CHAPTER I—EXPRESSIONS AND THEIR MEANINGS

2. UNDERSTANDING OF EXPRESSIONS

The rustle of leaves, the singing of birds, the noise of a passing motorcar we hear. The expressions of a language of which we have command we not only hear, but also understand. It is not easy to explain in what the understanding of an expression consists. The same kind of response to an expression heard is not always called the understanding of that expression. It is very often said that a person understood a given word when the hearing of that word intertwined in his mind with a thought about an object other than the word in question. For instance, a person who knows Latin thinks about the Earth on hearing the word “terra”; he thinks that the Earth is round on hearing the statement “terra est rotunda”. But it is not always required that the hearing of a word should in a person’s mind intertwine with a thought about an object other than the word in question when it is said that that person understood that word. It will be said, for instance, that we understand the word “whether”, as it occurs, e.g., in “I do not know whether he will be here”, even though on hearing that word we do not direct our thoughts toward any object other than the word in question. We would also, perhaps, say that a soldier understood an order if he did what he was told to, even if the order was formulated in a language which he does not understand in the first of the meanings mentioned above. (In this case we say that a person understands an order in the same sense as we might say that a dog understands those orders to which he has been trained to respond.)

As can be seen from these explanations, the word “understand” is used in different senses. Without going here into any detailed analysis of these various meanings of the word “understand” we shall bear in mind, in the discussion that follows, the first meaning of that word, namely that a person understands an expression if on hearing it he directs his thoughts to an object other than the word in question. In
those cases the understanding of an expression consists in a thought of the person who heard that expression, a thought which in his mind became intertwined into a single whole with the hearing of that expression. Such a thought is the process of understanding an expression also by the person who utters that expression, because when uttering it he also hears it or perceives it in some other way. It will be said that the thought by means of which a person understands an expression which he utters or hears is stated by means of that expression.

3. MEANING OF EXPRESSIONS

When two persons understand an expression which they both hear, then each of them understands it by means of his own thought, i.e., by means of his own process of understanding. These processes of understanding always differ at least in that one of them is linked with one of the two persons concerned, and the other, with the other person. But they may differ in other respects as well. For instance, on hearing the word “pen” one of them may think of the instrument used in writing, while the other may think of device used to keep small children confined to a safe place. Further, on hearing the sentence “The weather tomorrow will be fine” they may think of the same, but the thought of one of them may consist in the conviction that it will be just so, whereas the thought of the other may be associated with a neutral attitude, neither for nor against what he thinks when understanding the sentence in question.

When the difference in the way of understanding a word by two persons consists, for instance, in that on hearing the word in question each of them thinks something else, then it will be said that they use that word in different meanings. But if the difference consists, for instance, in that on hearing an utterance they think of the same state of things, but one of them believes that it is so, whereas the other has no such belief, then that difference in the processes of understanding does not induce us to say that they use that word in different meanings. Thus we see that the problem whether two persons use (in a given case) an expression in the same meaning or in different meanings is settled by the respects in which their thoughts by means of which each of them understands that expression agree.