any other idea; and it is the idea that constitutes its meaning. Insofar as 'use, as in "the correct use of a word" is introduced into an account of language, this amounts to tacit recognition that no non-circular account of 'language' and 'meaning' may be given. For certain a priori statements about what we would call a "use of a word" are appealed to, which also presuppose the notion of 'meaning'. It seems that any empirical account of language must start off with these. This is not to discredit the general empiricist programme out of hand, but to show that, at the best, the notion of a consistent empiricism is not a consistent one, (though without suggesting that, by contrast, the notion of a consistent rationalism is consistent).

CHAPTER III. ARE 'INTROSPECTIVE EXPERIMENTS' EXPERIMENTS?

By running together two quite different uses of 'use', Locke made it seem that an informative explanation might be given of language and meaning. Insofar as his concern was with the association of speech sounds with ideas, it might seem that his theorising about how words mean was a matter of setting up scientific hypotheses in the old introspective psychology; and that, at least in this respect, philosophy is another science, whose accounts can be rivalled or overthrown by the sciences as we know them. It might seem that the explanation he attempted to give of language is an explanation in the informative sense of those given in the sciences, and that it can be borne out by observation of introspected facts. A difficulty with the question, "How do words mean anything at all?" is that it itself is an intelligible form of expression. So that if anyone asked it, it would not be clear what it was he did not understand. Further, if Locke's account is a matter of setting up scientific hypotheses, then the statement of these is itself one use of language. But apart from these difficulties, it is hard to see how the notion of an 'introspective experiment' is at all intelligible as a form of knowledge. And the claim of the philosophical view, that the meaning of a word is the mental image associated with it, to be anything like a scientific theory, whatever 'meaning' might be here, might seem to rest on the possibility of developing relevant experimental techniques of that sort.

Whether the impossibility of my, in any way observing someone else's mental image be taken as an insuperable technical difficulty, like that of literally looking into my ear with my eye, or as a logical one, as a matter of the way we talk, the point of which is that there is nothing that we would call "my having someone else's mental image", it might seem that there are, nevertheless, methods of determining whether someone has a certain mental image, though they must rely on descriptions given by the subject, and that these are quite reputable scientifically. This gives rise to the notion of 'introspective experiment'. Even if this were taken as a legitimate form of knowledge, the fact that it depends upon descriptions given by the subject, presupposes the use of words. So that explanations of what words are associated with what images, even if of scientific interest, would not provide a 'justification' of meaning. Insofar as Locke found language to constitute a philosophical problem, scientific explanations of this sort, even if possible, would bypass the problem.

Although introspective experiments are no longer fashionable in psychology, some presuppositions inherent in the phrase "introspective experiment" still show through in recent theorising. For instance, Hebb, who seems no believer in the value of actually performing introspective experiments, seems to think that the whole notion is quite intelligible. He has said that:

> Private or subjective, or introspective evidence concerns events within the observer himself, and by the nature of things available to that one observer..... Speech, and introspective description is not a sort of pipeline direct to the consciousness of another, giving us first-hand knowledge. It is

> behaviour from which we may infer, correctly or incorrectly, the nature of the underlying processes that determine what the subject has said.[1]

Hebb, unlike Descartes, considered introspective reports to be very fallible. He said that, "A subject's reports may be a most unreliable source of information about what goes on in the mind of another, even though he is entirely honest".[2] Precisely what this suggests is that there are ways of finding out whether the introspector's report is accurate or not. It suggests that we might, in the light of this further source of information, train introspectors in precise observation of their mental images. It suggests that introspective experiments could be so designed as to get the greatest possible detail and precision in descriptions of mental images. Hebb spoke, in the first quotation, of inferring "correctly or incorrectly, the nature of the underlying processes". This makes the notion of "introspective experiment" seem quite intelligible, even though now unfashionable; makes it seem that criteria could be established by which we could rule out some of the introspector's descriptions as inaccurate. It suggests that by means of experiments of this kind we could, for a start, determine whether the right ideas have been produced in the minds of the children; teach them how to introspect these correctly; and determine when they are introspecting correctly. There also seems hope that by these methods we could learn how to produce the right ideas in their minds. For what is this further source of information that enables Hebb to

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1 D.O.Hebb, A Textbook of Psychology, Chapter 4.

2 Ibid., Chapter 4.

say that introspective reports are very fallible? It sounds like a first-hand source of information; unlike introspective reports, some kind of direct observation of other minds. It might seem just a practical detail (and not a paradox) that the children would have to know how to speak enough to give introspective reports concerning the processes by which they learn the meaning of words at all. For, after all, their descriptions are the only evidence available in this case, (yet what is in question just is, whether they are saying anything at all).

Locke's account makes it seem that we are able to teach children to speak in virtue of the production in their minds of mental images; and that it is the business of the philosopher-psychologist to investigate these with a great accuracy. In what sense might we speak of "greater" or "lesser accuracy" in introspective results with regard to subjects other than ourselves? If what is going on is something which the subject alone can "observe", then whatever he says at any moment is the best possible evidence available for the nature of the process at that moment. Statements can be corrected only in the light of better evidence. But the subject's evidence is the best possible. So it makes no sense to say that it could be corrected. If an utterance is of a kind which cannot in principle be corrected, there is no room for a distinction between its being "right" or "wrong". or being a "more" or "less reliable" report. The whole project of training introspectors in "greater accuracy" in the observation of their internal states seems wholly misconceived on its own basis. And, as there could be no criterion for rejecting any-

thing the subject might say as inaccurate, as he could say anything whatsoever, and it would have to go, introspective 'experiments' seem no more than a rigmarole.

Nevertheless, there might seem to be some standards of evidence with regard to introspecting as distinct from those which would be concerned merely with self-contradictory uses of words in an introspective description. And a question on this count suggested by Locke's view is, if an introspective description is contradictory, is it therefore a misdescription; and if we allow that it is not a misdescription, can we still maintain that the description was contradictory? If a man said two inconsistent things in quick succession, why should we not say that the introspected process changed its nature in the course of his describing it? That would fit in better with the fact that what the subject says at any moment is the best possible evidence going. And, on Locke's account, where the meaning of the words is precisely what is being described, this would seem to imply that a man cannot, in principle, contradict himself whilst making introspective reports. Thus, not only would anything the subject said have to be accepted as the best possible evidence, but also any nonsense he uttered. It seems that the notion of 'correct introspective reports' would fall to the ground even if this objection were withheld. Could n't we say that the introspector might determine that a misdescription had been made by looking more closely at his idea, thereby discovering that it was so-and-so, not such-and-such, as he had first thought (and perhaps thereby discovering that what he had previously misdescribed by a contradiction could now be described without one).

Being able to "look at" something suggests that one can also look away from it; and the phrase "looking away from something", used, as it usually is, of physical objects, suggests that the something continues to exist while no longer looked at. Could n't we say that we can look away from our ideas? We know what sort of investigation might settle the question whether a particular object exists when we are no longer looking at it,(one conducted with cameras, for instance). This suggests that there are analogous ways for settling the question whether an idea exists when I am no longer introspecting it. But would it have meaning to suggest that my idea exists after I have introspected it? What could be considered as evidence that it did or did not? Even introspective evidence is ruled out here. There seems to be no sense in saying that I might look away from my idea, and so no sense in saying that I might look more closely, or less closely; and so no serse in suggesting that I might misdescribe it through not looking at it closely enough. The moral that emerges from this is that looking is not like introspecting. The canons of empirical evidence that apply to the one have no application at all to introspecting. To say that introspection is an experiment is to blend together two quite different modes of description, and to abduct criteria we have for making physical object descriptions to do duty as criteria for making introspective descriptions.

That one cannot talk of correct, or incorrect, more, or less, accurate introspection, may be taken as a characterisation, not as a deficiency of introspection. That is what introspection is. I introspect whatever I introspect. But where an account of 'meaning' is

to be given in these terms too , it would be hard to see how language could be possible. Is whatever idea I happen to "associate" the meaning of the word concerned? We cannot talk of understanding a word incorrectly on this account, for we can't speak of an incorrect introspection. This makes it seem that a word means whatever I take it to mean. What would it be to learn how to teach a child to associate the correct mental image, when whatever the child introspects will not be inaccurate? Further, to the extent that Locke might seem to be advancing 'scientific' hypotheses about the association of ideas with words, to what extent can we speak of evidence for or against, if we can't label evidence either as correct, or incorrect. If meaning what we say, or understanding what is said, is a matter of having ideas, the correct ideas, it is difficult to see how language is at all possible. Prior to understanding a statement, we must first recognise that it is a statement at all, and not an arbitrary series of noises. At all understanding a statement depends upon recognising a particularly elusive relation between it and something else, a series of ideas in the mind. There is no way of teaching correct and accurate recognition. The recognition seems perfectly arbitrary and personal, like being struck by the shape of a tree, or the way someone walks.

Locke might seem to avoid this reduction of language to the arbitrariness of gibberish only insofar as he also employed the notion of 'use' as in "the correct use of a word", where this presupposes 'meaning'. This makes talk of ideas explanatorily superfluous; as, in a different way, they would seem to be by recognition of the fact that introspective reports are stated in language.

From this explanatory point of view, it is irrelevant what ideas someone has; he may have none at all, or any whatsoever.

CHAPTER IV. MIGHT MY MENTAL IMAGES 'TELL' ME WHAT WORDS MEAN?

There are difficulties connected with the notion of 'introspective experiments'. But apart from these, the objection that introspective reports must themselves be put in a form of words, so bringing in language at the start, might not be accepted as showing that talk of mental images is explanatorily superfluous, as showing that no explanation, in an informative sense of that word, can be given here. For instance, it might be felt that, although introspective reports must themselves be put in a form of words, and that is as clear but as uninteresting as a tautology, what is important in the case of these reports is the way they are used. True, they must be put in a form of words, but they have the unique status of describing the mental images which in some way constitute their meaning. In any other use of language, say, in describing the colour of wall-paper, or physical objects generally, what is described will not, as such, constitute the meaning of the constituent words. But it might seem that their meaningfulness must, in the end, be traced back to the mental images which are described in introspective reports. The suggestion is that, although we must use language to talk about mental images, and in this sense cannot hope to give anything but a question-begging account of meaning, still we can talk about mental images in such a way as to give an informative account of language within that limitation.

Quite clearly there are such things as introspective reports given by people of their own mental images. Amongst the peculiarities of these reports is that we cannot call them more, or less, acc-

urate, if the reports are all we have to go by. If I were to use the verb "introspect" as to say, "I introspect that I have a headache", my report would not be all you would have to go by. There would be my publicly observable behaviour; grimacing, change of pulse rate, and so on. If I behaved energetically, as though I had no pain at all, you would look for some reason why I was behaving so with a headache. Perhaps I might be trying to make a good impression on the boss. If you could find no reason at all, and I affirmed that I was not pretending or imagining that I had a headache, you would remain puzzled. You would not know how to take my statement. In reports concerning mental images, (and this is the classical philosophical context of the notion of 'introspection', the one suggested by Locke's account of how words mean, and discussed in the previous chapter), you would have to take them as they are, whatever they expressed. For here there need be no attendant publicly observable behaviour at all. For instance, we only know that the electrical stimulation of certain areas of the brain produces certain mental images on the introspective reports of subjects tested so far. If a new subject reported no mental image at all, or an unexpected mental image, and the electrical stimulation had gone according to plan, and there were no other unusual circumstances, then, as our only source of information is the introspective reports themselves, we would have no independant check on the reports of the new subject. We would just have to take his report as an exception to any pattern we had been establishing. It might be tempting to add another peculiarity to introspective reports about mental images, in the light of Locke's account of meaning. It might be tempting to say that

their meaning is in some way constituted by the mental images they describe.

What might be meant by saying that my mental images confer meaning on what would otherwise be my utterance of mere sounds? What might be meant by saying that I can learn the meaning of "red" by having a mental image of some sort? This view seems to be associated with, if not in many ways dependant upon, the confusion between giving and using a definition, between giving and using a sample. I can use a colour sample to describe the colour of something else; for instance, the colour of what I am looking at under the microscope. I might say, "The colour of the nucleus is this colour". But, I can also use a colour sample in quite a different way. I can say what "red" means by pointing to a sample. Here, "This is red" is a definition, an ostensive one. But what does it mean to use a sample, (and that it is a mental sample brings its own problems), to describe the colour of the sample itself? For this is what might seem to happen when I introspect the mental image constituting the meaning of "red", and say of it, "This is red". Here, "This is red" sounds informative in the same way as "This is red", or, "The colour of the nucleus is this colour" are informative, when we say that of a colour seen under a microscope. The introspective report has the ring of a description. Yet, on the implications of Locke's account, where the meanings of the constituent words of an introspective report are constituted by mental images, the role of "This is red" seems to be to provide an ostensive and archetypal definition of what "red" means. The introspective report might seem to partake of the character of both "This is red" used as a description of the mental image concerned,

and as used as an explanation of the meaning of "red" by giving an ostensive definition, where it means "This is called red". This makes it seem possible to give an explanation of the word "red" by giving a bit of descriptive information; makes it seem that we can explain the meanings of words, where this is not a matter of definition, but of informatively describing mental images.[1] This might seem one source of the view that although introspective reports must be in a form of words, still we can say something quite informative about meaning in the sense that we may talk in terms of how introspective reports are used to describe what constitutes their meaning.

The running together of giving and using a sample makes it seem that when I use a mental image to give an ostensive definition of a word, (and this might seem an odd way to give a definition), I am, by the same token, describing the mental image. This makes it sound as though the mental image itself somehow 'tells' me what it is called. This seems to tie language down to reality particularly closely. What the word "red" is to be applied to, what it means, is not just a matter of definition, but of a feature of a mental image which is, as it were, already clearly indicated by a label as redness. "Red" seems to correspond to the original labels, to the adamantine facts, (even if the facts are mental ones of a rather peculiar sort). This suggests that there is an additional and far more important kind of difference over and above the difference resulting from the way the words "red" and "green" are used in "Nothing can be greenish red", a necessary difference between mental images.

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1 Cp. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Pt.I, insertion at P.18.

It suggests that the assynonymity that lexicographers are concerned with is only a shadow of a mental 'assynonymity' in making our ostensive definitions of "red" and "green", This has been one line of thought that has led to calling "Nothing can be greenish red" a necessary synthetic statement.

To say that we merely recognise mental assynonymity in making our ostensive definitions of "red" and "green" suggests that there could be some sort of test which would inform us of whether or not our language 'corresponded to' reality. It might seem that our language is not arbitrary if it can be borne out by descriptions of mental images, (it is from such a direction that the philosophical suggestion has come that 'meaning' is a matter for psychogenetic analysis). This suggests that we might informatively explain language in this way, even though the descriptions would be in a form of words. To say that the meaning of "red" is a mental image or sense impression suggests that there is a correspondence between language and reality. It is this that provides a reason for speaking as we do. On this account, there might seem room for the notion of a 'justification' of meaning, and for speaking of the need for a justification. This suggests that the way we speak is somehow determined by the nature of our mental images. As though we could say that language is 'true'; just as we might say that a scientific hypothesis was true. But how would we determine whether our language is 'true', does correspond to reality? And how would we be aware of any lack of correspondence? Does it make sense to say that objects might have other properties, that our mental images of these might have other properties and that, in that case, our language should

be different? The difficulty with saying that our language is not arbitrary if it can be borne out by descriptions of mental images, is that our language as it is has to be used in making these descriptions; and, of course, the same holds for descriptions of the objects themselves. There is no kind of experiment to find out whether or not our language corresponds to reality.

It would be objected, and rightly, that to say that my learning the meaning of "red" is a matter of having a mental image of some sort, is an unjust simplification of the implications of Locke's account. I would be ostensively taught what "red" meant only by having a number of objects pointed out to me, and by having my subsequent application of this word to objects corrected until I understood precisely what was being pointed to; the colour, but not the smell, shape, or sound, of an object; or, on Locke's account, until it was clear what mental image was in question. What this recognises is that we might in each case interpret an ostensive definition in various ways, as pointing to the shape, colour, or size of an object; or even pointing to a direction of the compass. The way of making ourselves clear, on Locke's account, would be a matter of pointing to enough objects for a common feature to emerge; that it is the colour of the objects to which we are referring. But what Locke's account does suggest is that there is something about the use of the word "red" in the course of the ostensive teaching that makes it impossible for me to go on and use it in other ways, where this impossibility is that of averting the growth of a composite mental image of redness, built up out of a number of images of particular red things. The suggestion is that I can, on each new occasion,

tell from this composite image what "red" means. But is an ostensive definition employing a mental image of this sort, any more free from the possibility of being interpreted in various ways, as a matter of colour, intensity of brightness, or as a composite image of a fabric, or substance of some sort, say, blood, than is an ordinary colour sample? Does the mental image itself 'tell' me what it is called? What is it that enables me to affix the speech-sound "red" to just this sample?

Locke's implied account of learning the meaning of "red" makes room for 'meaning' as we know it only be smuggling in the established use of "red" in the language by means of the introspective report itself. Finding out what colour blood is might be said to be a matter of experience. But if someone asked, "What colour is red?", where he was asking for the meaning of the word, it would not do to tell him to find out by experience; tell him that he had only to look about him, and he would find this out. It would do if it were a matter of his seeing and describing what he saw, and not a matter of learning the meanings of words that he might afterwards use when describing. If I just showed him samples without saying anything, and without his asking anything, he might learn something, but would he learn what "red" meant? Similarly, it is hard to see how merely being conscious of any number of mental images could teach me what words meant.

It seems that I might pair this speech-sound with this sample only by giving, in the appropriate form of words, the ostensive definition, "This is called "red"". I cannot say <u>what</u> the sample is called without using the word "red". My mental images do not come

ready labelled in that way. The labelling is done by me when I point to a sample, introspect a mental image, and define, (not describe), what "red" means by saying, "This is called "red"",(not "This is what red is"). If definition were a matter of description, and of the form, "This is what "red" is", words would become meaningless as samples were destroyed. To say "This is that in virtue of which "red" is at all meaningful" is merely to say that it is a sample that has been picked out according to the established use of the word, which ensures just that it can be called "red" by means of an ostensive definition. That the paradigm of definition is taken as in some way being a matter of introspection could be taken as a result of the empirical starting point. When I say that blood is red, I am not saying that it is called red, but that it is red. I am giving a description not a definition. But I could mean nothing definite in giving a description, others could n't understand what I said, unless my hearers agreed with me in saying that blood is red, unless we agreed as to what was its correct use in the language. It is its correct use which is exemplified in an ostensive definition. But this is to presuppose language at the start.

One point which Locke's account does illumine is that if I were colour-blind I would not learn what "red" meant, (though I might use it correctly in descriptions, going by discriminations of light intensity). But no account could be given of what learning what "red" means amounts to unless language, and knowledge of it on the pupil's part, is already presupposed. Not only is ostensive teaching one [illegible] use of language employing words as we know them, but "This is called red" will only help a child to understand the

word. if he already has an idea of the general role of "red" in the language, understands that it is a colour word.[2] He must, to this extent, already have mastery of language to understand an ostensive definition. It would be no good just to intone the sound "red" in the presence of certain objects. That would not tell me how to go on and use the word "red" unless I already understood that it was a colour word. Understanding this is having a general understanding of the connection between the use of a word "red" in ostensive definition, and its use in other departments of language. For instance, it would make no sense to ask whether red was fusible or could be put in a hole.

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2 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Pt.I, Paras. 28-35,

CHAPTER V. CAN THERE BE A PRIVATE LANGUAGE?[1]

On Locke's account the meaning of "red" is a mental image. Could n't I identify my mental image on different occasions without bringing in the word "red" at all? This would be tantamount to saying, "This is called "red"", where I have a private understanding of what "red" means; which, on Locke's account, might seem to be the only understanding I ever could have of "red". This would avoid bringing in 'language' or 'meaning" as we know them in giving the introspective report. The view that we can talk about mental images in such a way as to give an informative account of language, within the limitation that we must use language to talk about mental images might seem tenable only at the expense of admitting the view that the language in which I ostensively define my mental images is an entirely different language from English, or Malay, or languages as we know them. The vocabulary of this language would consist of words whose meaning can only be given ostensively, with my mental images as samples. Then, in describing my mental images I would not be presupposing the meaningfulness of the words of language as we understand it. The suggestion might

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1 In this section I have in mind Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, e.g. Paras. 243-289; and the symposium, Can There Be a Private Language, in Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society, supplementary volume XXVII, (1954), in which the two participants were A.J.Ayer and R.Rhees.

be supposed to be that the words of the language as we know it are somehow constructed out of the vocabulary of this prior language. Insofar as this is a matter of explaining one language in terms of another, a 'justification' of language is only pushed further back. Wouldn't descriptions of mental images in terms of this prior language beg the question of the meaningfulness of the words of this prior language? For what is in question is why we apply just this word to this image, in giving even an ostensive definition. Does the image 'tell' us? or do we have to bring in notions of the use of the words of my private language? If an explanation of what 'saying something is' is sidestepped here, then nothing is achieved by bringing in my private language.

Further, in what sense is this language, whose vocabulary consists entirely of words whose meaning can only be given ostensively with my mental images as samples, a language? We would say that it is logically impossible to have someone else's mental images. This makes my private language a logically private one. We would not say that it made sense to say that someone else might learn it. Here the notion of 'correct' and 'incorrect uses' of words can be shown to get no grip. The language seems to be no language at all. The temptation to regard it as another language on a footing with English, is an outcome of regarding its privacy as only a factual one. At one time there were only three speakers of Cornish. Now there happen to be twelve. But it might have been that only one speaker remained. Then Cornish would have been a language understood by only one person. But, unlike a language for

mental images, we would not say that it made no sense to say that anyone might learn it. And, of course, when Cornish was more generally spoken, children grew up in the language, and learnt to speak it, without suffering from the fact that there was nothing that we call their having their parents' mental images. It is tempting also to think of my private language as a special sort of code. But a code is something that must, in principle, be decipherable. This draws the notion of 'language' into the very definition of a code. In deciding on the code signs, we carry out a "translation", as it were, from English, say, making certain signs stand for certain words; the use and meaning of these in the language being already presupposed. The contrast between a logically private language, and language as we know it, might be put in terms of talking of private language and the public language, where 'private' means logically so. To talk of a 'public' language here would be to talk merely of languages as we know them, including Cornish.

It might seem that the words other people utter, "red", "philosophy", though they sound like the words I would utter when I meant so-and-so, are, in fact, in a sort of code. It might seem that this code can be cracked in some way, in a different way for each person's utterances, for each person has his own code, so that I might determine the meaning of what you or anyone else is saying. "Understanding what was said" and "misunderstanding what was said" would then be a matter of cracking codes correctly or incorrectly. Although this makes communicating in the language look much more chancy than we might have thought it was, to talk of "codes" here still leaves room for the possibility of our saying things to each

other;: Locke might seem to have made talking in a misleading way, so as to make misunderstanding possible on the part of the hearers, no more culpable than whistling or making any other sort of noise. On this account, it would amount to something like an infringement or the international Coding Treaty. It would amount to using an ambiguous code. We, who are, (perhaps mistakenly?) used to the notion of the (public) language, would see in this an equivalent to what we might call, in journalese, a "crime in the language". The notion of responsibility can attach here. (As we ordinarily talk of codes, to talk of an International Coding Treaty is to talk of something selfdefeating. The more ambiguous a code seems to those who are trying to crack it, the more highly that code will be valued by the side that is using it. This is enough to start suspicion at the assimilation of my personal language to a code of some sort. If whatever any of us says can truly be described as a code of some sort, this might make the possibility of our saying things to each other a possibility in principle only; just as a code might never, in fact, be cracked. This makes it hard to see in what sense my personal language can be called "language".)

Even at first sight, what I say in my language does not seem like family jargon, or any stock military code. For these are not private in the sense that only one person uses or understands them. But could n't there be a military code intelligible to only one person? It would have to be said that it was a contingent matter that only one general understood this military code. If it is not, in principle, possible to decode a code, it might seem indistinguishable from the senseless jumble of letters and words which it

at first sight seems to be to the other side. This suggests that, if my language is a sort of code, it could become more widely understood. It would merely be a matter of enough people gaining sufficient competence in decoding it. Or, if it seems that my language, (and anyone else's personal language), is a peculiarly esoteric code, it would be a matter of enough people being able to understand it, even if they could not as such translate my language each one into his own personal language, because they could not have mental images numerically-identical with mine. (This might seem possible on the grounds that it is quite conceivable that we might come across a (public) language sufficiently different from any other (public) language for anything like a satisfactory translation to be possible.

To suggest that, in quite an ordinary sense of "learn", I can learn my language, and learn it independently of learning the (public) language that it is, in quite an ordinary sense, a "language", and so on the same footing as French or German, with the factual difference, that only I speak it, might seem no different from allowing that the Wolf Boy of Hiege might have invented words to describe plants and animals around him. These would be words that only he understood. We might suppose that his knowing how to use the words of his language correctly would be a matter of his remembering what objects they were intended to stand for. That his mental images need not come into the picture here, that his words would be names of the things around him, and not of what went on inhis mind, might seem just a difference in the kind of naming that was going on, which would make it easier for other people to learn his language. The important thing might seem to be that in

inventing his words he would be unable to justify his use of them by reference to what others meant by them. His only justification would be that his knowing how to use his words correctly depended on his remembering what objects he meant them to stand for. This seems pretty close, in principle, to the mental imagery theory of language. He would not say what the objects were in the (public) language, just as, in my language, "tree" or "philosophy" (for "philosophy" too seems, on this account, to be a "name" of a mental image) have the meanings which I respectively assign to them; their meanings are the mental images they are associated with, and name.

If we allow that the Wolf Boy of Liage might have invented words to name animals and plants, it seems that we must allow that he, and each of us, might invent words for our mental images. Why should we not speak of a private language for physical objects and a private language for images? What "learning what a word means" would seem to amount to here would be a matter of correcting our use of the invented words in the light of mistakes we made in identifying plants, or mental images of plants, (even though the latter kind of identification might seem more difficult to manage). In this way it might seem that I would not be able to use the words in my language arbitrarily. So that my language would be a quite genuine one, even though a private one. This seems one of Locke's reasons for saying that the words of my/our language stand for mental images. A word has to be uttered in association with the correct image. It might seem that I may recognise when I have identified a mental image wrongly, so that I could correct my misuses of the words concerned. This makes it sound as though I could not

use a word in just any way. If I could use a word in just any way, so that what particular way I used it made no difference to what was said, it would be no better than a noise. To say that I could correct my misuses of the words is to say here that I could correct misuses in my personal language. The uses and misuses that go on here are private ones, not uses and misuses in the (public) language. On Locke's account, these seem the only uses and misuses that we could arrive at. These would be no guide to what I meant by using words in the (public) language in a particular way; whatever the (public) language would be on Locke's account. On Locke's account, a difficulty with regard to the (public) language is determining that anyone is not using the (public) words to mean in just any way. It might seem that we can bypass this difficulty by talking only of private languages. I make sense to myself in my language, and others can come to decode this. If it makes sense to talk of my personal language as a code, then it would seem to make sense to talk of others coming to determine whether or not I am using my words to mean correctly. Only in this way do the notions of 'meaning', where this is a mental object, a different mental object in the case of each word in my language, and of 'use' seem to run together.

What might it mean to say that the Wolf Boy of Liege might have invented words to describe animals and plants? To say that his knowing how to use his words would be a matter of his remembering what objects they were intended to stand for might seem no different from remembering a system of signalling. We might say that he learns a private drill, as a result of which he says the

words of his language whenever he sees the appropriate plants or animals. (It should be said, in criticism, that this is to suppose that it makes sense to talk of a correspondence between language and reality, to talk of language as though it were some kind of theory. As though language were a "reaction" to the world, in some way analogous to a physiological reaction; and was dependent upon the kind of "stimuli" offered, could be borne out by pointing to the stimuli.) Similarly, a soldier is drilled to react in the appropriate ways to signals from his officer, perhaps by saying something, e.g. passing on an order, or by behaving in a certain way, e.g. holding himself to attention. On this account, when the Wolf Boy of Liege mistook one plant for another, this would seem to be a matter of his uttering a noise which had no part in the drill he had invented.

What might it mean to say, in a general way, that our learning the (public) language is a matter of learning a drill of some sort? To talk of a "drill" here suggests a parade ground picture. The soldiers are taught to move in certain ways when given certain orders. This suggests that learning the language is a matter of learning what other people do. In what way might 'what people do' be relevant to an account of what language is? In a fairly unusual sense of "doing", what people "do" is a necessary prerequisite for the possibility of there being a language at all. When I have been shown the use of a word, it is up to me to go on using it 'in the same way'. I cannot be taught what "the same" means. A prerequisite of my learning the language is that I should find it the "natural" way to go on using the word. If I differed wildly in what I called "the same as" the samples the teacher had shown me, and continued to do so no matter

how long he went on pointing out a sample to me, I could not be taught what the word meant.[2]

Suppose that we were trying to teach the Wolf Boy of Liege the (public) language. We could n't teach him anything unless he understood the notion 'and so on', understood what it was to go on using a word in the same way. If he did n't understand the notion, we would say that we could n't establish communication with him. Could we also say that we would be saying something in addition to this if we said that he lacked the notion of 'and so on', that he was ignorant of this? If we wanted to say this, what would we say he was ignorant of? He is n't ignorant of something prior to the language in the sense that 'and so on' is some sort of object, or an aspect of the object we are pointing to in making the ostensive definition. If it were, then he would be making a mistake like mistaking something for food. And we might say that we could detect his mistake merely by watching how he acted, if we could detect it at all. Whether or not he can learn our language would be irrelevant to the fact that we could detect a mistake like that just by looking and seeing. If 'and so on' were anything like some sort of object, then we might say of ourselves, that we see that we understand what 'and so on' is, and that it is this that makes communication possible. This sounds as though we could say that we see that our language reactions tally, they can be pointed to, and that it is this that makes communication possible. But what could saying that mean? Given that we can say things to each other, then our

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2 Cp. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Paras. 241-2.

uses of (public) words will be the criteria of whether or not someone has the notion of 'and so on'. Only given the (public) language, can we see, and tell each other, whether our reactions of this kind do, or do not, tally. "Seeing" is not just a matter of looking here. In an ordinary condition of good communication, it would be more correct to say that we 'see' that we do understand each other, without noticing whether our reactions tally or not; it is only because we already agree in these reactions that we can say things to each other. It is in this sense that common reactions of this kind are prerequisites for the possibility of language. If we cannot teach the Wolf boy of Liege even a smattering of the (public) language, we have no criteria at all of whether he has the notion 'and so on'. But if we could do this, then his use of the (public) words would be the criteria of whether or not he had the notion. If he had some understanding of the language already, he could learn from the consequences of misusing words, and learn from being constantly corrected. Here we might want to say, of some of his misuses of the (public) language that, in those respects, he for the moment lacked the notion of 'and so on'. But though it would be more understandable to say that in this case, it is still hard to see what this would add to saying that he does n't understand the word concerned. And it is tempting to say that this does add something. It is not as though there is anything in my use of the word I am trying to teach him that makes it impossible for him to regard his different use of the word as going on in the same way, where this is something like a physical impossibility in manipulating an object in any other but one way; so that his misusing the word

would be a matter of his mistaking the object. If he kept on insisting that his use was the same, I could not teach him anything in that respect: communication would come to a stop on that point. Saying that he lacked the notion 'and so on' would add nothing to that. Further, given that we cannot teach him the (public) language, saying that he was ignorant of, or lacked, the notion would add nothing to saying that we could n't establish communication with him. If we cannot teach him our (public) language at all, there are no criteria of whether or not he understands the notion 'and so on'. We cannot just look and see. Objects, and what he or we do with them, do not tell us how to go on 'in the same way', where what is in question is a prerequisite for learning the language. The Wolf Boy of Liege might use marks for particular purposes, (e.g. to show which trails cannot be climbed), with great regularity. But there are difficulties with saying that this is like using an expression in the same way, using it to mean the same.[3] If he came to use the marks in an entirely different way, use them for an entirely different purpose, this might be a more practical thing to do. He might consider it a 'better' use. But there are difficulties with saying that this is like using an expression with a different meaning.

In all this, we are talking of 'prerequisites' for learning the (public) language. (If using the word "prerequisite" suggests that these common reactions were there in man before the (public) language ever began, rather than that they grew up as part of ~~the~~ talking the (public) language, this would be a mistake.) This

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3. Cp. Chapter VI.

might seem not as yet to force the parade ground picture on us, if only because we may seem not yet to have got to the point of talking as such of 'understanding what was said'. It might seem that 'understanding what was said' might be a matter of learning also to behave in certain ways, of developing further common reactions in the more ordinary sense, where these are pieces of behaviour. Ordinarily we would say that one use of the language is on the parade ground. Might n't we also say that learning the (public) language is nothing more than performing a drill of some sort? That learning the (public) language is a matter of learning a super-drill?

In fact, talking of common reactions in connection with the notion 'and so on' undermines the parade ground picture. These common reactions are not of the sort that can, in any ordinary sense of the word, be "taught". Parade ground drills most often can be taught by physical compulsion. But I could not in this way compel someone to use a word correctly, unless I followed him everywhere, and forced his hand with my own to write the word in the correct places. Then he might come to write the word correctly when he knew I was watching. But if he did not find this way of using the word the 'natural' one, I would have taught him to perform a drill only when I was around to catch him out. Once out of my way, he might use the word as he found it 'natural' to use it. I would not have taught him the notion 'and so on'; and I would not have taught him the meaning of the word. Military drills take place on parade grounds and battle fields. Language is spoken everywhere. 'And so on' could not be taught by a drill; the meaning of a word could not be.[4] Dogs do not always bark twice for a walk, and only once

4 For a different discussion of this point see Chapter VI.

for a bone; though these may be special tricks they have been taught. But, given that someone has these common reactions, we can speak of teaching him the correct use of, the meaning of, a word. Though this training would not literally be a drill. Another way in which the parade ground picture is undermined is by pointing out that common reactions in connection with 'and so on' cannot be seen just by looking. Only given the (public) language can we 'see' whether our reactions of this kind tally. The parade ground picture suggests that we can explain language in a sense in which the fact that we already speak the language is not to be considered a particularly relevant condition for the explanation. As though we could explain the (public) language "from scratch" just by observing common reactions; and there are no relevant common reactions that cannot be observed just by looking, even if special instruments need to be brought in. But this seems absurd. This is a major charge against certain claims, implicit, or explicit, on the part of certain behavioural psychologists, to 'explain' the (public) language.[5]

Shelving for the moment the question whether learning the (public) language is a matter of learning a drill of some sort, does it make sense to talk of learning my personal language, whether this language is a private language for physical objects, or for mental images, as being a matter of learning a drill of some sort? In the case of a private language, what might it mean to speak of a 'drill'? This question might seem to carry trouble only for the notion of a private language for mental images; and not for the not-

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5 Cp. Chapter VI for the development of this charge in the context of the sort of claims made or implied.

ion of a private language for physical objects. In the case of both languages it might seem that whenever I see a certain object, whether this is a mental or physical object, whether I see by inner or outer sight, I have to react in the appropriate way by saying, for instance, "Red". There would be no one else to correct me when I went wrong. I would have to correct myself. That I felt quitecclear that I was using a word in association with the right physical object or mental image would be the confirmation that I was using the word correctly. But to whom or what could I appeal to distinguish between the case where I was only under the impression that I was using it correctly, and the case where I was using it correctly? In the case of my private language, no appeal could be made to anything independent of what may only be my impression that I am using the word correctly. It might seem that I could teach myself a drill with physical objects by learning from the consequences of, say, mistaking an inedible for an edible plant. (Whether making a mistake like this is like mistaking the use of an expression is another question.) But what would it be to 'mistake' one mental image for another? What would be the consequences of 'mistaking' one mental image for another? And how would we learn from making a 'mistake' of this kind? In the case of my mental imagery language, my only appeal would be to whether or not I used the word in conjunction with the appropriate mental image, or seemed to use it so. This puts me in the spot of not being able to distinguish between understanding the words of my language, and only thinking that I make sense to myself. My 'language' is not another language in principle on the same footing as French or German. It is

hard to see that it is a language at all. It would not do to say that, although I may never be sure that I am making sense to myself, it is possible that I may be. For exactly what is in question is what it could possibly mean to say that. It seems that even if we allowed that the Wolf Boy of Liege might have invented words to name animals and plants, and at least we can talk of being 'incorrect' in using a word here, this would provide no reason for saying that each of us might invent words for our mental images. Further, because it does not make sense to say that I might be mistaken (as it does not make sense to say that I might be correct) in the identification of a mental image., it would not do to say that I misunderstood my language, as though there was a language in the case, but I had not yet learned it. In the light of this last remark, to say that I felt quite clear that I was using a word in association with the 'right' mental image would <u>be</u> the confirmation that I was using the word correctly, would be to say that whatever way I used the word would be alright. Feeling clear about it would be a matter of introspecting it so. And there no one has better 'evidence' than I. This would reduce my language to a matter of making noises more effectively than saying that I could have no independent correction of any kind. My language is only the impression of a language.

It could be imagined that ostensive teaching might not form an important part of teaching the (public) language; it just happens to be so with human beings. It is certainly true that ostensive teaching is not the only method of teaching the (public) language. We can understand many words of the (public) language without ob-

serving the objects they are said to signify. For instance, we can be taught the meaning of these words by being given verbal definitions. And, even if it were allowed that "pain" names a sensation which constitutes its meaning, it would have to be granted also that we do not learn the meaning of this word by having that 'object' pointed out to us in other ways; though natural expressions such as grimacing help to provide criteria for the correct use of the word in "He's in pain". All this could quite well be taken as denying any vagaries to the meaning of "definition"in the phrase "ostensive definition".

It might well seem puzzling what "definition"means in the phrase "ostensive definition". There is a temptation to take "definition" here in quite an ordinary sense; we know what "definition"means on its own, and we know what "ostentation" means on its own; all we have to do is put these two familiar meanings together to get the sense of the phrase "ostensive definition". This approach might result in assimilating ostensive definition to the ordinary kinds of definition we provide by giving synonymous forms of words. That is, there is a temptation to take Ostensive definition as providing us with 'synonyms' of a most mysterious sort, where these are the objects pointed to when the meanings of certain (public) words are taught. These synonyms might seem to provide a justification of language which is entirely external to language, but yet related to it by a fundamental language technique, definition, which ensures just that we can talk about a justification of the'meaningfulness' of expressions. On this account, ostensive definition forges a link between language and the world, without which no man-

ner of pointing out what there is in the world would in any way justify the (public) language. It seems to be this account of the notion of 'ostensive definition' which gives sense to talk about a'justification' of language. It might seem that if we are to talk of 'justifying' the (public) language, there must be a way of doing this other than in a form of words.

A result of this view is that it is not just simply false, but somehow nonsensical, to suggest that I could understand a (public) word without at some time havihg observed the object that it signified. On this account, it is taken that when we learn a word in the presence of an object, say, by having the object pointed out to us, and the word "bottle" intoned, what the ostensive definition does is give the object to us as the 'meaning' of the word. But, how we go on to use the word is not given with the mere act of naming. That does not tell us how to go on. For instance, we might interpret an ostensive definition in various ways, as pointing to the shape, colour, size, of the object. It is not as though 'and so on' were an object of some kind. As though there were something in my use of the word I am trying to teach him that makes it impossible for him to regard a different use of the word as going on 'in the same way', where this 'something' is like a physical impossibility in manipulating an object in any other than one way. With respect to this whole view, there would be a point in remembering that ostensive teaching is not the only method of teaching the (public) language; and that conceivably, it might not play an important part at all. In fact, it rarely is used, as such, in teaching a child. This would be one way of showing that to know what a word means we

do not have to come to grips with an object.

Although we logically cannot point to the sensation concerned when we say "He's in pain", there nevertheless are criteria for the correct use of that phrase; the natural expressions of his pain. We can teach the meaning of "He's in pain" by pointing to these. This is not a matter of pointing to an object that constitutes the meaning of "pain" in this use of the word. Neither is it that the natural expressions themselves are objects constituting the meaning of the word; for how we are to use the word is not given with the mere act of naming. Nor is it that the correct criteria for the use of the word constitute its meaning, in the sense that the meaning of the word is its correct use, (though explaining what the criteria are is a way of explaining what the word means). Do I learn what "He's in pain" means by learning to use it only when people make faces and writhe about? If this were the entire account, no room would be left for the solicitude that often seems to be what is primarily expressed by uttering that phrase. It might seem that just as the fact that the sample happened to be present would enable us to teach "sepia" ostensively, though this is not the only way of teaching what words mean, and is not the only way of teaching what this word means, (we might understand it in terms of its being an intermediate colour), and what its meaning is is not in any case constituted by the object; so we might dispense with the public criteria, provided by natural expressions, for the correct use of "pain", in this case as used in 'I am in pain". It might seem that I could have a language for those of my sensations that have no natural expressions. This would make room for the notion of a language for my

mental images, for these need have no natural expressions. (If we are to speak of a language of this kind, it might seem we would have to talk of the meanings of the words being the 'objects' for which they stood.) Here the requirement for ostensive teaching seems to have been run together with the requirement for public criteria for the use of words; as though we could on occasions teach what a word meant without there being any public criteria for its use. That we can understand many words of the (public) language without observing the objects they are said to stand for, might be thought to show that it is in no sense essential that there should be anything publicly agreed upon, in the case. It seems to be for reasons somewhat similar to these that Ayer said that "The ways in which languages are actually learned do not logically circumscribe the possibilities of their being understood".[6] It seems that it was on something like these grounds that Ayer claimed that someone in the position of the Wolf Boy might have his own language, where this was a language for his mental images.

It is quite conceivable that we might not teach our (public) language ostensively to any large extent. But the statement "We might learn the language in various ways" only makes sense if it makes sense to speak of "language" here. We can't use that statement in just any way, and still have it retain its sense. If we cannot speak of a "language" here, then we can't speak of "learning the language". The notion of "learning" becomes unclear too. What is "learning" here, if anything? When you start off with that state-

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6 Can There Be a Private Language?

ment, "learning" and "language" have a perfectly good sense. But if you push it too far, they lose that sense. And then it is no good appealing to the fact that they originally had sense. The ways in which languages are actually learned do circumscribe what we would call a language, in respect of the notion of criteria for the correct use of a word. Someone else must be able to correct my uses of words. Given that this notion has a place, it makes sense to say "We might learn the language, or languages, in various ways".

What is in question with regard to the claim that I might have learned a private language for my mental images is what would show that I had understood correctly. "The criterion of whether someone has the notion 'and so on', that he is following a definition in connection with his use of a word, is his use of that word" is circular unless we add that if we are to talk of someone following a definition at all, it must make sense to ask whether he is making a mistake. What does seem important for the notion of 'criteria' is that they should be ostensive just in that they are, in an ordinary sense, publicly checkable. A criterion for the correct use of a word would be those features of someone's circumstances and behaviour that settle the question whether he is using the word correctly. We must have criteria, even if we wish to continue talking of mental processes of 'meaning what is said'. We cannot simply see these criteria, without language being in the case; what the criteria are grew up as part of the activity of talking.

CHAPTER VI. BEHAVIOURAL EXPLANATIONS OF LANGUAGE

It might be thought that if psychology is in a more backward state than is the case with other sciences, this is only partly because it is a newer science; but mainly because psychology has wasted its time for so long on an incomprehensible programme for the experimental observation of mind. Watson maintained that although mental phenonmena do exist, they are not amenable to scientific treatment.[1] Being observable by only one observer, (he seems to have found no faults with 'observation' in that context), the verification of introspective findings is impossible. For this reason, he thought that all mention of intangibles like psychic entities must be avoided in anything that claimed to be a scientifically psychological account. He thought that the most complicated aspects of human behaviour, and he included using language and thinking as pieces of behaviour, could be accounted for in terms of combinations of simple stimulus and response patterns of behaviour. His aim was to turn psychology into a natural science, physiologically based. On this programme, the psychologist could have

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1 e.g. in Watson, Behaviourism, Chapter X.

nothing to say of 'consciousness' or related notions. His method must be to build up a psychology without it, introducing nothing which, on his view, could be 'known' only through introspection. In order ever to attain the status of a science, Psychology must use techniques of the same kind as those utilised in other sciences, if only in the sense that the facts it claims to have established must be capable of public verification.

Watson was well aware, in his discussions of topics such as "talking" and "thinking", of the criticisms he would have to face that had their roots in philosophical discussions of 'meaning'. He acknowledged that "One of the chief criticisms directed against the behaviourist's view of thinking [and equally of talking, it might be said,] is that it gives no account of meaning".[2] However, he thought that his critics on this point were merely tilting at windmills. He said:

> May I point out that the logic of the critic here is poor? The behaviourist's theory must be judged on its own premises. The premises of the behaviourist contain no propositions about meaning. It is an historical word borrowed from philosophy and introspective psychology. It has no scientific connotation.[3]

This could be taken as a salutary reminder that philosophers should not dogmatise about what science can and cannot do. It might be thought that there is no reason why there should not be

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

a behavioural programme. There is undoubtedly a large field of facts that can be profitably studied in this manner; outstandingly, facts about the behaviour of animals. But even though there may be no objection to the behavioural method as such, it is a different matter with regard to certain of its proposed applications; or, more correctly, with regard to the way certain of its applications are to be construed. Many of the so-called behavioural investigations of language have patently not been concerned with literally investigating language; they have claimed to do no more than investigate certain kinds of reflex arc. Watson might seem to be pointing out as much when he said of "meaning" that, "It has no scientific connotation".

All this would suggest that the behaviourist would be inviting nothing but trouble if he reintroduced terms such as "language" and "meaning" into his account. Watson does reintroduce these terms (see later). He seems enabled to do so by at least implying a weak form of the view sometimes called "reductionist behaviourism". On his view, statements containing words such as "thinking", "meaning", and "consciousness" are only intelligible (in this case as distinct from, say, referring to what are, in at least a scientific sense, unknown and unknowable processes, entities, and states), insofar as they can be 'translated' into statements descriptive of more or less complicated stimulus and response processes. In any case, to say that he performed only a weak form of reduction would be one way of accounting for the fact that in allowing the term "meaning" at all, Watson allows

it fugitively to carry its old connotations from, for instance, introspective psychology and philosophy in general. A word cannot be adopted from common usage as finally as a child may be adopted. It is much more likely to slip back to its old ways.

It has sometimes been suggested that language is nothing more than a matter of physiology. (I don't say that behaviourists have said just that. Yet it seems to be a view that Watson's account implies, when taken in a certain way.) It is not just that the physiology of speech mechanisms can be investigated in this way, but that, for instance, the ordinary ways we have of describing talking, for instance, "What he said was self-contradictory and quite unintelligible", should be reduced to physiological descriptions. Perhaps, for the physiologist's purposes, this might be a fruitful procedure. Negatively, it would rule out facts that were not his proper concern. Positively, it might lead to fruitful investigations of, for instance, the nervous effects, in the male hearer, of a woman's honeyed voice. But, if taken quite literally, and not as a pointer to a scientific technique, that language is nothing more than physiology, if we take 'language' here in anything like an ordinary sense, then the scientist's description of physiological occurences, being itself a use of language, would be in question. To talk at all of a 'reduction' of 'meaning', and of similar notions, to physiological terminology, whether this reduction is a partial or a complete one, makes it seem that behavioural theory is a rival, not an alternative, to other kinds of account: that it undermines, for instance, any

kind of account we might give in philosophy of what 'saying something' is. This might seem to go along with saying that a philosophical account is a rival scientific account; but it is not clear, as yet, that it need do so. The trouble seems to be not only that Watson leaves room for 'meaning' to carry its old connotations, but that a 'reduction' is implied in any case. If learning by drill to behave towards objects were all that learning the language amounted to, this could be learnt without language being the case at all.

That Watson did in fact reintroduce the terms 'meaning' and 'language', and in such a way that there is room for them to carry their old connotations, introduces a confusion into behavioural theory itself; even if its practice remains unaffected. That behaviourism is seen as undermining other kinds of accounts of language might not perhaps introduce confusion into behavioural theory insofar as this is regarded on its own. But it would introduce (philosophical) confusions concerning the place of this scientific activity amongst other sciences; and concerning the relation of the world accounted for by scientists to the everyday world we know. It might seem that only scientists know how things really are, know, for instance, what 'saying something' really amounts to, how it can be explained, and that it can be explained too.

It was with regard to this weak form of 'reduction' that Watson claimed that behaviourism breaks down the distinction between subjective and objective phenomena. The introspective psy-

chologist had taken it that the mind is a queer sort of place. The behaviourist showed that it could never, in any sense, be pointed to. But he nevertheless perpetrated the general tradition that the whole question about mind and its supposed contents, (thoughts, meanings, motives), is about entities of some sort, with the difference that the search is now for physiological causes and effects. That the reduction is incomplete, that a reduction is brought in at all, lays the behaviourist open to the accusation that he merely explains the ghost by the machine, and does not lay the ghost for good and all. If Watson's weak form of reduction cannot be carried out, that places him in the uncomfortable position of having to fall back once more to regarding 'thought','meaning', and 'motives' as strange entities contained in that queer place, the 'mind'; entities which Watson has made us feel are silently accompanying the processes he sets out to observe. Either way, the the question whether an explanation of language can be given, whether "What is meaning?" can be answered, remains a question about explanation in a fairly familiar sense of the word. It seems to be a scientific matter of come kind. Though the behaviourist may seem to offer us more hope of this explanation being given.

Watson thought that the behavioural method not only superceded the old 'unscientific' introspective psychology, and showed it up as a rigmarole, but provided a threat to philosophy itself, insofar as philosophy concerns itself with problems of 'thought', 'meaning', 'motive', and there is perhaps no area of philosophy where 'mind' and related notions have not found a place of some sort, even in the foundations of mathematics. (Mill talked of

the "concepts" of "2" and "3"; and said that they were "abstracted" from a number of groups of objects.[4] This has been taken, and unfairly to Mill, as making mathematics sound like an appendix to psychology. As though "1 + 1 = 2" reports a mental fact regarding the way relations between objects are 'reflected' in consciousness.) Watson said that "With the behaviouristic point of view now becoming dominant, it is hard to find a place for what has been called philosophy. Philosophy is passing- has all but passed, and unless new issues arise which give a foundation for a new philosophy, the world has seen its last great philosopher."[5] This implies the view, one that has been held or implied by many philosophers, or read as implied by them, that philosophy is itself a science, specifically, that it is a branch of introspective psychology, so that when the philosopher asks, "What is meaning?", his question is a factual one.

If all this is so, if Locke was right in thinking, (as it might seem he thought), that he could refute other philosophical views by showing that they are false, then it might seem that philosophy as a whole can be shown, by the rise of the behavioural programme to be, if not exactly false, (for Watson did not deny the existence of mental images, although some behaviourists have), then quite aimless and unscientific. The charge might be at least since Descartes, that 'thought' and 'meaning' have been treated as holy cows, surrounded with an air of mystery and reverence; that the "Cogito ergo sum" was designed merely to smuggle the soul into a

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4 e.g. in System of Logic, Bk.II, Ch.VI.

5 The Ways of Behaviourism, P.14.

position of respectability as something out of the reach of physical causality, but which is purportedly quite mysteriously accessible to certain special kinds of investigation. The suggestion is that the "new issues" which would have to arise to give a "foundation for a new philosophy" would have to be something like new facts unearthed by the philosopher-psychologist, or a more scientifically adequate theoretical explanation of the facts.

Watson maintained that learning language is a matter of the formation of what he called "word habits"[6], where this goes together with learning to react to objects in the 'right' way. Objects may be regarded as stimuli to which the child responds by bodily movements. For instance, when confronted with a box, he will move it about, open it, close it, and put things into it. On Watson's account, the parents would teach the child the word "box" by saying "box" whenever the child is confronted with one; and would teach the phrases "open box" and "close box" by saying these whenever the child was opening or closing the box. After a number of times, without any other stimulus than that of the box, which had originally brought about only bodily habits, or, in physiological terms, reflex arcs 'mediating' between visual receptors and bodily muscles, the child will begin to say "box" when he sees it, "open box" when he opens it, and so on.[7] The sight of a box is not just a stimulus capable of sparking off certain

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6 Ibid., Cf. P.80.

7 Cp., Behaviour: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology, Pp. 329-30.

reflexes (and this might seem a fairly fruitful way of studying very simple, virtually reflex, actions, in babies). The sight of a box, on Watson's account, becomes a stimulus capable of sparking off a "word habit". The teaching process has established a physiological reflex arc 'mediating' between visual receptors and the speech mechanisms of the throat and mouth. The development of the "word habit" passes through a stage where the child says "box" when he sees the box, and accompanies this with such bodily habits associated with the sight of the box, as running towards it to take toys out. The maturation of the "word habit" comes when the child says "box" without executing habitual bodily movements, perhaps when the box is out of sight. He may say "box" to get his parents to bring it to him. Watson characterised this final stage by saying that the word "box" becomes "substitutable" for the object. What he meant by this was that "Words are equivalent to objects in releasing behaviour".[8] For instance, if a parent says "box", some of the same reactions will be called out in the child as would be by the sight of the box. And when the parents fetch the box when the child says "Box", they are going through a more complicated drill they have learnt. On this view, learning the meanings of words, (whatever physiological learning might be), seems, in important respects, a matter of learning to manipulate objects in the 'right' way. Almost as though using and understanding the language was a matter of giving and executing orders, and nothing more; as though understanding "box" were a matter of performing the right drill, the appropriate drill. At

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8 The Ways of Behaviourism, P. 81.

the back of this seems to lie the notion that questions about the meanings of words are, in one sense, practical questions about objects, and what to do with them; and in that way, the word "box" means boxes (and no longer mental images of boxes).

Saying that we know when someone has understood what was said by seeing what he says and does subsequently, (and not by 'observing' his mental images in some way), is not the same as saying that we know when someone has understood what was said by seeing whether he performs the 'correct' drill. A trouble with Watson's account is imagining the language spoken in such a way that words like"box" are only uttered with a corresponding piece of behaviour in view; Understanding "box" would be reacting to it in the "correct" way; and teaching "box" would involve teaching or helping along with the 'right' reactions.[9]

What the child has learnt is something like a signal for a piece of behaviour to be performed. The word carnot be used in any other way; cannot be used except in connection with the associated bodily habits. If whole sentences are to be considered as signals for pieces of behaviour (Watson's treatment of the question of sentences is an extrapolation from his consideration of words and phrases), and not only individual words and phrases, then we could never understand what a statement meant without having run across it before; even though we knew the meanings of the individual words concerned. Just as we learn what words mean by having them explained to us, so we would have to develop a 'vocabulary' of

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9 Cp. Chapter I.

statements, each with its own special meaning, each a signal for a different piece of behaviour. Then we might say that there is a stock of things it is possible to say in the language; just as we might want to say that there is a stock of words in the language, which is available for use. So, whenever a person wanted to say anything, he would have to say one of the standard things; use one of the standard signals for one of the standard pieces of behaviour. And, on Watson's account, it might very well seem that whole sentences are to be considered as signals for pieces of behaviour, if only because the word "box" seems always to be a request of some kind for the performance of a certain piece of behaviour; to be of the form; "Do so-and-so".

One of the questions this whole account gives rise to is, if all that has been learnt are generally used noises and reactions to these, how are we to formulate the distinction between sense and nonsense? Being bewildered by a noise to which I had not been trained to react might seem no different from being bewildered if someone manipulated an object in a way that was not part of a routine in which I had been drilled. It is hard here to distinguish between making sense in what we say and doing what is generally done.

It might be said, "Surely we do learn what words mean by observing what other people do?" But is what we learn when we learn what a word means just what other people do, their common reactions in certain circumstances? That we have common reactions may in some way be prior to language.[10]

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10 Cp. Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, paras. 241-2.

The possibility of teaching a child the meaning of a colour word by showing him samples depends upon his agreeing with you in what he calls the "same as" the samples shown him. If he differed wildly in this, and continued to do so no matter how long we went on pointing out red samples to him, he could not be taught what "red" means. But is establishing reactions of this sort nothing more than establishing physiological reflexes?

Rats might be trained to react in one way to green lights and in another way to red lights; might be trained so as to have common reactions in this respect. But we would not want to say that they know what "red" means, or what "green" means. Here it might be objected, "Don't we teach children to speak as we train animals? For instance, don't we train them to respond in the appropriate ways when ordered?" If this were all that learning the language amounted to, it might be no different from training people to carry out orders and make appropriate utterances when ordered in English, when they understood no English. It is hard to make sense of the view that using the language is a matter of issuing and obeying orders; to make any sense of the assimilation of 'knowing what to do' to 'knowing what it means'. There seems no room in this account for the view that we use the expressions we do because we have something to say, and are understood by other speakers of the language. Though, in a sense, the view that language is a matter of issuing and obeying orders might seem to gain its plausibility only by presupposing language and meaning as we know them; although only one amongst countless of the uses to which it can be put is accorded official recognition. Further, it is hard to make any sense of the view that

you can teach someone to speak simply by drills of some sort; or of any form of this view disguised as the view that in practice we do, in fact, teach children to speak, what words mean, by ostentation, whether what is in question is the establishing of a mental or physiological reflex of some sort. Ostentation is in fact a teaching method (though one with a limited application). It is another matter to demote it to an unintelligible 'explanation' of teaching methods by the introduction of special physiological, or mental, reflexes.

If someone were bewildered by a noise to which he had not been trained to react in any way, he would ignore it as not part of the routine. But this hardly seems the same as rejecting it as nonsense. Nevertheless, it might be felt that this account of how some languages are learnt by their native speakers is a plausible account; that this might be so with some undiscovered primitive tribe with a particularly simple form of language. So, there would be no difference between learning to build a boat, fish, and cook in the manner of the tribe, and learning what makes sense. Could we say that people might learn to speak in this way? Could we say that the force of "You don't understand that word" might be, "It is generally agreed by the speakers of this language that that is not the correct way to react to that word". The problem is what 'correct' and 'incorrect' could mean here. Why shouldn't someone use and understand a word in a different and 'better' way, if this is merely a matter of developing a different and better method for building boats? Why shouldn't each person use and understand words in different ways, because it suited him; just as several

people might build boats in different ways from each other. Further, why should n't each person use and understand words not only differently from others, but differently from the ways he has used them on previous occasions; just as a man might make modifications and improvements on each new boat he builds.

Attempted scientific explanations of the philosophical problem of meaning, (whether or not this problem is to be characterised as a scientific one), in terms of common reactions to objects, would seem to be ruled out a priori on consideration of what "physiological learning" might mean;[11] and of the logical dissimilarity of 'acting in the same way' and 'meaning the same'. This is not so much to legislate what science can or cannot do, as to distinguish between different interests in 'meaning'. Watson claimed to give an explanation of language in terms of common reactions that are taught, where these common reactions are publicly observable to the naked eye, or observable with the aid of instruments. If these common reactions are those that may be considered necessary prerequisites for the possibility of language, i.e. those connected with the notion 'and so on', then there are some publicly observable aspects of human behaviour, the study of which would amount to a study of the necessary prerequisites for the possibility of language. Behaviourism might claim to give an explanation of language in that sense. But we cannot see these common reactions just by looking, even with the most powerful of instrumental aids. Given that we can say things to each othef, then our uses of the (public) lan-

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11 Cp. Chapter I.

guage will be the criteria of whether we have the notion, 'and so on' in any particular case. It would be absurd to suggest that behaviourism can explain the language in a sense in which the fact that we already use the language was not to be considered a relevant condition. But the word "explanation" tempts us to think that: to think that behavioural method could lead to an explanation of language 'from scratch'; that there is no kind of common reaction which is not there to be straightforwardly seen. It seems clear that the behaviourist uses language to describe physiological occurences (how else is he to describe them?); and that these occurences are in any case not the common reactions that are the necessary prerequisites for the possibility of language. In the case of reactions normally examined by the behaviourist, it would be absurd to suggest that he could account for language 'from scratch', simply because language is employed in describing them. In the case of common reactions connected with the notion 'and so on', language would similarly be presupposed by the possibility of describing them. But in this case, language is presupposed in a further and more striking manner, in that it is the correct use of language itself which is the criteria for their presence. Whereas, by contrast, physiological reflexes in animals, for instance, would go on whether or not any human being was there to describe them. Although, of course, the possibility of describing these reflexes would presuppose language, and beings able to speak. It is this more striking manner in which language is presupposed that might tempt us to think that if the behaviourist could only observe common reactions of this sort, and do this apart from the language, as it were, he would be able to offer an explan-

ation of language and meaning by uncovering facts of a privileged status; facts which are also, apart from the language, prerequisites for the possibility of language. Not only are the occurences that the behaviourist describes in his technical use of language not in any case common reactions of this sort, but it is hard to see how he could deal with them. 'And so on' is not an object of any sort. It is not as though our tallying reactions can be pointed to in anything but a highly metaphorical sense. Further, it is difficult to see how these common reactions would be described at all. For it is only because we already agree in these reactions that we can say things to each other; we understand each other without noticing whether our reactions tally or not.

CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION

That meaning seems essentially a pseudo-problem throws light on what a philosophical question (at least with regard to 'meaning') is not, and, correspondingly, on what sorts of answers or explanations can be given. Philosophical questions and answers with regard to 'meaning' and 'language' might seem to differ from ordinary questions and answers only in the peculiarity of the subject matter 'about' which they are asked. "How do words mean anything at all? Are any expressions intelligible?" might seem assimilable to "What classroom technique should be used in teaching a backward child to speak?" or "How do fish fly?" It might seem that the first questions, unlike the latter two, are not about matters that can be examined by the senses in any way, but are settleable only by the philosopher's reflection on mental processes characteristic of, for instance, understanding what was said. On this construction, philosophical method amounts to an intellectual process like looking and seeing, but applied to subjects merely considered by the Ordinary Man. This leads to 'meaning' being treated as the name of something belonging to the same category as things at which we ordinarily look, only not sensible, because what is in question is a mental or psychological phenomenon, for whose detailed description the trained observation of professional philosophers is required. But yet, these questions in ordinary life which we do say are settled by looking and seeing, are in forms of expression upon whose use speakers of the language are agreed.

If you asked me the colour of the paper on which I am writing, I can tell by looking that it is white. Here, it would, in any ordinary circumstances, at any rate, be strange to ask for evidence or argument on my part. Both you, my questioner, and I are habituated to the use of colour words for describing what we see. Without this background of a common language, questions could not be settled by looking. What is meant by 'knowing the colour of the paper' is logically inseparable from familiarity with colour words, though no doubt, accidentally, with much else. "How do I know that this colour is "red"?" "It would be an answer to say, "I have learnt English"".[1] This brings in language at the start. It is only insofar as language is not genuinely put in doubt that the analogy of philosophical questions with questions ordinarily settled by looking and seeing does not fall to the ground through the demise of ordinary questions, (and language generally). But then the analogy is only maintained at the expense of showing that nothing is really in question.

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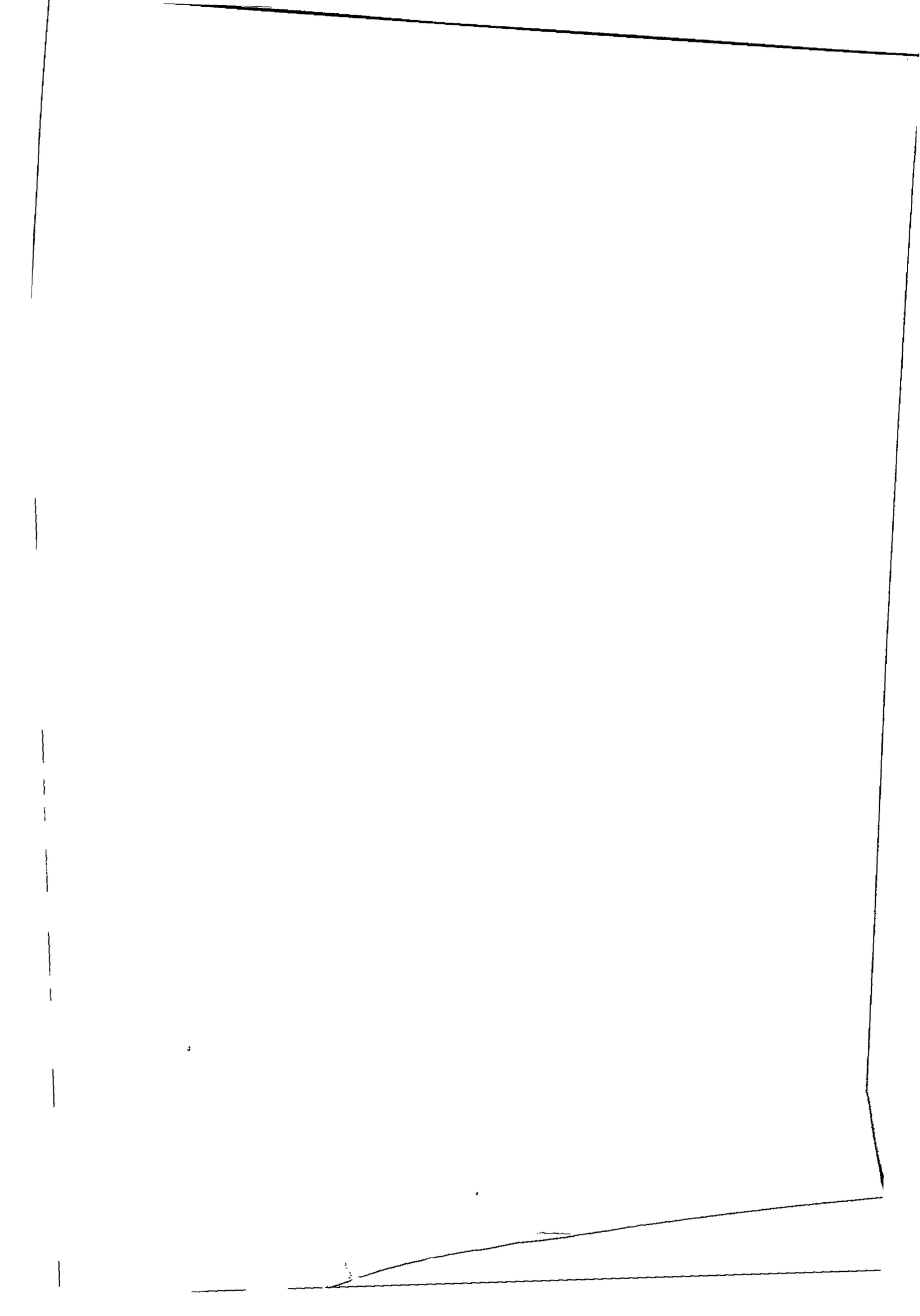
1 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, Pt. I, Para.381.



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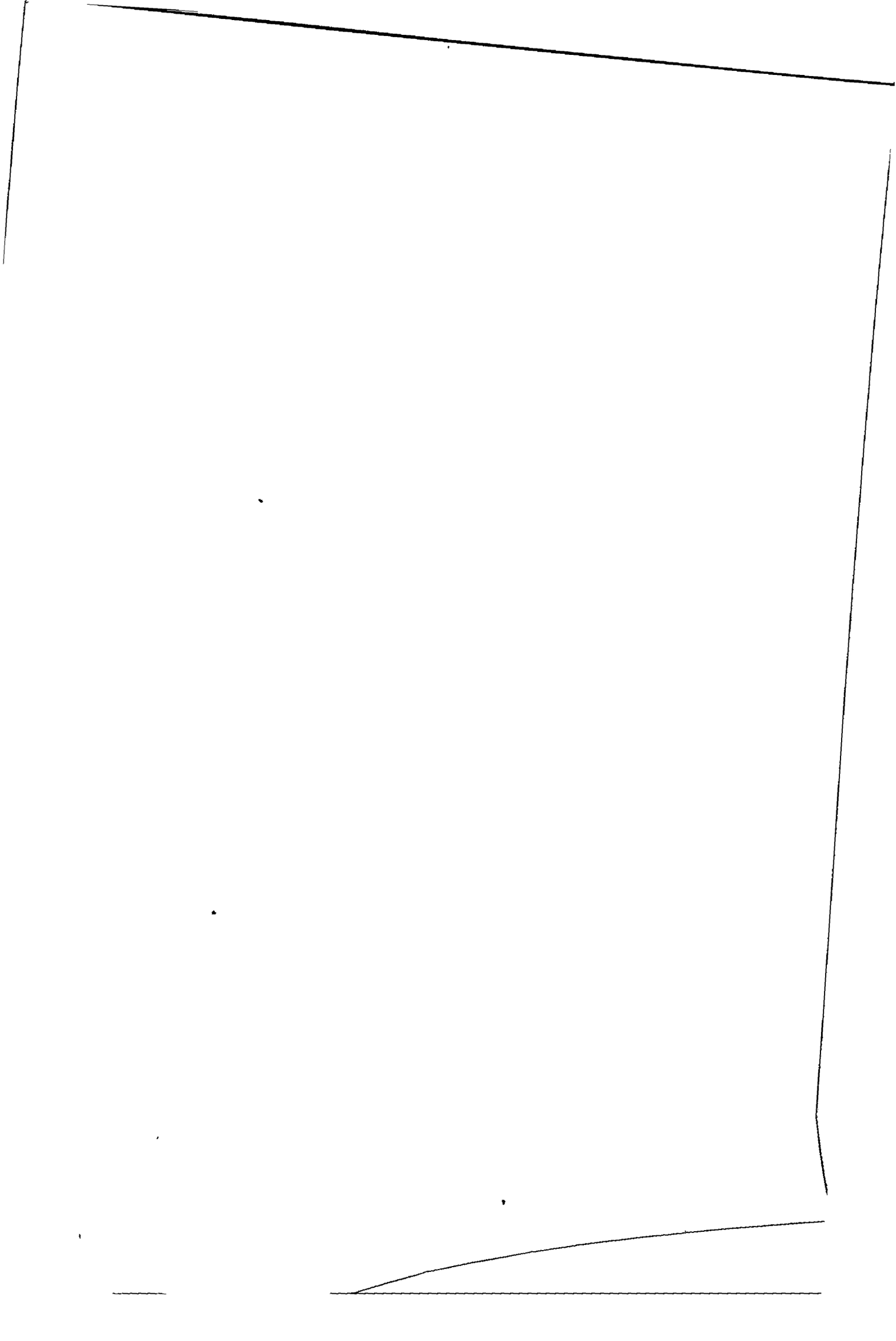

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