WITTGENSTEIN'S DOCTRINE OF USE

It is well known that Wittgenstein usually avoided in his later work the practice of affirming and denying philosophical theses. He chose rather to present his readers and listeners with a large number of carefully constructed and arranged examples which, by reminding them of how words are actually used, would cure them of their conceptual ailments. This has made it difficult to identify, let alone criticize, the broad features of his philosophy.

We can, however, identify at least one thesis which he definitely held and which is basic to his philosophical position. I refer to his thesis that the meaning of a word is its use in the language. It is possible to argue that this thesis is merely one more of Wittgenstein's therapeutic devices but I propose, in this paper, to examine and criticize it on the assumption that it is a straightforward philosophical theory of the nature of meaning.

1. "MEANING" AND "USE"

Wittgenstein's doctrine of use appears on page 20 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, where it is stated as follows:

For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (§43)

What exactly does this mean? What does Wittgenstein mean by "meaning" and what does he mean by "use"? It has always seemed strange to me that Wittgenstein, who was concerned to map the actual uses of words, never, so far as I know, paid any attention to scientific dictionaries which, after all, record the ways in which words are used by proficient speakers. Of course, dictionaries do not take one very far in doing linguistic analysis, but they do provide a starting point, as John Austin demonstrated in his William James lectures (which are found in *How to Do Things with Words*). Let us see, therefore, what Wittgenstein's doctrine amounts to when it is examined in the light of the dictionary entries for the words "meaning" and "use".

†The author died suddenly at home on 15 April 1983.

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Webster's New World Dictionary defines "meaning" as follows:

1. What is meant; what is intended to be, or is in fact, signified, indicated, referred to or understood: signification, purport, import, sense or significance.
2. (Archaic) intention, purpose.

It then distinguishes in a synonymy between these kinds of meaning in a way which makes it clear that the word "meaning" is the general term and the terms "referent", "sense", "import", "purport", "signification", and "significance" connote species of meaning.

Did Wittgenstein have all these species of meaning in mind when he enunciated his doctrine of use, or some of them, or only one? We obtain a clue to what he meant by "meaning" from the following passage of the Investigations:

It is important to note that the word "meaning" is being used illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that "corresponds" to the word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name. When Mr. N.N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceased to have a meaning it could make no sense to say that "Mr. N.N. is dead." (§40)

In this passage Wittgenstein makes it clear that by "the meaning of a word" he does not mean its referent, and he provides us with some evidence for thinking that what he does mean is its sense. It is interesting to note that he is concerned with sense rather than reference since he denies that reference is a species of meaning, which is contrary to what the dictionary tells us. Moreover, his example is spurious because it works only if we accept his identification of meaning with sense. If the name "Mr. N.N." ceased to have a sense it would certainly make no sense to say that Mr. N.N. is dead, but this would not prevent us from saying that the person meant by the name "Mr. N.N." is dead, even when Mr. N.N. is dead.

I shall assume henceforth that by the meaning of a word Wittgenstein meant its sense. This identification of meaning with sense not only fits what he says in the foregoing passage but also conforms to his uses of the word "meaning" elsewhere in the Investigations.

Given this assumption we can now reword Wittgenstein's doctrine of use in the following manner: The sense of a word is its use in the language. However, this new version of the doctrine at once runs into difficulties because a glance at any dictionary immediately reveals that most words have more than one sense. To take account of this fact the