On Appeals to "Ordinary Language"

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ABSTRACT: In recent decades, the philosophical tradition known as “Ordinary Language Philosophy” popularized in the middle of the 20th century by philosophers such as J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, has dissipated substantially, in large part, due to post-Gricean developments in systematized linguistics and philosophy of language. I think, however, that much of what has been held in disrepute of ordinary language philosophy has, in fact, little or nothing to do with (many of) the real philosophical concerns of ordinary language philosophers, at least the sort exemplified in the works of Austin and Wittgenstein. I will suggest that many contemporary positions which do purport to deal with these “ordinary language concerns” are missing the point on an important and fundamental level.

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91 I’d like to dedicate this paper to Avner Baz, whose lectures and insights on ordinary language philosophy were of great value and influence to me.
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I

It has often been remarked that “Ordinary Language Philosophy” is a rather poor label for the philosophical attitude expressed in the work of Austin and Wittgenstein. Perhaps the label isn’t so bad, but it is indeed potentially troublesome if not properly understood. In the first instance, it is quite vague—what here is meant by the term ordinary in “ordinary language”? One may insist that language is just too complicated for us to deem some of it “ordinary” and some of it not. We use our words in all sorts of ways, to do all sorts of things (analytic philosophy among them!).

Who’s to say what the ordinary use of a particular term is, and what puts these Oxford philosophers and their followers in any position of authority on the matter? Why shouldn’t we be able to use our words however we like? And if we do, isn’t that just their ordinary use, or at least part of it?

The fact that these sorts of knee-jerk responses so quickly come to mind shows something problematic about the word “ordinary” here, which itself is an ordinary word in the sense relevant to the ordinary language philosopher. (It is important to bear in mind that many of the words that will come up in this paper are ordinary words in this sense, including ‘word’, ‘concept,’ ‘utterance,’ ‘language,’ and so on.) What ordinary language philosophers emphasized about our words was, as Stanley Cavell suggests, not so much the ordinariness of various expressions, but the way such expressions are used by human beings in definite human situations; that they are said by human beings to human beings in a shared context.92 Here it may be helpful to think about how one might go about teaching a language to a child: There is more to it than just teaching them the meanings of certain words; part of learning a language is learning when, or in what sorts of circumstances particular expressions are relevant, or where they have no place; or where you should say this instead of that; or where saying this in such and such a situation will imply all sorts of other things, or when nothing needs to be said at all; etc. The relevance of this should be apparent if we take the ordinary language view that reflecting upon our practices, what words we apply in what sorts of shared human contexts, will be revelatory of the various phenomena that we as human beings find important, and so will be philosophically illuminating.

In Wittgensteinian terms, in order to understand a word (or concept) we need to look at the role that that word plays in our language-game—which is to say, we need to look at the grammar of the word. The notion of “grammar” is one of the most vital aspects of Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations and is very closely tied to the age old philosophical notion of essence (PI §371, §373). Coming to understand a concept is a matter of looking at the various ways in which that concept is employed or made manifest in our language-game. Grammar is that which we all share as language users—it is a part of our form of life—that allows for the very possibility of an investigation into the essence of our concepts.

The notion of grammar, like most notions in Wittgenstein, is best shown by means of examples, rather than definitions. Take the concept of knowledge, which will be of primary interest to us later in this paper. The grammar of “knowledge” (or “knowing” or “know”), and

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92 Cavell, 1979 p. 206
hence the essence of our concept of knowledge, is revealed when we reflect on how the word is used, and in what sorts of situations it is used. When would we say “I know that…”? What would be the significance of our saying “know” in these situations instead of something else (e.g., “believe”, “am certain”, etc.)? How do we ordinarily respond when someone says they know (that) such and such? What is expected of someone who says they know, and in what sorts of circumstances? What kinds of responsibilities go along with claiming to know something? In what situations would we say “I don’t know” or “I thought I knew” or “I should have known”? The answers to these sorts of questions reveal to us the grammar of knowledge—what it means for us to say we know something. Notice that there is nothing especially technical or definitional to be discovered about the nature of this concept, or any of our concepts for that matter. The point is that no conceptual analysis of knowledge outside the grammar of the word will better explain our concept, or explain it at all.

Another respect in which the label “Ordinary Language Philosophy” is potentially misleading is that it may wrongly imply what sorts of things ordinary language philosophers are concerned with. In particular, it is natural to expect that what goes on in ordinary language philosophy would rightly fall under the category of philosophy of language, and accordingly, that the sorts of questions and topics one might come across again and again in a survey of important works in the philosophy of language would be of relevance to ordinary language philosophers. This can be dangerous. Indeed, language and how we use our words is of the utmost concern to the ordinary language philosopher, but much of what is discussed within the area of philosophy of language nowadays was of little concern to them. Consequently, much of what has been written in the vein of contemporary philosophy of language (perhaps starting with Grice), which might be thought to undermine the writings of ordinary language philosophers, really does no such thing.

Ordinary language philosophy ought not to be seen as a systematic project aimed at producing some sort of theory of language or meaning. It should instead be seen more as a suggestion or a recommendation to the philosopher to step back for a moment and consider the words we use in our philosophizing afresh, in a way uncontaminated and uncorrupted by our philosophical preoccupations, by reflecting upon the ways in which we use those words—our words—in ordinary (human) contexts and circumstances. So to give another example, if we were thinking of something like belief, instead of taking for granted some established philosophical definition of belief, we should instead reflect upon the following sorts of considerations: When—in what sorts of circumstances—would we say of a person that he believes that such and such? When—in what sorts of circumstances—would we say of a person that he has acquired or given up his belief? When and why do we say, “I believe that such and such?” What would be the point or significance of saying that in this or that context? What do all these considerations tell us about our concept of belief or believing that—what it is for us to believe? What’s the difference, if any, between believing a person and believing a fact? Is this anything like what the philosopher is talking about when she says “S believes that p,” say, in some sort of analysis of knowledge? If a philosopher wants to say none of this is relevant to our concept of belief, the burden, I think, is on her to tell us why not.

As I hope will become increasingly clear, the ordinary language philosopher who asks these kinds of questions—like those suggested above about knowledge and belief—while she is reflecting upon the language, is not looking at any real semantic or syntactic properties of the words; rather, she is getting at (or trying to get at) the very concept of knowledge or belief as the case may be. She is doing epistemology, not semantics. Likewise, in “A Plea For Excuses” when Austin invites us to reflect upon the ordinary circumstances under which we might make excuses, or say
of someone that she acted voluntarily or involuntarily, or that she did such and such accidentally or by mistake, we are not, so it seems, being asked to do any sort of semantic analysis; rather, reflection upon this web of notions is meant to shed light upon the very nature of human freedom and action. But is this in any way an issue for philosophy of language? It seems quite plain that what we’re doing here is moral philosophy or philosophy of action, not philosophy of language. So it should be noted that in a vast majority of cases ordinary language philosophers are not doing philosophy of language but something different, something richer, something more substantial.

Some contemporary philosophers, known as Contextualists, have seen their project as something of a continuation of the work of Wittgenstein and Austin. Keith DeRose, for instance, suggests that the Contextualist argument itself is “an exercise in how to do ordinary language philosophy.” The fact that Contextualism is seen as such through both the eyes of its own proponents and those of its opponents has (perhaps) led some philosophers to suppose that the onslaught of papers attacking Contextualism may be seen further as a sort of refutation of the original ordinary language philosophers and their project. I shall argue that, in the first place, the Contextualist project, as it has been understood in much of the literature, is less akin to the true practice of ordinary language philosophy than its proponents may fancy it to be, and as such, criticisms of this position have even less to do with the real concerns of true ordinary language philosophers. Second, I shall argue that many of the misconceptions about ordinary language philosophy, and the concerns and the practice thereof, started with Grice, and the machinery his theory provided for philosophers. But before we get to that, I’ll say something about why many philosophers have seen problems with ordinary language philosophy.

II

The reaction to ordinary language philosophy came in various flavors, but a theme that could be seen throughout was the worry that the ordinary language approach is lacking in systematicity. The following quote from J. Fodor and J. J. Katz is typical of the reactionary attitude towards ordinary language philosophy:

[T]he approach known as ordinary-language philosophy has been rightly criticized by the positivists as lacking in systematicity and theoretical orientation. One must agree with the positivist’s charge against the ordinary-language philosopher that any account of a natural language which fails to provide a specification of its formal structure is ipso facto unsatisfactory. For it is upon this structure that the generative principles which determine the syntactic and semantic characteristics of a natural language depend . . . It is his failure to appreciate the significance of the systematic character of the compositional features of languages which accounts for the ordinary-language philosopher’s disregard of the study of sentences and sentential structure.

Fodor and Katz, then, are worried that ordinary language philosophy is guilty of providing us with a bad theory of natural language, one that ignores what is most fundamental to a theory of language, namely that it provides a formal and systematic account of “the rules which are internalized by speakers when they learn the language and applied in speaking and

93 “The Ordinary Language Basis for Contextualism,” p.172.
94 Of course, some Contextualists are doing something far more akin to ordinary language philosophy than others. Charles Travis is a good example.
95 J. Fodor and J. J. Katz, “What’s Wrong with the Philosophy of Language?” p.269. Note, they probably have Ryle in mind here when they speak of a disregard for the study of sentences and sentential structure.
understanding it.”

Worse still, in many respects it looks as though ordinary language philosophy is urging us in the other direction, emphasizing the informal and unsystematic character of natural languages. This is like nails on a chalkboard to most analytic philosophers. The article quoted above was written in the nineteen-seventies. But notice that this worry is paralleled in some contemporary criticisms of Contextualism as an offshoot of ordinary language philosophy:

In philosophy, the Twentieth Century began with the thought that the context-dependence and vagueness of natural language undermined the possibility of providing a systematic account of the meaning of natural language sentences. Philosophical reflection on language continued through its middle period with an even more explicit emphasis on the unsystematic character of language. But then Paul Grice showed how to explain some of the unruly effects of context on linguistic communication by appeal to general conversational principles. From the other direction, Richard Montague and his students showed that much of what appeared to be unsystematic was in fact explicable. Indeed, Montague and his coterie approached this task using the tools developed by the descendants of the very philosophers who had despaired of the possibility of providing a rigorous semantics for natural language. As syntax and semantics became increasingly sophisticated, vagueness and context-dependence became objects of formal study, rather than phenomena whose existence demonstrated the impossibility of such work. From the perspective of those fluent with the tools of Chomsky, Grice, and Montague, conclusions from premises about the unsystematic nature of natural language began to look a bit like a previous era's skepticism about the possibility of a systematic physical theory of the universe.

It is somewhat surprising, then, that philosophy of language in the Twentieth Century, and the beginning of the Twenty-First, has been dominated by a wealth of papers and books seeking to return us to the pessimistic conclusions of the past.

This passage is from the introduction to Jason Stanley’s 2005 review of Litereal Meaning by Francois Recanati (2004), a contemporary Contextualist. It seems to me that Stanley’s worries are a lot like those of Fodor and Katz. First of all, he is appalled by the idea that we might not be able to come up with a clear and elegant formal picture of natural language, even in the tricky sorts of cases that Contextualists like to point out. He even goes as far as to suggest that premises to the effect that we might not be able to map out an elegant system of this sort for natural languages are primitive (as in cave-man-like, not as in basic) much like past eras’ skepticism about the possibility of a systematized physical theory. But how did this happen? How did we get from Austin’s “A Plea for Excuses” or Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations to this? How did it come to be that criticism like this favors the disrepute or irrelevance of the sort of philosophy exemplified in Wittgenstein and Austin?

A good place to start looking for answers to these questions, I think, is with Grice. What Grice did in his “Logic and Conversation” lectures (1967) was deceptively responsive to the worries philosophers had about ordinary language philosophy; in particular, the worry that that conditions of sense, context and appropriateness gave natural language an unsystematic character.

Grice argued that for any utterance $u$ in any context $C$, there is, on the one hand, what $u$ strictly says, and then, on the other hand, there is what $u$ merely implies. The former belongs to the semantics of $u$, the latter to its pragmatics. He further suggests that ordinary communication is governed by certain conversational principles; this is meant to account for why uttering $u$ in $C$ may imply something beyond what $u$ strictly says. So for instance, to give a

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97 See also Stanley, “Semantics in Context”
98 Of course, this worry can be traced back at least to Frege. Perhaps not so much a worry as something analytic philosophers would be excited to find true.
famous example from Grice, if I were to say to you, “There’s a gas station around that corner”, I may communicate to you that the gas station in question is open; however, this latter point is in no way part of the semantic content of my utterance. If it turns out that the gas station is closed (and suppose I know this) then I will have implied something false, though I will not have said anything false. As long as there is a gas station around the corner, what I have said is true, whether or not it is open. Now we are meant to generalize this. For any utterance \( u \), then, there will be some ‘minimal proposition’ expressed by \( u \), what \( u \) strictly says, evaluable in terms of truth and falsity. There may in addition be certain other propositions implied by \( u \), which belong to the pragmatics of \( u \), which have nothing to do with the truth value of the semantic content of \( u \).

It is easy to see why philosophers troubled by the ordinary language approach were excited about this type of analysis. By adopting a Gricean picture, they were able to account for how certain words of traditional philosophical significance (know, believe, voluntary, understanding, etc.) can be meaningfully employed outside of the ordinary circumstances in which they are used. All of a sudden there was a sort of license for hand waving towards ordinary-language-type criticisms. For anything we say at any time and in any circumstance, there will be something expressed by our words assessable in terms of truth and falsity. Whether or not there would ever be any occasion to use those words in a particular situation or not—whether it would ever make sense to use those words in that situation—is of no bearing on the semantic theory; all that is relegated to the domain of pragmatics, and we can appeal to Gricean conversational principles to explain why uttering those words in this or that situation would be extremely odd or out of place. The semantic theory, or the grounding for it anyway, stays in tact. Now the analytic philosopher claims to have heard the worries of the ordinary language philosopher and responded to them. Back to business as usual.

For much of the rest of this paper I’m going to focus on knowledge and the philosophical relevance of this subject as it is understood in contemporary analytic philosophy. I will try to contrast this with what we might call an ordinary language approach to the same subject. Hopefully this will bring to light the various important respects in which these approaches differ, and show how the analytic philosopher might want to rethink how it is that he approaches the subject. I emphasize now, though, that this may only serve as a starting ground where more work needs to be done.

III

Consider, then, the following case. An analytic philosopher is interested in establishing the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. He begins by giving us certain cases to think about; the literature is filled with these: Joe is at the zoo where they keep the zebras . . .; DeRose and his wife are in front of the bank and need to make a deposit . . .; So and so is at a job interview with ten coins in his pocket . . .; You’re driving along the highway and unbeknownst to you, someone’s put up a whole bunch of barn façades . . .; and so on. Now we are asked to consult our intuitions—what are we inclined to say \(^{99}\) in each of these cases, that the protagonist knows the relevant proposition or that he does not?\(^{100}\) Does Joe know the animal before him is a

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\(^{99}\) And what should we say about this “being inclined to say” when asked “Does so and so know . . . ?”. Should this really matter at all to our theory if, were we to actually be in that situation, we would never actually say “So and so knows . . .”?\(^{100}\) The fact that the reader is consulting his own intuitions about what he (or we) would ordinarily say in such and such a case is supposed to be, in some way or other, sensitive to the concerns that the ordinary language philosophers brought to our attention.
zebra despite the fact that there are some painted mules circulating on the zoo circuit? Does DeRose know that the bank will be open on Saturday despite the fact that sometimes banks change their hours (and his wife reminds us of this)? Does the interviewee know that the person who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket despite his belief that that Jones will get the job and not him? Do you know that you’re looking at a real barn? What we are inclined to say in these cases, about whether the protagonist does or does not know, is now taken as data for the philosopher’s theory of knowledge. The data is supposed to be revelatory of our ordinary concept of knowledge.

Now imagine someone points out that these are far from ordinary cases, and furthermore, it is not at all obvious that in these situations or others we would ordinarily use the word ‘know’ or think of the situation in terms of knowing or not knowing. (We should remind ourselves here of what Cavell urges us to think about when we think of the ordinary use of a term: that it is used by humans in genuine human contexts.) But the analytic philosopher feels immune to this sort of objection given his Gricean machinery. It should no longer matter to us whether DeRose, for instance, would actually say (the words), “I know the bank will be open,” or whether the man in the hospital would ever, for no real reason, come out and say (the words), “I know there is a sick man in front of me.”¹⁰¹ That is an issue for pragmatics: saying those things in those situations may conversationally imply something the speaker does not mean to communicate (say, that there are such and such alternatives that need, for his purposes, to be ruled out). But that’s not what we’re asking. We’re interested in the knowledge claim. In the example, the protagonist says he knows; is what he says true or false? Set aside for now what his utterance may or may not imply or why he might have said it; there is something his utterance literally says, and it is the truth or falsity of this that we are concerned with when we ask whether or not he knows.

It is worth noting that at this stage of the argument, the Contextualist and the anti-Contextualist are still on the same page. There is no disagreement as to whether or not every utterance in any given circumstance expresses a proposition assessable in terms of truth and falsity. Their disagreement lies in the extent to which each camp understands the relevance of context in determining the semantic content of utterances. The Contextualist thinks that the proposition expressed by sentences of the sort “S knows that such and such” varies according to the context in which the sentence is uttered: what the utterance says is sensitive to the relevant interests and concerns of the person making the knowledge attribution (or asking whether or not so and so knows). So depending on our interests and concerns, DeRose may or may not know. “DeRose knows . . .” expresses different propositions in different contexts. Before we can answer the question of whether or not it is true that he knows we need to determine which proposition we are evaluating, and that is a matter of considering the context in which the question is being asked. (In this way, Contextualists are sometimes seen as breaking down some of the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics. Nevertheless they operate according to the assumption that every utterance does express a determinate proposition and as such is evaluable in terms of truth and falsity.¹⁰²) Anti-Contextualists, or “invariantists,” on the other hand, think that the propositions expressed by utterances of the sort “S knows that such and such” are the same across contexts. We don’t need to know anything about the context in which the knowledge attribution

¹⁰¹ See Wittgenstein, On Certainty § 10
¹⁰² Travis may be an exception to this: he would say that some utterances, where the context is underdetermined, don’t express determinate propositions at all, and so, are nonsense. But still, if the context is determinate, a determinate proposition would be expressed assessable in terms of truth and falsity.
is being made. “DeRose knows . . .” says the same thing in every context, and depending on what the theory’s standards for knowing are, the statement says something true or something false.

If this were where the ordinary language philosopher saw a problem with the analytic philosopher’s approach to understanding what knowing (or whatever other concept) amounts to, then there would be a relevant sense in which Contextualism, so conceived, is as DeRose sees it, “an exercise in how to do ordinary language philosophy.” And likewise, if this were the case, then there would be a relevant sense in which contemporary criticisms directed towards Contextualism could be brought to bear on the concerns of ordinary language philosophers. This, however, is not the case. It is precisely where the Contextualist and the anti-Contextualist are in agreement that the ordinary language philosopher feels they are on the wrong track. First of all, consider what the analytic philosopher, Contextualist or not, takes as data for our ordinary uses of “know.” He presents us with contrived examples and then ask us: In this case does the protagonist know . . .? This is meant to provide us with good bits of data for a theory of knowledge. How we are inclined to respond when asked, “Does so and so know . . .?” will yield instances of what many contemporary philosophers would call “our ordinary claims to know.”

One question we should remind ourselves of here is this: Are we talking about the verb ‘to know’ or are we talking about knowledge? All this talk of “the semantic content of utterances in which ‘know’ occurs” (and the like) often makes it unclear whether this is mere linguistic analysis or something more substantive. Earlier I suggested that it is knowledge with which the ordinary language philosopher is concerned. As Austin says in “A Plea for Excuses:”

When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or ‘meanings,’ whatever they may be) but also the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena. (p. 182)

Is this what’s going on in contemporary epistemology and other areas of analytic philosophy? Do the methods of analytic philosophy reveal to us the very nature of the phenomena we care about? Some philosophers talk primarily about the verb ‘to know’ and in this respect are not in any obvious way asserting anything more than semantics;103 but, clearly, many contemporary philosophers would like to think that they are talking about the reality beyond the word. Jason Stanley, for example, insists that by considering the sorts of fabricated examples we’ve been considering, and appealing to our “ordinary” intuitions about whether or not the protagonist in the example knows, we are doing more than talking about the semantics of ‘know;’ we are talking about the real metaphysical relation of knowing that obtains or does not between a subject and a proposition. I’m sure that many analytic philosophers, if pressed on this issue, would say more or less the same thing as Stanley here, some of them perhaps even citing Austin or Wittgenstein in their defense. Suppose then that we grant these philosophers that they’re not merely talking about the semantics of ‘know,’ but what knowledge, or our concept of knowledge, really consists in. Even then, their way of going about this looks hopeless. In the first instance, philosophers have been doing this type of analysis for decades, going back and forth with each other, citing examples, tweaking examples, coming up with counterexamples, and so forth, and no progress has been made. So as a plain empirical fact, this method does not seem to get us very far. But more importantly, I want to suggest that even if this method were to generate some sort of

103 E.g. John Hawthorne, in the first paragraph of his book Knowledge and Lotteries, talks of answering intriguing questions about the verb ‘to know’ and our “ordinary claims to know.”
analysis that all those in the debate (roughly) agreed upon\textsuperscript{104}, such an analysis would not tell us what knowledge—our concept of knowledge as it matters to us—really amounts to.

If we look at these matters in a way that is truly sympathetic with the Austinian sentiment expressed above, it becomes clear that whatever we may generate by the sorts of methods that the analytic philosopher employs will fail to be revelatory of what knowledge (or whatever else) is, what its genuine relevance is for us in our everyday lives. Our concepts manifest themselves in the way we use our words—in our practice—and are really nothing above and beyond the significance they have in these ordinary human situations. It is in the ordinary employment of our words that the sorts of distinctions and classifications that are relevant to us show themselves\textsuperscript{105}. This is where the philosopher who wishes to get clearer on these distinctions and classifications ought to begin if his project is going to be revelatory about its purported subject matter. As Austin puts it, “ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superceded. Only remember it is the first word.”\textsuperscript{106}

The analytic philosopher will no doubt hear this quote from Austin and say that it is precisely this—supplementing, improving upon, and superceding our ordinary concepts as they turn up in their natural contexts—that he is doing when he engages in his analysis. But this misses the most important part of Austin’s point here. The significance of our words as they occur in ordinary contexts—the relevant distinctions they mark and the purposes they serve in various circumstances—are all too often ignored in the sort of analyses that go on in traditional philosophy. Consequently, the products of these analyses fail to shed any real light upon what we were interested in to begin with.

Any theory of knowledge resulting from the methods employed by analytic philosophy as I have described them is bound to give us an account of knowing that is, on the one hand, too broad, and on the other hand, too narrow. It will be too broad in the sense that it will treat too many phenomena of a particular kind as relevant data in developing a theory of knowledge: for every subject and every proposition it will be either true or false that the subject knows that proposition. At the same time, it will be too narrow in the sense that it will ignore so much of what else we can do with ‘know;’ what other relevance it has for us in human contexts besides just stating a relation between a subject and a proposition. This is symptomatic of a way of understanding language that is prevalent in traditional philosophy. In analytic philosophy there is a strong and persuasive tendency to think of language as a sort of vehicle for applying concepts. Our concepts are thought to divide the world up in certain important and fundamental ways, the idea here being that we are, in a sense, always making judgments (or always disposed in some way or other to make judgments), sorting various things in the world into either the extension or anti-extension of various predicates we apply. Analytic philosophers often say they are in the business of clarifying our concepts. A big part of the reason why this project seems so important and engaging is because of this underlying way of thinking about what using language amounts to. If we think about the function of language in this way, it is natural to think of utterances as expressing propositions (or judgments or facts or what have you) which are always assessable in terms of truth and falsity.

I think here it is important to take a cue from Austin again. Austin reminds us that there is more to what we do with our words than make claims, or assertions, or judgments. There are

\textsuperscript{104} Perhaps this was the case at some point. Gettier seems to talk of the traditional analysis of knowledge as something pretty much everyone was, for a while anyway, in basic agreement over. Maybe.

\textsuperscript{105} Many of these distinctions will be of evolutionary relevance I’m sure, whether in the cultural or biological sense.

\textsuperscript{106} p. 185
things we do with our words which are not assessable in terms of truth and falsity, what he calls “preformative utterances.” Some speech acts are apt to succeed in ways other than being true, and apt to fail in ways other than being false. Making statements, or claims, or judgments, the sorts of things assessable in terms of truth and falsity, is indeed one thing we do with our words, but it is far from the only thing. Among the other things we can do with our words: give an order, console someone, warn someone, marry someone, make a promise, apologize, deny something, make a bet, accuse someone, sentence someone, etc. Performatives are judged not by standards of truth and falsity, but by other criteria: whether or not the speech act is felicitous or not, appropriate or not, in place or not. There isn’t a sharp distinction between assertoric statements on the one hand, and performatics on the other. There seem to be clear cases on either end, and some blurrier cases in the middle; so the difference is one of degree. At any rate, there is strong reason to suppose that at least some of these non-assertoric kinds of speech acts are sui generis.

There are appropriate and inappropriate contexts for their employment and this is not reducible to assessment of assertoric statements in terms of truth and falsity. (“Shut the door!”)

No doubt the analytic philosopher has heard all this before. Thanks to Grice he has a quick response. For any subject and predicate, he will say, either the predicate is true of the subject or it is not. Whether saying in a particular context that so and so is such and such is appropriate or inappropriate, felicitous or infelicitous, is just a matter for pragmatics. Furthermore, anything more that you are doing with your words, above and beyond making a statement, has nothing to do with the semantic content of your utterance, or whether what you say is truth-evaluable. Whatever you say in whatever context will express some determinate proposition (or fact) which is true or false depending on whether some particular metaphysical state obtains. (The context will matter more or less depending on whether or not the philosopher we’re talking about is a Contextualist.) This is the power of the Gricean machinery. “I know there is a sick man in front of me:” this is true or false irrespective of whether there is any point in your saying it or not. Consoling someone: “I know, baby, I know…” this expresses a proposition—a knowledge claim!—that is true or false. Reassuring someone: “Remember to turn off the stove, “I know”—again, on the semantic level, no different from the ‘know’ of “I know the cat is on the mat” (but of course there would have to be some very peculiar circumstance in place for us to say this as well).

But now it is important to remind ourselves of what we’re doing here; why we are constructing a theory of knowledge in the first place. Knowledge is something that matters to us as human beings. The relevance of our concept of knowing is revealed to us in the grammar of ‘know,’ the way we use the word in ordinary shared human contexts. Consequently, if, as analytic philosophers are prone to do, we take as data for our theory of knowledge cases in which it would not make sense, or there would be no point to say of someone that she does or doesn’t know, because supposedly it just is or isn’t the case that she knows, we will not be developing a theory of our concept of knowledge—knowledge as it matters to us. We will instead have developed a theory of knowledge in a special sense, a simulacrum107. (We do something with our word ‘know’ in various real circumstances other than just make knowledge claims. Is there something less genuine about these kinds of cases? When I console someone in tears—“I know, baby, I know”—am I making a knowledge claim? If not literally, am I speaking ironically or

107 Compare this to what Cavell says in footnote 19 of “Must We Mean What We Say” about ‘voluntary:’ “Of course you can say (the words) ‘When I ask whether an action is voluntary I do not imply that I think something is special about the action.’ You can say this, but then you may have difficulty showing the relevance of this ‘voluntary’ to what people are worrying about when they ask whether a person’s action was voluntary or not.”
jokingly or metaphorically as some philosophers have suggested\textsuperscript{108}? And if any of these possibilities are to be entertained, am I just saying something false? What would it mean for my words to be true or false in this sort of case? Should it not matter more that I am sincere than that I speak truly? Should it not be important that in this sort of situation, you and I share a context, yet I can do something different with “I know” than I can with “You know”? namely, I can console you? Is know just some metaphysical relation that I attribute in one case to myself and in another case to you? In this case, where we share a context, what is the common relation that ‘know’ is meant to express? There’s obviously a lot to think about here.)

What I hope to have shown this far is as follows. (1) Ordinary language philosophers are interested in phenomena or realities, not merely words. They believe that looking at the way our concepts manifest themselves in the grammar of our words, the way we do things with our words in ordinary shared human contexts, is the only way to get at the essences of these realities. Consequently, any reactionary attitude towards the ordinary language approach, which operates only on the level of a semantic theory, concerned with linguistic entities only and not the realities they are meant to express, will not be, in any real sense, responsive to ordinary language philosophy at all. (2) If, on the other hand, a contemporary theory purports to be talking about real phenomena, and not merely words, it may or may not be appropriately responsive. But in most if not all cases, the method applied in producing these theories is (a) not sensitive to the ordinary use of our words in the sense of ‘ordinary’ that the ordinary language philosopher cares about (though most of these theories claim to be); and (b) as a result of this, philosophers employing such a method—constructing cases and asking us what we’re inclined to say—run the risk of producing a theory which, despite what the philosopher might insist, is not revelatory of our ordinary concept.

On a final note, I do not expect this to be taken as a refutation of any analytic philosophical thesis or any analytic philosophical method. It will be hard (if not impossible) to convince the analytic philosopher that he won’t do just fine answering all these worries by shoving them off into the domain of pragmatics, keeping his semantic and metaphysical theories in tact. But I hope to have made a compelling point, one worth considering, that if we do that, we should not expect our resulting theory to tell us anything about our practice. A theory may be of philosophical interest for some reason or other, but it will not be a theory about our “ordinary claims to know” or “the ordinary use of know” (or whatever other concept) as many prominent theories purport to be. But now it is worth asking, if a theory doesn’t tell us anything about our practice, is it clear at all why the theory should be of importance to us?

\textbf{Works Cited}

Cavell, S. (1969) “Must We Mean What We Say”, Cambridge UP.
J. Fodor, “On Knowing What We Would Say”

\textsuperscript{108} Timothy Williamson, I think, for one.