The ascription of meaning: A Wittgensteinian perspective

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WITTGENSTEINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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This remark by the later Wittgenstein, “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward
criteria,” suggests the thesis to be developed here: the locus of meaning in
communication is not based on private, internal states of a person, but, rather, on the
satisfaction of public criteria. If this thesis is sound, then the oft-cited proposition,
“Meanings are ‘in the head’ of the individual,” must be called into question.

It is not without a little trepidation that I address a problem as recalcitrant as the
foundation of meaning. But I believe that Wittgenstein’s notion of criteria offers a
direction to develop a distinctively communicative view of meaning. Although
communication theorists are certainly familiar with Wittgenstein’s work, they have
not fully appreciated the implications of his notion of criteria in the literature on
meaning.

My goals are (1) to show that the position, “The locus of meaning is ‘in the head’
of the individual,” is based on dualistic premises. This position faces the problem of
explaining how an individual can know another person’s meanings—what philoso-
phers have called the other minds problem. (2) Wittgenstein’s notion of criteria will
be developed as an alternative approach to meaning which avoids the difficulties of
dualism. The nature, functions, and uses of criteria will be presented, and contrasted
to the epistemological implications of dualism. (3) Some of the later Wittgenstein’s
views on meaning were applied in Thomas S. Frentz and Thomas B. Farrell’s
proposal of the language-action paradigm. However, they did not explore the
implications of Wittgenstein’s notion of criteria. I will argue that this notion of
criteria may be usefully integrated into this perspective to complement the concept of
rules. Without the notion of criteria, the language-action paradigm cannot explain
how communicators apply general rules to a specific context.

MEANING AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER MINDS

The concept of meaning has been conceived traditionally along various bipolar
continua: inner-outer, private-public, subject-object, individual-collective, and per-
sonal-social.2 Theorists who claim that the locus of meaning resides in the left-hand
pole of these continua are said to subscribe to a version of subjectivism: “Meanings
are in people, not in words,” or “Meaning is ‘in the head’ of the individual.”
Theorists who opt for the right-hand pole tend to be objectivists: “Meaning is
contained in the message,” or “Words have meaning by their reference to objects.”3
This dispute can be traced back to the pre-Socratics.4 The debate turns on whether
objects external to the subject constrain or determine the meaning of sign and symbol
systems.5 These epistemological views about meaning are based on a Cartesian
dualism of mind and body.6

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Once the locus of meaning is assigned to an internal, mental realm, the problem arises: How can one know another person’s meanings, which are contained in his or her mind, when one has access only to an other’s external behaviors and physical states? This puzzle has been called the other minds problem. The other minds problem arises when the issue of meaning is based on dualistic premises. The problem may be summarized as follows: I have direct access to my own meanings, and, consequently, I can know my own meanings. I do not have any direct access to other’s meanings, only to other’s behavioral and physical states; therefore, how can we justifiably make ascriptions of other persons’ meanings without direct access to them? Put in a linguistic mode, the issue boils down to the epistemological relation between a third-person ascription (e.g., “Jones is angry”) and the state ascribed (e.g., Jones’ anger). The dualist, as already shown, claims that the subject knows his or her meanings directly, which allows the subject to ascribe a verbal label to his or her own mental state (i.e., a first-person ascription). On this view, the subject is, at best, aware of another person’s meanings indirectly.

This seemingly esoteric philosophical problem is of no little importance for communication theory, for the answers given (or more typically, the assumptions made) lead to views on meaning, such as behavioral theory (that is, words have meaning as stimuli for behavioral responses), and ideational theory (that is, words have meaning due to the mental ideas which they evoke). Each of these divergent positions can be seen as providing answers to the other minds problem. Behaviorism may be seen as a reaction against dualism; it is the objectivist view, which holds that meanings are unknowable except as behaviors and behavioral dispositions in response to various stimuli. Behaviorism avoids the other minds problem by treating the mind as a “black box” and by restricting scientific investigation directly to observable behavioral responses. Ideational theory, on the other hand, basically accepts dualism and the corresponding epistemological implications. Ideational theory is a subjectivist view, which holds that meanings cannot be known independently of the individual’s interpretation of signification systems. From this perspective, understanding the person’s meanings becomes of critical importance for the researcher. But in its own way, ideational theory treats the mind as a kind of “black box,” too, but with the exception that the individual is the only one who can be aware of its contents; another person can never know one’s meanings exactly.

**Meanings Are Based on the Use of Criteria**

Wittgenstein’s “meaning as use” perspective offers an alternative approach to meaning. It avoids the conceptual problems inherent in dualism. Wittgenstein’s position on meaning will be presented by developing his notion on criteria, especially as applied to the other minds problem. According to the later Wittgenstein, the dualist is wrong: the ascription of meaning is not based on an inner process, but on the satisfaction of criteria.

As we have seen, the problem for the dualist is being able to justify claims about another person’s meanings without direct access. Wittgenstein’s approach to this problem was to reformulate it: unlike the dualist, we do not need to make inferences behind the behaviors to another’s meanings; and unlike the behaviorist, meanings are not reducible solely to behaviors or dispositions to behave. Instead of the locus of meaning being “in” the mind or “in” the behaviors, meanings are based on the
conventions of our use of language. Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn” recasts the problem from locating meanings in a place to the problem of how we use language. This move allows us to see communication processes not merely as vehicles to transmit inner meanings, but as constitutive of meanings.

Wittgenstein approached the other minds problem with reference to another person having an opinion, in this way:

To have an opinion is a state.—A state of what? Of the soul? Of the mind? Well, of what object does one say that it has an opinion? Of Mr. N. N. for example. And that is the correct answer. One should not expect to be enlightened by the answer to that question. Others go deeper: What, in particular cases, do we regard as criteria for someone’s being of such-and-such an opinion? When do we say: he reached this opinion at that time? When: he has altered his opinion? And so on. The picture which the answers to these questions give us shows what gets treated grammatically as a state here.

This passage recommends that instead of asking for the locus of the state, having an opinion, as the dualist would have it, that we examine the criteria in particular cases for ascribing an opinion of another. By examining the ways we talk about opinions, we can uncover the “grammar” or meanings of the term. So with this example, we would say that another person has an opinion when he or she verbally avows it, argues over it, follows a sequence of actions in accordance with it, and the like. Alternatively, we would not say that a person could have an opinion of a factual statement, say, the chemical composition of a substance. To engage in the communicative practice or “language-game” of having an opinion implies certain criteria of meaning.

The notion of criteria is crucial for understanding Wittgenstein’s views on meaning because it provides the basis for the domain of application for our uses of words. “To understand the grammar of these states (e.g., opinion, expectations, hoping, knowing, being able to), it is necessary to ask: ‘What counts as criteria for any one’s being in such a state?’” To justifiably ascribe meanings assumes the satisfaction of criteria for the ascription in question.

Wittgenstein does not provide a formal definition of criteria, but it is clear from his uses and examples that criteria involve evidence or support for the ascription of meanings. “To the question, ‘How do you know that so-and-so is the case?’ we sometimes answer by giving ‘criteria.’” Carl Wellman, however, has formulated a useful definition of Wittgenstein’s notion: “A criterion is a purely linguistic ground for judging that it is or is not correct to apply a given expression to some object.” The key point here is the notion of grounds or justification for ascribing a meaning. For example, criteria are the grounds which justify us in ascribing the verbal meaning, “[Jones is angry]” to Jones. Wellman’s definition raises two questions: How do we recognize criteria? and What is the epistemological status of criteria as the “ground” for making ascriptions?

In ordinary circumstances, criteria are tacit or implicit; but criteria can be made explicit if one is called upon to justify one’s ascription. From the previous example, what are the criteria for saying, “Jones is angry”? Jones may verbally claim to be angry, curse, pound her fist on the table, facially flush; in addition, an observer may be aware of contextual background information, such as her relationship with Smith, her plans, and the fight they had yesterday. In this case, Jones’ actions in context can be seen as an instance of what we mean by anger. If someone were to question this
ascription of "anger," one could justify it by pointing to the criteria of what counts as anger and seeing Jones' actions as an instance of it.

The criteria we use in ascribing meanings depends upon the "language-game" in which we are engaged—quite simply, criteria are context dependent. Wittgenstein shows this by examining the use of the term "describe": when we say, "I describe my state of mind" and "I describe my room," we use different criteria because we play different "language-games." The following passage further clarifies the contextual nature of criteria:

We regard certain facial expressions, gestures, etc. as characteristic for the expression of belief. We speak of a "tone of conviction." And yet it is clear that this tone of conviction isn't always present whenever we rightly speak of conviction. "Just so," you might say, "this shows that there is something else, something behind those gestures, etc. which is the real belief as opposed to mere expression of belief." — "Not at all," I should say, "many different criteria distinguish, under different circumstances, cases of believing what you say from those of not believing what you say" (italics added).

Wittgenstein's position is that there are no behaviors (for example, "a tone of conviction") which are invariably associated with another's mental state such as one's belief. A "tone of conviction" can be a criterion for a speaker's belief in what he or she is saying; but, in other cases, the speaker may not have a tone of conviction and yet be said to believe what he or she is saying. In short, criteria of meaning are dependent on context or "circumstances." Circumstances include background knowledge, temporally prior events, expectations, interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and the like. For Wittgenstein, the ascription of meaning is not based on inner mental state or process behind the behavior, but involves the satisfaction of criteria in context.

Wittgenstein's view that meaning is based on the use of criteria should not be read as a version of behaviorism. Behaviors can be used as criteria, but, as the above passage suggests, the behavior, "a tone of conviction," does not always mean that one believes what one is saying. A person's behaviors, along with other features of context, are to be used as the grounds for ascribing belief. Wittgenstein's notion of criteria allows him to circumvent dualistic premises and ground meaning on the features of language use in context. Put in a material mode, the locus of meaning is in the "language-game" or practice. These practices are not reducible to any list of behaviors, but are constituted by a matrix of actions in context.

The notion of criteria also needs to be distinguished from the concepts of necessary and sufficient conditions. In the case of Jones's anger, Jones may be angry and yet successfully conceal her feelings from others. The possibility of concealment shows that certain characteristic anger-behaviors are not a necessary condition for the ascription of anger. In addition, Jones may be lying or pretending to be angry, which may lead an observer to make a false ascription of meaning. The possibility of lying or pretense shows that characteristic anger-behaviors are not a sufficient condition for the ascription of anger. There is no list of necessary and sufficient conditions for making ascriptions of meaning. Consequently, the notion of criteria is not one of logical entailment; the possibility of error always exists. Since criteria are not invariant indicators, cases may arise in which one can be said justifiably to make an ascription (e.g., Jones is angry) when that ascription turns out to be false (e.g., Jones was pretending).
If the notion of criteria is not equivalent to a necessary or sufficient condition, what is its epistemological status? To address this question, we need to understand Wittgenstein’s distinction between criteria and symptoms. Each of these constructs may be used to justify knowledge claims. But criteria are based on what we mean by the term in question, its defining characteristics, while symptoms are based on inductive evidence. Wittgenstein said: “I call ‘symptom’ a phenomenon of which experience has taught us that it coincided, in some way or other, with the phenomenon which is our defining criterion.” Wittgenstein’s point was that “symptoms are discovered in experience, but criteria are fixed by convention.” In other words, criteria are based on the meaning of terms, while symptoms are based on empirical correlations or associations learned by experience. A “symptom” of anger would be present if one knew that whenever Jones has three or more cups of coffee, Jones will become irritable and angry. The fact that Jones drinks three cups of coffee is not part of the social convention of what is meant by anger, but it is associated with anger by the principle of induction. Contextual criteria are not merely empirically associated with an underlying mental state, the feeling of anger, but are constitutive of anger as a practice.

For Wittgenstein, the meaning of words is ultimately based on conventions of language use. Again, in the ascription of anger to Jones, if one questions the ascription, one would likely reply by citing various criteria, which constitute the grounds for the ascription, such as Jones’ cursing or her fight with Smith. But if someone were to ask how one knows that these criteria justify the ascription of anger, all one could say in response is that such actions in context are what count as “anger.” There are no further grounds beyond criteria for justification—“here we strike rock bottom, that is we have come down to conventions.” Wittgenstein shows the connection among ascriptions of meaning, criteria, and conventions in criticizing the metaphysician’s violation of ordinary language use:

The man who says “Only my pain is real,” doesn’t mean to say that he has found out by the common criteria—the criteria, i.e., which give our words their common meanings—that the others who said they had pains were cheating. But what he rebels against is the use of this expression in connection with these criteria. That is, he objects to using this word the particular way in which it is commonly used. On the other hand, he is not aware that he is objecting to a convention.

In this section, Wittgenstein’s notion of a criterion has been presented as an alternative approach to the ascription of meaning, particularly with regards to the other minds problem. I am not claiming that Wittgenstein’s position is without its own problems. My point is that the Wittgensteinian model provides a useful way to conceive of meaning and to recognize the constitutive dimension of our everyday communicative practices.

**Implications of Wittgenstein’s View of Meaning**

If Wittgenstein’s view of meaning is correct, then the oft-cited position, “Meaning is ‘in the head’ of the individual,” must be called into serious question. An important epistemological consequence of the Wittgensteinian position is that the individual is not the final court of appeal about the individual’s own meanings. That is, an individual can err in making self-ascriptions and another person can justifiably
overrule the individual’s self-ascription by citing criteria. These consequences cannot be accounted for from the “meaning in the head” perspective.

Wittgenstein makes this point with regard to the term “understanding.” One may feel that one understands an algebraic formula, but if one cannot apply it or explain the formula to another, then one’s claim to understanding may be called into question and overruled. The basis of our ascription of mentalistic terms, like “understanding,” is not another’s inner mental processes, but another’s satisfaction of certain criteria.

Let us remember that there are certain criteria in a man’s behaviour for the fact that he does not understand a word: that it means nothing to him, that he can do nothing with it. And criteria for his “thinking he understands,” attaching some meaning to the word, but not the right one. And, lastly, criteria for his understanding the word right.

The point is also made in regard to communicative actions which count as making a promise. An individual’s inner feelings do not warrant that a promise has been made; it is rather that certain public criteria have been specified, such as verbal commitments to do something for someone in the future and the other’s acceptance of it. Criteria for promise making are the same for both speaker and listener. For if one makes a promise, with the inner feeling of not meaning it, and says sincerely, “I didn’t really mean what I said about meeting you for dinner at seven,” one can still be blamed for breaking a promise. The obligation created by a promise is based, not on “inner meanings,” but on social conventions. And criteria provide the justification that the social convention has been invoked. A classic example is the case of jealousy. An individual may deny feeling jealous, but his or her actions, combined with background relational information and other events, may provide criteria for an observer to overrule this denial and justify the ascription of jealousy. Often the individual is the last to admit her or his own jealousy.

At times, it is not at all clear whether criteria have been met, such as in borderline cases or ambiguous examples. Ascriptions of meaning can be open to dispute; for instance, was a given event a riot or a demonstration, were another’s remarks aggressive or assertive, was a promise made in jest or with serious intent? Persons can disagree over the meanings of an event, citing criteria to support their interpretation. Other ambiguous actions include teasing and flirting.

It is instructive to look at a naturally occurring discourse in which participants disagree over an ascription of meaning and examine the criteria they use in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The following transcript contains a disagreement over the ascription of flirting.

K.1 Could I ask you a question?
J.1 Sure.
K.3 Did breaking up put some of the excitement back into it again?
J.4 Ummm, maybe but that’s not the big thing about it.
K.5 What is the big thing about it?
J.6 I told ya—it takes the jealousy away and the pressure off.
K.7 What kind of pressure you talking about?
J.8 Just pres—uh
K.9 Pressure to be with somebody?
J.10 Yes and just having, you know
K.11 Having what?
J.12 Having to make sure that nothing can be taken wrong by anybody so
13 they don’t go and report.
K.14 Nobody ever came to me and reported. I never—did you ever get a
15 report?
J.16 Huh? Hundreds of times!
K.17 What do people say? Tell me.
J.18 Oh, you flirt like a banshee. It's true too,
19 I've seen you.
K.20 I'm really getting mad.
J.21 Why?
K.21 Because I don't.
J.23 Oh, everyone misinterprets
K.24 Everyone else is wrong! I don't flirt, and if you take kindness
25 and liking somebody and friendship and being friendly to somebody
26 as flirting then you have a problem.
J.27 I guess I do.

The sequence (18–26) is interesting because K and J disagree over the ascription of meaning, "flirting," and use various criteria as justifications. For instance, J supports his accusation by the criteria of what others "report" to him (16) and his own observations of K (18–19). K denies flirting (20, 22) and responds by restating her denial and justifying her past actions by using criteria to distinguish flirting from "being friendly" (24–26). Notice how J and K use criteria to support their respective meanings. J grounds his ascription of flirting on what others have reported to him and on what he himself has seen. When K denies this ascription, J implicitly overrules her by implying that "everyone" else could not "misinterpret" her actions (23). Here J uses a kind of "consensus" criterion to disagree with K's denial. K's response is to recast her actions as a socially recognizable instance of friendliness, rather than flirting (24–26).

The fact that two persons can arrive at two different meanings for the same event is part of the intuitive appeal of the "Meaning is 'in the head' of the individual" position—that is, that meanings are often not shared between communicators.33 For instance, in a communication episode, one may become angry, but conceal the anger from others. Persons may come away from such an episode with largely different interpretations. Typically, one knows more than others about one's own situation. The individual has more access to his or her own feelings, intentions, beliefs, biography, and other contextual considerations which become relevant in the ascription of meanings.34 This asymmetry of access allows one to offer self-reports based on information which may be unknown or unappreciated by others. But this asymmetry of access does not imply that by a self-report a person is truly conveying inner meanings. Rather, a self-report is one's implicit specification of criteria which makes an action or event meaningful. In some cases, we may not be able to detect when a person is angry, but that is not because we do not perceive other's inner processes, but because we are not aware of (or do not appreciate) the criteria which justify the ascription of anger to that person. Episodes in which meanings are not shared, are not because meanings are hidden in the mind, but because persons have differential access to contextual information, or may use different criteria to make ascriptions of meaning. It is not merely inner sensations, but criteria in context which justify the ascription of anger.

**CRITERIA AND RULES**

In the past fifteen years, there has been much interest in the rules paradigm.35 Many rules theorists cite the later Wittgenstein as a progenitor of this position. But
the notion of criteria has been largely overlooked by rules theory. The most thorough application of the meaning-as-use perspective in the field of communication is that of Frentz and Farrell.36 I will argue that the notion of criteria is crucial to their language-action paradigm.

They apply the Wittgensteinian view, "Meaning as use," to what they call "actional meaning":

"[A]ctional meaning" is... governed by rules. The center of our analysis discusses the multiplicity of functions that may be performed by discourse in conversation, along with the rules that govern the use of discourse. At each stage of analysis (episode, encounter, and form-of-life), we contend that the function of the utterance contributes to its meaning.37

Actional meaning, they explain, is comprised of three contextual levels: episode, encounter, and form-of-life. (1) At the episode level there are rules which "specify both the form of the episode and the permissible or appropriate symbolic acts for the form in question."38 For instance, avoiding a direct answer to a series of direct questions is a recognizable form of an evasion episode.39 (2) At the level of encounter, there are rules which "specify[ly] a range of experiential subjects and/or episodes pertinent, permissible, or obligatory for the encounter-type in question."40 For instance, the meaning of one's personal self-disclosure will vary depending upon whether the encounter is a cocktail party, an interview, or an obscene phone call.41 (3) Form of life is "that range of cultural experience that members of a given social sphere hold in common."42 For instance, the psychoanalytic session between therapist and client, the Roman Catholic confessional between priest and parishioner, and the personal self-disclosure between best friends are similar yet different forms of life. The crucial concept of a "rule" is characterized as:

Communication rules... define parameters of choice for intelligible pertinent, and functional symbolic acts.... Communication rules specify a domain of relevant application, and then stipulate or prescribe a species of required/prohibited/permitted conduct.43

Communication rules provide both (1) the boundary conditions for their application, and (2) prescribe modes of appropriate conduct. My criticism is that (1) is not satisfied when we examine specific cases.

Application of General Rules to a Specific Situation

A problem for the language-action paradigm is specifying how communicators know when to apply general rules to a situated context. The notion of a criterion provides a partial solution to this problem.

One of the types of episodic rules cited by Farrell and Frentz is this:

In formal settings, one episodic rule seems to sanction negatively any disparaging reference to present conversational performance of communicants.44

They provide the example that it is prohibited to break a lull in conversation with the comment, "Gee, that was a long silence!" or "I guess we don't have much to say tonight."45 But this episodic rule clearly does not apply in all "formal settings." For instance, during courtroom proceedings, a judge may say to a witness, "Don't be
nervous. Just tell us what happened that evening.” Or, during a job interview, a committee member may say to the applicant, “You seem to be evading my question.” These exceptions to the “disparaging reference” episodic rule are not perceived by communicators as rule-violations, but rather constitute following different episodic rules. In the courtroom setting, the judge may be following an episodic rule of putting the witness at ease; while in the interview, the committee member may be following an episodic rule of testing the acumen of the interviewee. Farrell and Frentz may reply to this counter-example by citing the encounter-type (e.g., a courtroom; an interview) which has specialized episodic rules.

But such a response would not answer the more basic problem of how rules are applied in a specific situation. “There is always a logical gap between a rule and its application to a particular instance; specifying a rule still leaves to be specified how that rule is to be applied.” And this is a problem not only for the language-action paradigm, but also for any theory which uses the concept of rules or social norms.

The notion of “meta-rules” has been proposed as a solution to this problem. “Meta-rules are rules which prescribe other rules.” But this solution faces the problem of an infinite regress: How do communicators know when to apply meta-rules to rules to specific contexts? That is, theorists would be led to the notion of “meta-meta-rules.” A second, and more fundamental, problem for meta-rules is the very notion of there being “rules about rules.” Is the application of the above-mentioned episodic rule, “avoid disparaging reference to present conversational performance,” itself following a rule?

Instead of positing meta-rules, the problem of application may be partially solved by looking at the communicator’s interpretation of contextual meanings. Farrell and Frentz claim that rules influence the interpretation of meanings, but also meanings influence the application of rules. Consider again the examples of the judge who may be asked to account for saying, “Don’t be nervous. Just tell us what happened that evening.” The judge may cite the witness’ nervousness as a criterion of a potential barrier to a full disclosure. In another case, given similar conditions, the judge may remain silent. When asked to account for this silence, the judge may cite the witness’ nervousness, not as a barrier, but as a criterion to ascribe deceptive intent. The point here is that communicators may use a different criterion to ascribe meaning and thereby apply different episodic rules. The point was evident in the previous example of flirting: J’s ascription of flirting simultaneously invokes a rule of blaming, while K’s denial invokes a rule of justification. In short, ascribed meanings often imply the appropriate rules of action.

This problem of the application of general rules to a specific situation is not fully resolved. “The ‘fit’ between circumstances and rule is indeterminate in some respect.” The notion of criteria indicates one’s grounds for ascribing meaning. While one’s ascription of meaning often implies rules of action, meaning does not fully determine the selection of rules. In this sense, a criterion is a bridging concept between the general rule and the particular situation.

All of the rules cited by Farrell and Frentz can be seen to admit of exceptions, as well as alternative rules. My criticism is not that there is no general rules but, rather, that we need to understand how communicators apply rules to situated contexts. A person’s use of a criterion to structure the meaning of context provides part of the explanation for how general rules are applied to situations. My purpose in analyzing
the language-action paradigm's concept of rules is to suggest that this position could be strengthened (i.e., anomalies could be explained) by adopting Wittgenstein's notion of criteria to complement the rules model.

CONCLUSION

The two main themes of this paper are opposite sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the negative argument was made that the view, "The locus of meaning is 'in the head' of the individual," is based on dualism and subject to serious criticisms. On the other hand, the positive argument was made that meaning is based on the use of criteria in context to support one's ascriptions. This Wittgensteinian view of meaning is, of course, not entirely new, but its importance has not been fully appreciated. This notion of criteria of meaning is not a full-bodied theory, but an analytical concept. As such, it may be usefully integrated into various theoretical perspectives. For instance, it may be a useful addition to the language-action paradigm, a bridging concept between general rules and situated contexts.

On an ontological level, the meaning as use view allows us to avoid making dualistic assumptions. The world would not be divided up into the ontological realms of the mental and the physical as with dualism; rather, talk about the mental (e.g., "She understands the proof"), or the physical (e.g., "He weighs over 200 pounds"), or a combination of these (e.g., "Jones is flushing with embarrassment") is based on the use of criteria to make meaningful ascriptions. Criteria of meaning provide the basis for the ascriptions we make of mental states and processes and of physical or behavioral conditions. On an epistemological level, criteria of meaning apply equally to first-person and third-person ascriptions. Of course, one typically knows more about oneself than about others (which allows one to make more assured self-ascriptions), but the criteria are nonetheless the same for self and other to support the ascriptions of meaning.

Wittgenstein's concept of contextual criteria seems particularly fruitful for the development of a distinctively communicative approach to meaning. Instead of inferring inner processes and attitudes somehow behind a person's behavior, theorists can examine communication practices as making meanings. Communicative actions, instead of being a mere vehicle for transmitting inner meanings, are constitutive of meaning. The notion of criteria orients us toward what persons are doing with words: the social activity and practice of making a promise, greeting, teasing, ingratiating, lying, and the like. This approach to meaning advanced in this essay implies that symbolic action and interaction are not ancillary, but constitutive of communicative meanings.

NOTES


6Wittgenstein shows how his approach differs from the dualist. A problem for the dualist is knowledge of another person’s mental states, for instance, the sensation of pain. A possible “solution” for the dualist is solipsism: “If what I feel is always my pain only, what can the supposition mean that someone else has a pain?” The thing to do in such cases is always to look how the words in question are actually used in our language. We are in all such cases thinking of a use different from that which our ordinary language makes of the words.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Books (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 56.

7Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 151f.

8Wittgenstein, p. 151e.


11Philosophical Investigations, p. 99e. Wittgenstein shows this connection among our use of words, criteria, and language-games in the following passage: “The criteria we accept for ‘fitting,’ ‘being able to,’ ‘understanding,’ are much more complicated than they might appear at first sight. That is, the game with these words, their employment in the linguistic intercourse that is carried on by their means, is more involved . . . than we are tempted to think.” Philosophical Investigations, p. 182. See also Canfield, ch. 4.


13This critique of dualism is made in a similar fashion by two philosophers influenced by the later Wittgenstein: “The mistake is to suppose that since a man can say, ‘I felt angry’ we shall find out what anger is by finding out what he felt. In what context does he say ‘I felt angry?’ In the context of some story of events, conversations, thoughts: that is to say, he puts the anger he reports into a context which shows a log about the anger.” G. E. M. Anscombe, “ Pretending,” Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 29, (1955), 35. “When we ask ourselves whether someone is angry, our question is not whether such and such events are transpiring in the hidden chamber in his mind; nor do we, when we feel angry, turn our attention inward from the things that provoke us, the persons with whom we are angry, the circumstances in which we show, display and vent our anger.” A. I. Melden, “The Conceptual Dimensions of Emotions,” in Human Action: Conceptual and Empirical Issues, ed. T. Mischel (New York: Academic Press, 1969), p. 206.

14Malcolm makes this point in discussing the relation between “pain-behavior” and the ascription of “pain” to another: “Pain-behavior is a criterion of pain only in certain circumstances. If we come upon a man exhibiting violent pain-behavior, couldn’t something show that he is not in pain? Of course! For example, he is rehearsing for a play; or he has been hypnotized and told, ‘You will act as if you are in pain, although you won’t be in pain,’ . . . The expressions of pain are a criterion of pain in certain ‘surroundings,’ not in others.” Norman Malcolm, “Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations,” in The Philosophy of Mind, ed. V. C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 87–8. See also Hacker, p. 305; and Meredith Williams, “Wittgenstein’s Rejection of Scientific Psychology,” Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 15 (1985), 203–23.

15Research on anger supports this claim: “There are certain behaviors which are typical of anger . . . but none of
these is necessary for the attribution of anger. Thus, the person who is angry may lash out at his antagonist, or he may withdraw from the situation; he may experience a high degree of physiological arousal, or he may calmly retaliate; his subjective experience may vary from exhilaration to depression; in addition, under some conditions, he may not even realize that he is angry." James R. Averill, "A Constructivist View of Emotion," in Emotion: Theory, Research and Experience, ed. R. Plutchik (New York: Academic Press, 1980), p. 307.


22Hacker, p. 290. Also: "What makes something into a symptom of y is that experience teaches that it is always or usually associated with y; that so-and-so is the criterion of y is a matter, not of experience, but of definition." Malcolm, p. 87. See also Canfield, pp. 32–5.

23"The grounds which are taken to support ... assertions, Wittgenstein calls 'criteria.' Through our linguistic conventions, the sense of a declarative sentence is specified by the evidences which are regarded as justifying its assertion. Conversely, such conventions endow these criteria with their evidential value." John T. E. Richardson, The Grammar of Justification (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 132.


26Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 58e.

27Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 172e.

28"Wittgenstein argues that meaning and understanding are not processes at all, and that the criteria by which we decide whether someone understood a sentence, and what he meant by it, are quite different from the criteria by which we discover what mental processes are going on while someone is talking or writing." Anthony Kenny, Wittgenstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 140.

29Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, p. 269. A similar point is also made, apparently independently, by Ryle: "There is no singular performance, overt or in your head, which would determine that you had understood the argument. Even if you claimed that you had experienced a flash or click of comprehension and had actually done so, you would still withdraw your other claim to have understood the argument if you found that you could not paraphrase it, illustrate, expand, or recast it; and you would allow someone else to have understood it who could meet all examination-questions about it, but reported no click of comprehension." Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1949), p. 163.


31For example, "The wife whose husband continually brings home a lady friend for coffee manages to spill coffee all over the lady's elegant dress. 'I didn't mean to,' she cries in alarm, exposing her conduct. But later, especially after it happens for a third time, honest attention to circumstances might lead her to say, 'I suppose I meant it after all.'" A. R. Louch, Explanation and Human Action (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), p. 114.

32This transcript was drawn from an audio tape recording in which participants were asked to tape record a conversation of their choice in their home. Background information: J and K are a college-aged, unmarried couple; J is male and K is female. Apparently they once had an intimate interpersonal relationship and they have redefined their relationship so they can date others. The fragment is from an episode in which they are discussing how their feelings are different since their relational redefinition.


34Bedford makes this point regarding one's awareness of one's own emotions. "It is sometimes the case that we know our own emotions better than anyone else does, but there is no need to explain this as being due to the introspection of feelings. One reason for this is that it is hardly possible for a man to be completely ignorant, as other may be, of the context of his own behavior. Again, thoughts may cross his mind that he does not make public. But the fact that he prefers to keep them to himself is incidental; and if they were known, they would only be corroborative evidence, not indispensable evidence of a radically different sort from that which is available to other people. It is only in some respects, then, that each of us is in a better position to understand himself than anyone else is. Against this must be set the possibility of self-deception and a reluctance to admit that we are, for instance, vain or envious." Errol Bedford, "Emotions," in The Philosophy of Mind, ed. V. C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 113.

35For a useful review of the rules theory literature, see Susan B. Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research (Beverly Hills, Sage, 1980).


47Shimanoff, p. 59-60.
48Shimanoff, p. 59.
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