

Chapter I

Contextualizing Meaning

I. I. The Indeterminacy of Meaning: “Unnatural Doubts” and “Theoretical Diagnosis”

IN *UNNATURAL DOUBTS* Michael Williams argues that skeptical problems won't be resolved until they receive the proper diagnostic treatment. According to Williams, traditional skeptical doubts concerning the external world are fool-proof traps that don't admit a direct solution; but they won't be resolved by any kind of philosophical diagnosis either. Williams argues against the kind of diagnostic treatment that tries to show that skepticism is self-undermining in such a way that, when examined in its own terms, it falls into incoherence. This kind of diagnosis—quite popular in the twentieth century among Wittgensteinians—is what Williams terms “therapeutic diagnosis.” Its aim is to unmask skeptical doubts as unintelligible, as producing only the *appearance* of intelligibility. Williams proposes a very different kind of diagnostic treatment, one that tries to make sense of skeptical claims and questions by placing them in a broader theoretical context. This alternative diagnostic treatment is what Williams terms “theoretical diagnosis.” Its central strategy is to challenge the *naturalness* of the skeptic's doubts and to shift the burden of proof to the skeptic's shoulders, “not necessarily to shift it entirely [. . .] but, at least initially, to get him to acknowledge his share” (p. 41). The theoretical diagnostician proceeds by making explicit the theoretical assumptions and claims that the skeptic relies on, thus showing that “the skeptic is less of a plain man than he likes to appear” (p. 39). The theoretical diagnostician tries to show that the starting point of the skeptic is not uncontroversial, that it is more

than an unproblematic intuition we all share or a set of “platitudes we would all accept.” At the very least the skeptic has to acknowledge that his starting point is the theoretical reconstruction of our epistemic intuitions or of the tacit presuppositions of our epistemic practices. As Williams puts it, even if we grant that the skeptic exploits only the demands of our ordinary epistemic concepts, “we have not conceded that it is obvious what the demands of these concepts are” (p. 34). The goal of theoretical diagnosis is to show that the skeptic is committed to a theory: “a theory of our ordinary concept of knowledge,” “a theory of the systematic demands on knowledge that ordinary practice implicitly imposes” (p. 34).

But what is accomplished by theoretical diagnosis? This kind of diagnosis does not aim at a definitive refutation of skepticism. Its goal is far more modest, namely, to show that skeptical claims and conclusions are *not inescapable*, that there is room for an alternative theoretical reconstruction of ordinary epistemic concepts and the epistemic presuppositions of ordinary practice. Starting from ordinary concepts and practices as we must, “we are under no compulsion to add what the skeptic adds” (p. 40). Far from stemming directly and inescapably from our ordinary concepts and practices, skeptical doubts require quite a bit of theoretical work to arise. And in this way their alleged naturalness is challenged: if not unnatural, they are at least less than natural; there may be a more natural way of thinking about our concepts and practices. The theoretical diagnostician can even concede that skeptical problems cannot be solved in their own terms while stepping out of the skeptic’s game; and this without becoming a skeptic and without acknowledging any truth in the conclusion of the skeptic. As Williams puts it: “There is no danger in conceding that the skeptic cannot be refuted on his own terms if those terms are not ones we are bound to accept” (p. 41).

My discussion in this chapter will be restricted to only one brand of skepticism, namely, *semantic* skepticism. I will concern myself exclusively with skeptical worries concerning whether we know what our words mean, whether our meanings are determinate enough to support genuine communication; and I will leave aside skeptical worries about the external world or about other minds. In the next section I will argue that Wittgenstein’s discussions of skeptical problems concerning meaning amount to a *theoretical diagnosis of semantic skepticism* (or at least a sketch of such a diagnosis). I will then identify the similarities between Wittgenstein’s diagnosis and Dewey’s critique of traditional views of meaning; and I will use these similarities to explain the convergence of their positive views, showing how an alternative picture of meaning emerges from the theoretical diagnosis of indeterminacy problems. According to this theoretical diagnosis, the crucial move in semantic skepticism—“the conjuring trick”—is the demand for a (certain type of) theory to fix meaning, which is claimed to be grounded in our communicative practices. What the theoretical

diagnosis tries to show is that the demand for a theory that fixes meaning is not immanent in our ordinary linguistic practices, but it is rather a *philosophical* demand imposed on these practices by a particular theoretical conception of their structure or presuppositions. The theoretical diagnosis is completed with the articulation of an alternative conception of meaning which renders the theoretical demands that give rise to semantic skepticism unnecessary—a superfluous and ultimately distorting add-on. It will be my contention that there is a strong convergence between Wittgenstein's diagnosis of semantic skepticism and Dewey's critique of traditional theories of meaning, and that these critical perspectives are intimately related to a strikingly similar picture of meaning that is at the core of their philosophies. This convergence, I will argue, leads to a minimal philosophy of language that conceptualizes meaning without philosophical additives and strong theoretical demands—a pragmatic conceptualization of meaning that departs from the received semantic views in the philosophical tradition.

Let me begin by identifying clearly what both Wittgenstein and Dewey are reacting against in their critique of traditional theories of meaning. The central theoretical assumption that gives rise to the problem of the indeterminacy of meaning is a well-entrenched assumption that is shared by most (if not all) traditional theories of meaning, namely, the assumption that meaning is *a thing* (whether physical or mental), something *determinate* and *fixed*. We can derive two requirements from this basic assumption: the *Determinacy Requirement* and the *Immutability or Fixity Requirement*. The requirement that meanings be determinate or sharply defined¹ is the requirement that we be able to determine for anything whatever (for any object or idea) whether or not it is part of the meaning of a term. The Immutability Requirement is the requirement that meanings be fixed, that they remain the same over time and across speakers. The basic rationale for these requirements is that without fixity and determinacy communication would be impossible. If meanings were recalcitrantly vague and constantly fluctuating, if they were radically indeterminate and unstable, we could not understand each other, we could never be quite sure whether we mean the same things by our words as others do, or whether each of us means the same things by her words now as she did in the past or as she will in the future. In other words, the received view of meaning suggests that if the requirements of determinacy and fixity were not met, there would be no guarantee for successful communication, for what meanings (if any) are attached to our words would be always up for grabs. The violation of these semantic requirements is precisely what is behind the skeptical challenges that fall under the heading of *the indeterminacy of meaning*.² These challenges suggest a disturbing possibility: it is very possible that the semantic determinacy and fixity prefigured by the normative presuppositions of our linguistic practices might be nowhere to be found in these practices.

It is important to note that the Determinacy and Fixity Requirements don't purport to be in any way *factual* or *descriptive* of actual linguistic practices. They are *normative* conditions for communication that may or may not obtain. They can even be conceived as *ideal* conditions that our actual practices can only approximate (conditions that would only obtain for a perfect language, conditions that would be descriptive only of an ideal speech situation). So the claim of the received view is not that the meanings that we find in our communicative practices actually meet these requirements, but that they *should*; not that our meanings are in fact fully stable and determinate, but that they *should* be. The claim is that the demands of communication expressed by the Determinacy and Fixity Requirements set the standards that we have to live up to; that these are the normative standards of communication even if they are only partially met in our less than perfect practices where communication is typically defective (even when successful). More radically yet, the claim is that these are the standards *even if they are never met at all!* Exploiting the demands that are (alleged to be) implicit in our communicative practices the skeptic develops indeterminacy arguments that shake our most basic confidence in everyday communication and uproot our taken-for-granted certainties concerning meaning. The skeptical conclusions that these arguments try to establish is that, for all we know, the semantic requirements of determinacy and fixity, the very conditions of possibility of communication, are never met at all (not even approximately or partially); for all we know, there are only communication failures and no successes in our communicative attempts; for all we know, we do not *really* communicate at all, and our linguistic practices only produce the *illusion* of shared meanings, the *appearance* of mutual intelligibility and understanding.

Are these skeptical doubts about meaning *natural*? The meaning skeptic claims that they are because they are generated simply by drawing the implications of the normative standards implicit in our communicative practices. Although the doubts of the meaning skeptic may seem quite counterintuitive, they are alleged to be doubts that arise naturally because they are rooted in a commonsensical view of meaning and communication. But are the doubts of the meaning skeptic really based on nothing else than on platitudes that we must all accept? Are the semantic assumptions of the skeptic really platitudes? Are they really inescapable? The central target for a theoretical diagnosis of meaning skepticism is the claim that indeterminacy challenges derive from our ordinary concept of meaning, from the standards involved in our ordinary practices of communication. The *naturalness* that the meaning skeptic claims for his doubts can only be substantiated if the normative standards of communication on which he relies are shown to be in fact the standards we unavoidably commit ourselves to in our ordinary linguistic practices. Let's consider one example of how the skeptical problem of the indeterminacy of meaning is alleged to arise naturally from our ordinary semantic intuitions.

According to the skeptic, in clear cases of successful communication (if we could find any), in cases where our words have well-defined semantic contents (if we could find any), our meanings would be fully *determinate* and *fixed*. Given that mathematics has traditionally been considered a paradigm of semantic determinacy and fixity, it is not surprising that skeptics typically use this semantic domain to shake the foundations of our semantic certainties. With its clearly defined concepts and its fully articulated system of rules, mathematics seems better equipped than any other domain to offer paradigmatic cases of determinate and fixed meanings. So, if the skeptic succeeds in showing that not even here is it possible to establish that the most basic semantic requirements are met, then it should not be difficult to generalize his skeptical conclusions and transfer them to other domains. Thus, for instance, in his interpretation of Wittgenstein, Kripke (1982) develops indeterminacy arguments concerning the meaning of the word “plus” and the symbol “+” (pp. 7ff). Here, he contends, we seem to have a clearly fixed and fully determinate meaning, namely, the mathematical function of addition, which can be captured in a rule that determines the correct application of “plus” and “+” in every instance. According to Kripke, we ordinarily rely on our grasp of this rule in our computations in everyday practices. Relying on my grasp of the rule for addition I can claim that in a “metalinguistic sense” I am certain that “‘plus,’ as I intended to use the word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers I called ‘68’ and ‘57,’ yields the value 125” (p. 8). But the skeptic challenges this metalinguistic certainty and questions whether there is any way at all in which we can justify the claim that the correctness of “ $68 + 57 = 125$ ” is uniquely determined by our grasp of the meaning of the terms involved. Kripke introduces the following skeptical possibility: perhaps “+” does not mean addition or the plus function, but *quaddition* or the *quus* function. He defines the latter as follows: the numerical value of the quaddition of two numbers is the same as that of the addition of these numbers when they are smaller than 57, and 5 otherwise. This is the challenge that this skeptical possibility raises: “The sceptic claims (or feigns to claim) that I am now misinterpreting my own previous usage. By ‘plus,’ he says, I always meant quus; now under the influence of some insane frenzy, or a bout of LSD, I have come to misinterpret my own previous usage. Ridiculous and fantastic though it is, the sceptic’s hypothesis is not logically impossible” (p. 9).

The burden that this skeptical possibility imposes on us is to *isolate* a fact that can uniquely determine the meaning of “+” so that we can settle whether the correct solution to “ $68 + 57$ ” is 125 or 5, for “if [the skeptical hypothesis] is false, there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it” (p. 9). The meaning skeptic argues that this is a burden that cannot be met, for, as it turns out, we are unable to isolate facts that can endow our words with fixed and definite meanings, that is, facts that can ground our normative

assessments and allow us to deem every application of a term either correct or incorrect. The skeptic's gamble is that in the search for meaning-determining facts we will come out empty-handed, that any candidate fact will fall short of the demands derived from the normative presuppositions of our practices. Thus Kripke goes on to argue that appeals to intuitions, dispositions, and the like, will not do because, for any intuition, disposition, etc. for adding there is a corresponding, indistinguishable intuition, disposition, etc. for quadding; and, therefore, all these facts about the speaker and her linguistic usage fail as candidates for the fact that determines the meaning of her words and the correctness of her claims.

From the standpoint of a theoretical diagnosis, the most contentious point in Kripke's indeterminacy argument occurs at the very beginning, in setting the stage, when Kripke appeals to our assumptions concerning the meaning of the word "plus" and the symbol "+." In this vein, Gary Ebbs (1997) has argued that "Kripke plays the role of a *dialectical skeptic* [who] begins with our firmly entrenched judgments about some topic, and draws a skeptical conclusion from his analysis of those judgments" (p. 11). As Ebbs points out, in order to succeed the dialectical skeptic "must convince us that prior to encountering his arguments we were already committed to the requirements that lead to his skeptical conclusion" (p. 11). Therefore, it all hinges on the starting point of the skeptical argument: how persuasive the conclusions of the dialectical skeptic are depends on how persuasive is his interpretation of our commonsensical assumptions. As Ebbs observes, "the most important ingredient in Kripke's dialectical strategy is his interpretation of our ordinary understanding of meaning" (p. 11).

The premise of Kripke's skeptical argument is the postulation of well-defined semantic rules as the basis of meaning. Kripke's initial assumption is the idea that the meaning of our claims and the outcome of our normative assessments are determined by semantic rules that speakers grasp and follow. He takes it to be part of our ordinary understanding of communication that it is *because* we grasp and follow rules that our words have meaning, that we can agree or disagree, and that we can make assertions and assess their validity. And since his skeptical argument shows that we can't grasp or follow rules in a way that determines the meaning of our claims and the outcome of our normative assessments, Kripke concludes that our words are meaningless and our communicative exchanges, our agreements and disagreements, our assertions and their evaluation, groundless. As Ebbs remarks, "Kripke's skeptical conclusion is an inevitable consequence of his tempting interpretation of our naïve first thoughts about meaning and assertion" (p. 10). In a book-long theoretical diagnosis quite congenial with the one I develop in this chapter, Ebbs argues that "Kripke's picture of meaning leads us unknowingly to accept an objectifying perspective that obscures our understanding of meaning and assertion" (p. 11).

It is this objectifying perspective which requires that we be able to isolate those elusive meaning-*determining* facts. The core of this objectifying or reifying perspective is the assumption that meaning is a definite *thing*, fixed and determinate, and the semantic requirements that derive from these assumptions. The discussion that follows tries to challenge this perspective through a theoretical diagnosis of semantic skepticism derived from Wittgenstein.

I will not develop my discussion of the indeterminacy problem as an examination of Kripke's skeptical arguments concerning meaning and rule following, either in their own right or as an interpretation of Wittgenstein's arguments. Many critics have done this quite adequately already.³ My discussion will have a broader focus than the skeptical doubts of a Kripkean variety. My goal is to articulate an interpretation of Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments as a theoretical diagnosis of meaning skepticism. My interpretation tries to show that Wittgenstein's discussions of indeterminacy diagnose semantic skeptical challenges as arising from a distorted and distorting picture of our communicative practices (i.e., from a misconception about our ordinary concept of meaning and the semantic assumptions implicit in our linguistic practices). It may seem surprising that I want to interpret Wittgenstein as offering a theoretical rather than a *therapeutic* diagnosis of skepticism, since he has been considered by most commentators as the therapeutic diagnostician par excellence. Williams, for one, has argued that Wittgenstein's strategy to deal with the skeptic is not to dig out the theoretical presuppositions of the skeptical hypotheses, but to show that they fall into incoherence and unintelligibility, being thus committed to a definitive refutation of skepticism. It is important to note, though, that Williams's interpretation refers to Wittgenstein's discussion of skepticism about the external world in *On Certainty*. Similar therapeutic interpretations have been offered to account for Wittgenstein's treatment of the skeptical problem of other minds.⁴ However, for the purposes of this book, I am interested only in Wittgenstein's diagnosis of *semantic* skepticism and it is this diagnosis that I will interpret as theoretical, putting aside his diagnostic treatment of other kinds of skepticism.⁵

1.2. Wittgenstein as a Theoretical Diagnostician: Overcoming the Temptations of Reification and Decontextualization

It is important to observe that the reifying perspective that conceives of meaning as a (fixed and determinate) thing can have many different faces, leading to many different kinds of reification. Perhaps the most natural form of reification is to think of meaning as a *thing out there* in an *objective* realm, whether this is the physical domain of natural entities or the notional domain of ideal entities. This form of semantic reification is at the heart of both naturalism and Platonism, which—though radically opposed metaphysical views—are nonetheless

different versions of the same semantic view: a semantic *objectivism* that locates meanings in a *mind-independent* realm. On the other hand, meanings can also be reified in a rather different way by projecting semantic shadows inward instead of outward. This perhaps more subtle but equally problematic form of semantic reification consists in conceptualizing meaning as a *thing in here*, in a *subjective* realm, that is, as a mental entity of some kind: a disposition, an idea, an image, a schema, a rule formulation or interpretation, or the like. This subjectivist reification is shared by a wide variety of perspectives from nativism and intuitionism to associationism and dispositionalism. All these views can be considered as different versions of semantic *subjectivism*; what they all have in common is the idea that meanings reside in a *mind-dependent* realm. In my discussion of objectivist and subjectivist reifications below, I will try to identify, following Wittgenstein, the common assumptions on which both objectivist and subjectivist views of meaning rely.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein identifies many different ways in which meaning can be conceived as a thing. In his critical discussions of semantic reifications he tries to show that, in all the different forms it can take, the reifying perspective has as its natural companion the problem of semantic indeterminacy: objectivist and subjectivist views of meaning face similar skeptical challenges concerning the fixity and determinacy of semantic content. Moreover, there is one particular argumentative form that the indeterminacy problem takes for all of these views, namely, *the Regress Argument*. On my reading, the Regress Argument shows that the reifying perspective on meaning fails according to its own standards, for any form of objective or subjective reification fails to satisfy the basic semantic requirements it presupposes. This failure would be inescapable if the reifying perspective were the only game in town; that is, the skeptical conclusions about meaning that derive from the Regress Argument would be unavoidable truths about semantic content if meanings could not be thought of in terms other than those that prompt indeterminacy arguments such as the Regress. The antiskeptical move here cannot be simply to insist that meaning ought to be conceived in some other terms, for in this sense "ought" does not imply "can." In order to use the Regress Argument (or any other indeterminacy argument for that matter) as part of a theoretical diagnosis of semantic skepticism rather than as the basis of a tacit agreement with the skeptic, we are required, at the very least, to sketch an alternative semantic perspective, to articulate a different conceptualization of meaning. The task of theoretical diagnosis is, therefore, twofold: first, to identify the theoretical presuppositions of the reifying perspective that invites the indeterminacy problem; and second, to suggest an alternative perspective that doesn't rely on those presuppositions. Only in this way can the reifying perspective and its skeptical implications be shown to be, at best, optional and avoidable. In what follows I try to elucidate how the Regress Argument, as developed in

Wittgenstein's discussions of meaning and rule following, can help us identify the presuppositions of objectivist and subjectivist reifications and thus contribute to a theoretical diagnosis of semantic skepticism.

Wittgenstein's first critical discussion of semantic objectivism can be found in the opening sections of the *Investigations*. What he terms "the Augustinian picture of language" is an objectivist, denotational approach according to which meanings are things out there that can be pointed at. This objectivist reification is the target of Wittgenstein's critique of ostensive definition. He begins this critique by emphasizing that an ostensive definition is always ambiguous, for ostensive definitions are used to introduce very different kinds of words: "one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on" (1958a [PI] §28). So, for example, if pointing with one hand to something I am holding with my other hand I say "apple," how can someone who doesn't already know the meaning of the word, determine whether "apple" means the kind of fruit I'm holding, its color, its material, its number, or whatever? Far from fixing meaning, Wittgenstein claims, "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case" (PI §28).

There are two possible responses that can be given at this point. But far from solving the indeterminacy problem, these responses call for further elaborations that make the indeterminacy argument sharper and more lethal: these elaborations can be found in Wittgenstein's Regress Argument and Quine's Argument for the Indeterminacy of Translation. One response is to suggest that the indeterminacy of an ostensive definition can be dispelled by disambiguating the ostension with a *sortal*, that is, with a classificatory term that specifies what *sort* of thing the word defined is supposed to name, saying for instance "This *colour* is called so-and-so" (PI §29). But Wittgenstein replies that sortals can also be variously interpreted according to different classificatory systems; and since they are not self-explanatory, "they just need defining [. . .] by means of other words!" (PI §29). But in order to guarantee the univocity of these further words, more defining is needed. So we are thus led to a regress. "And what about the last definition in the chain?" Wittgenstein asks (PI §29). We can always interpret the terms used in the last definition in different ways. So the upshot of the Regress Argument is that meaning cannot be fixed by an ostensive definition, for no matter how much is added to the definans, the definiendum remains indeterminate.⁶

But there is another possible response to the indeterminacy of ostension. The defender of ostensive definition can reply that the trick is not to take the defining to different levels of abstractions (as sortals do), but to different situations in order to diversify the evidential basis that can facilitate the correct understanding of the definition through an induction. The idea here is that repeated ostensive definitions of the same term, say "apple," can progressively

enable us to rule out competing interpretative hypotheses until we are left with the correct one. We can address this response by supplementing Wittgenstein's discussion with Quine's Argument for the Indeterminacy of Translation.⁷ This indeterminacy argument shows that the correct interpretation of an ostensive definition cannot be uniquely established on inductive grounds because we can always concoct alternative interpretative hypotheses that fit the available evidence equally well. As with Quine's "gavagai," we can always wonder whether "apple" refers to apples, or perhaps to undetached apple parts or to the time slices of an apple. One way in which interpretative alternatives can be produced is by projecting past usage into the future in an unexpected way. These alternative interpretative hypotheses that exploit the temporal dimension of language use typically have the disjunctive form "so-and-so up to this point in time and so-and-so thereafter," and try to drive home the point that future use is underdetermined by past use.⁸

Wittgenstein's Regress and Quine's Indeterminacy of Translation are very different indeterminacy arguments,⁹ but they have at least this much in common: they both try to establish that the meanings of words do not simply attach themselves to self-identifying objects out there, that the world around us does not divide itself into kinds, that there is always room for alternative conceptualizations. These indeterminacy arguments teach us that *if* meaning is an object out there (as some referentialist views contend), it remains forever elusive which object in particular it is, for there are always skeptical hypotheses that can reinterpret our ostensive definitions in new ways. The indeterminacy that afflicts objective reifications casts doubt on the identification of meaning with a thing in the world, that is, on the idea that the world has self-indicating powers, that it contains self-identifying objects.¹⁰ Meanings are not simply out there waiting to be pointed at. They are not *pure* objects, *mind-independent* objects unaffected by our conceptualizations and our ways of dealing with the world. Even in its extensional sense, word meaning seems to be deeply mind dependent: it seems to require the mediation of our ways of looking at the world and our practices. How else are we going to identify language-world correlations? At this point there is the temptation to take the reifying perspective in a different direction by appealing to *mental reference*. Mental reference is what I have called "subjective reification," which takes place when the denotational approach turns inward and claims that meanings are not things out there, but things in here, mental things. But subjective reifications are open to the same indeterminacy problems as objective reifications, for nothing is intrinsically self-interpreting, neither mind nor the world. Neither the objective world nor the subjective world have special powers of indication: neither the things out there nor the things in here can interpret themselves.

Wittgenstein's critique of subjective reification is developed in his discussions of meaning and rule following. In these discussions the Regress Argument

is used to establish that there are no privileged mental representations (such as pictures, schemas, rule formulations, or interpretations) which, *by themselves*, can univocally determine the meaning of a word and its correct use. Mental representations can always be interpreted and applied in different ways; and, therefore, we are led from one representation to another indefinitely when we attempt to fix the correct use of a word or the correct application of a rule by means of mental representations. This Regress Argument is first developed by Wittgenstein in the discussion of the meaning and correct use of the word “cube” (PI §§139–42). He argues that the correct use of the word “cube” cannot be fixed by a mental representation of the object designated by this word, for instance, by a picture or drawing of a cube. For, even if we suppose that this picture “comes before our mind” every time we use the word, it is still up for grabs what accords with this representation and what doesn’t: “In what sense can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word ‘cube?’” (PI §139). One may think that if you apply the word to a triangular prism, “then this use of the word does not fit the picture” (§139). But this is a mistake, for whether it fits or not depends on how the picture is to be interpreted and projected onto the prism, and “it is quite easy to imagine a *method of projection* according to which the picture does fit after all” (§139). So Wittgenstein concludes that although the picture of a cube can “indeed *suggest* a certain use” of the word, it is always “possible for me to use it differently” (§139).

Similar argumentative moves and similar conclusions can be found in the discussion of the continuation of a numerical series according to the rule “+ 2” (esp. §§186–98). In this part of the rule-following discussion Wittgenstein calls into question the idea that the *meaning* of a rule determines what we do with it, as if the entire range of applications of the rule were somehow contained in its meaning. Thus he accuses the interlocutor of being “inclined to use such expressions as: ‘The steps are *really* already taken, even before I take them in writing or orally or in thought.’ And it seemed as if they were in some *unique* way predetermined, anticipated—as only the act of meaning can anticipate reality” (§188). But what is this meaning with such magical powers? What does the meaning of a rule consist in? One natural suggestion is to say that the meaning of a rule is to be found not simply in its formulation (such as the algebraic formula “+2”), but in an *interpretation* that reads the rule formulation in a particular way. It may appear that if we fix the interpretation of the rule, we thereby fix its meaning and hence its applications. We may think that how the formation rule “+ 2” is to be applied to the series of natural numbers can be fixed by giving the following interpretation: “Write the next but one number after *every* number”; and we may think that all the numbers in the series follow from this sentence. To this suggestion Wittgenstein responds: “But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from that sentence. Or, again, what, at any stage we are to call ‘being in accord’ with that

sentence (and with the *mean*-ing you then put into that sentence—whatever that may have consisted in)” (§186). The interpretation of the rule does not really get us any further, for it can in turn be understood in different ways. It is in fact just another formulation of the rule, like the algebraic formula, and it can also be variously interpreted. Interpretations are themselves open to interpretation. No interpretation interprets itself. So Wittgenstein concludes at §198 that “any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.”

It is important to note that in this negative conclusion that Wittgenstein draws from the Regress Argument the emphasis should be put on “determine.” The point is not that interpretations are always useless, but that they cannot accomplish the function assigned to them by certain philosophical theories of meaning: the function of definitely determining semantic content once and for all. This was also the conclusion of the Regress Argument used in the critique of ostensive definition: Wittgenstein did not deny that ostensive definitions can have a role to play in language learning (in fact, he acknowledges this at PI §§30–31); his point was, rather, that it is mistaken to think of ostensive definitions as semantic foundations, to conceive of bare pointings as fixing the meanings of words once and for all unambiguously. The Regress Argument, therefore, offers an incisive critique of the philosophical search for *definite fixers and determiners of meaning*, trying to show that this search is misguided and we will come out of it empty-handed. For all the candidates found in this search for semantic foundations, the Regress Argument can be used to reach the same conclusion; namely, that the alleged semantic fixers and determiners by themselves do not fix and determine meaning. Wittgenstein has nothing against ostensive definitions or against interpretations per se (as he has nothing against mental images, schemas, rule formulations, etc.). All these things have a role to play in our communicative practices. The problem, the indeterminacy problem, arises when these ordinary ingredients of our communicative practices are elevated to the status of an *isolable foundation*, the be all and end all of meaning.

The upshot of Wittgenstein’s Regress Argument in all its formulations is that indeterminacy arises because in all these cases meaning is assumed to be an isolable thing, whether in an objective or in a subjective realm. Wittgenstein’s different formulations of the argument show that the medium in which the reification of meaning takes place is quite inconsequential. What matters is that meanings are isolated or detached from specific contexts of use, and they are thought of as having definite and fixed boundaries (i.e., as having “rigid limits” or being “everywhere circumscribed by rules,” PI §68; see also §§71, 76, 79, 99). Thus Wittgenstein’s diagnosis identifies as the source of the indeterminacy problem the theoretical assumption that there must be *isolable semantic*

foundations, that is, fixers and determiners of meaning which constitute the isolable facts that can satisfy the Determinacy and Fixity Requirements. These are the semantic facts that Kripke was looking for and could not find. What Wittgenstein's theoretical diagnosis shows is that this search is misguided, that it starts from a theoretical assumption that constitutes a significant departure from our ordinary understanding of meaning and communication. My interpretation of Wittgenstein's arguments thus strongly disagrees with Kripke's skeptical reading. While Kripke's Wittgenstein thinks that it is reasonable and natural to look for the fixers and determiners of meaning that make communication possible (although they are nowhere to be found), what Wittgenstein's arguments actually show (I contend) is that these sought fixers and determiners of meaning are mere theoretical constructs—philosophical fictions—that play no role in our actual communicative practices or language games. While Kripke's Wittgenstein thinks that the normative presuppositions of any linguistic act lead to semantic skepticism, that the very act of using a term commits us to the requirement that there be semantic facts that unambiguously fix and determine the meaning of the term in all contexts, what Wittgenstein's diagnosis actually shows is that this requirement, far from being an unavoidable normative presupposition, is in fact an unnatural theoretical demand imposed from outside on our practices, a demand that is only motivated by and grounded in a distorting philosophical picture of language.

The crucial philosophical move in this theoretical departure from the ordinary use and understanding of our semantic notions, from the common-sense view of meaning and communication, is *decontextualization*. The theoretical assumption that there must be isolable semantic foundations forces us to abstract from particular contexts of use in a vain attempt to distil the semantic essence of our words from those contexts. This assumption and the decontextualizing or reifying perspective it gives rise to require that we be able to isolate something or other that gives complete determinacy to our meanings and sustain it over time, that is, something that enables us to draw a fully determinate and unchangeable boundary around the meaning of our words. This constitutes the theoretical common ground shared by the meaning realist and the meaning skeptic. I will refer to this theoretical common ground as *semantic foundationalism*, for what is at its core is the assumption that meaning requires isolable semantic foundations. Both meaning realists and meaning skeptics are foundationalist at heart. But while the meaning skeptic argues that the required semantic foundations are nowhere to be found, the meaning realist (whether of an idealist or a naturalistic persuasion) claims to have found the fixers and determiners of meaning that the foundationalist assumption demands (be it in a Platonic realm or in the natural world).

Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments try to persuade us that, considered in their own terms, the semantic foundations proposed by meaning

realists do not work: they do not satisfy the Determinacy and Fixity Requirements as they were supposed to. However, the conclusion we should draw from Wittgenstein's indeterminacy arguments is not that meaning is radically indeterminate, but rather, that it *looks indeterminate* when we adopt a detached semantic perspective, when we depart from specific contexts of use and abstract from their particularity and messiness. The indeterminacy of meaning is inescapable only from the perspective of a philosophical theory that demands absolute determinacy and fixity. This philosophical theory is not a harmless reconstruction of commonsensical intuitions. By decontextualizing meaning in the search for isolable semantic foundations this theory posits unreasonable semantic standards of determinacy and fixity, standards that cannot be met even if considered in the foundationalist's own terms. So when meaning is construed in foundationalist terms, it becomes radically indeterminate. But construing the concept of meaning in that way is optional; and, as it turns out, that philosophical construal is not a very promising option, but a blind alley. Fortunately, we can abandon the decontextualizing and reifying perspective of semantic foundationalism that Wittgenstein's theoretical diagnosis identifies as the basis of meaning skepticism. This diagnosis is only part of the story of Wittgenstein's engagement with semantic skepticism, and not the most interesting part but only a preliminary part, a prolegomenon to an alternative view of meaning. But it is important to note that the alternative semantic view that emerges from Wittgenstein's critical discussions is not a theory (as traditionally conceived), but an approach, a strategy, a piecemeal way of elucidating meanings *in context*.

The alternative approach Wittgenstein sketches to resist semantic decontextualization and reification is developed around the idea of our "consensus of action" or our "agreement in forms of life." As I have argued elsewhere,¹¹ this perspective on meaning emerging from Wittgenstein's later philosophy can be described as a *pragmatic contextualism*. I will develop the central ideas of this perspective in the next section through an examination of Wittgenstein's and Dewey's semantic views. In later chapters I will put to use this semantic contextualism in ways Wittgenstein never anticipated (and even in ways he might not approve of). But it is important to keep in mind that in Wittgenstein's own philosophy this contextualist perspective has mainly a deflationary point: its central point is to dissolve metaphysical disputes about meaning. Wittgenstein's semantic contextualism is developed as a reconstruction of our commonsensical intuitions about meaning and communication. He thought that when made perspicuous, semantic platitudes can shed light on our philosophical problems concerning meaning and can have an extraordinary (even devastating) critical impact on our semantic theories. The semantic contextualism that emerges from Wittgenstein's reconstruction of ordinary intuitions is at the service of his critique of meaning skepticism and meaning realism. The

central philosophical task of this contextualism is to show the gratuitousness and unnaturalness of semantic foundationalism and its assumptions, shared by meaning realists and meaning skeptics alike.

1.3. Contextual Determinacy: Wittgenstein and Dewey on Meaning and Agreement

Any discussion of semantic skepticism should distinguish between meaning's being *underdetermined* and its being *radically indeterminate*. This distinction between underdetermination and indeterminacy is suggested by Laudan's (1990) argument against relativistic views of science, although Laudan does not draw this distinction explicitly. Using my terminological distinction, what Laudan's argument shows is that in philosophy of science indeterminacy arguments such as the ones developed by Goodman, Quine, and Kuhn only establish that theories are underdetermined by evidence, but not that they are radically indeterminate. Laudan argues that unless we wrongly identify what is reasonable to believe with what is logically possible, indeterminacy arguments are not as troublesome as they seem. These considerations only play with logical possibilities. Most (if not all) of the logical possibilities considered by indeterminacy arguments are equally valid candidates for the interpretation of a theory in the abstract, but not in particular situations where the state of the discipline and the body of evidence available, as well as various sociohistorical circumstances affecting scientific research, impose all kinds of interpretative restrictions. So, contextual factors heavily constrain the interpretation of theories,¹² rendering many logical possibilities unreasonable. As Laudan (1990) puts it, indeterminacy arguments establish the *thesis of nonuniqueness* (p. 271), that is, the thesis that for any interpretation of a theory or hypothesis there is always the *possibility* of an alternative interpretation that is logically compatible with our entire body of knowledge. But these arguments fall short of establishing the *thesis of cognitive egalitarianism* (p. 270), that is, the thesis that *all* rival interpretations are equally belief-worthy or equally rational to accept.

So, the upshot of Laudan's argument is that the classic indeterminacy arguments in philosophy of science prove that scientific theories and their interpretation are underdetermined by evidence, but not that they are radically indeterminate. There isn't an infinite (or even indefinite) number of equally plausible hypotheses that we can choose from in the interpretation of our theories. But there can be a constrained set of competing alternatives with equal or similar epistemic support.¹³ This set may be narrowed down by future research, but it may also grow by the inclusion of new competing hypotheses (whose consideration is after all contingent on the available conceptual resources and the imagination of scientists). As Laudan's argument suggests, underdetermination is simply one aspect of the *limited* and *fallible* nature of

our epistemic practices, but it doesn't constitute an insurmountable obstacle to scientific research or to the various investigative activities of ordinary life, as the skeptic would have us believe. Underdetermination can be inflated into radical indeterminacy only if we buy into the mistaken assumption that what is logically possible and what is reasonable are coextensive.

Laudan's objection against indeterminacy arguments in philosophy of science is also valid in the philosophy of language: *underdetermination does not warrant indeterminacy*. The auxiliary assumption that enables us to go from underdetermination to indeterminacy is the assumption that there must be isolable semantic foundations that render our meanings fully determinate and fixed; and if we fall short of that—the assumption suggests—anything goes, any semantic interpretation is equally valid and, therefore, meaning is radically indeterminate. It is only when we have been antecedently persuaded by semantic foundationalism that it makes sense to argue that in the absence of semantic foundations there is no determinacy whatsoever. As we saw in the previous section, Wittgenstein's theoretical diagnosis of meaning skepticism unmasks this foundationalist assumption and questions its plausibility or reasonableness. In order to show how gratuitous this assumption is, the next step is to sketch a nonfoundationalist picture of meaning in which *underdetermination does not warrant indeterminacy*. This picture blocks the inferential moves that meaning skeptics want to make with their indeterminacy arguments, showing that the impossibility of semantic fixers and determiners of meaning by itself—that is, without relying on foundationalist assumptions—does not warrant semantic skepticism. At the core of this nonfoundationalist picture is what I term the idea of *contextual determinacy*, which accepts and integrates the thesis of underdetermination while rejecting the thesis of radical indeterminacy. According to this idea, our meanings do not live up to the standards of absolute determinacy and fixity of semantic foundationalism, but they are not radically indeterminate: they are *contextually determinate*, that is, they acquire a transitory and always imperfect, fragile, and relativized form of determinacy in particular contexts of communication, given the purposes of the communicative exchanges, the background conditions and practices, the participants' perspectives, their patterns of interactions, and so on, I contend that this idea of contextual determinacy is developed by Wittgenstein and Dewey in their elucidations of the relation between meaning and *agreement in action*. This section will examine the *pragmatic contextualism* that results from those elucidations. The challenge of this contextualism is to develop a nonfoundationalist view of meaning based on underdetermination, as opposed to unqualified determinacy or indeterminacy.

Before I start developing the idea of contextual determinacy and elucidating the pragmatic contextualism of Wittgenstein and Dewey, I want to address a worry that is likely to be entertained by those who are familiar with

the analytic literature in philosophy of language. Analytic readers may wonder what is particularly new or interesting about this response to indeterminacy arguments. They may think that the semantic holism developed by a legion of analytic philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century¹⁴ has already established that semantic facts are not isolable and detachable from particular contexts. Isn't the core idea of semantic holism that meanings cannot be decontextualized and encapsulated in atomic packages? And so, what's the fuss about? Isn't this "pragmatic contextualism" a fancy way of delivering old news? Many may think that an examination of contextualism as a nonfoundationalist and nonskeptical view of meaning is unlikely to yield insights that are new or even controversial.¹⁵ However, this is not so. To begin with, it would be a mistake to simply identify contextualism and holism. The demands of contextualization go well beyond what is typically understood by semantic holism. Contextualism certainly involves a holistic insight insofar as it asserts the priority of the whole over its parts. However, on the contextualist view shared by Wittgenstein and Dewey, the whole-part relation is understood in a way that is rather different from standard holistic views of language. On standard holistic views, there is no qualitative difference between the whole and its component parts. Following Meredith Williams (1998), we can describe these views as *homogeneous holisms*, that is, views in which what is required in order to understand a word or a sentence is "more of the same," more words or sentences. By contrast, a *heterogeneous holism* holds that the whole in which words and sentences have to be inscribed is composed of qualitatively different elements.¹⁶ Both Wittgenstein and Dewey qualify as heterogeneous holists, for their concept of *context* does not refer to a homogeneous whole—a system of signs, a network of sentences, or a calculus of propositions—but rather, to a heterogeneous whole that contains verbal and nonverbal elements.

Wittgenstein's and Dewey's emphasis on contextualization underscores that words are inextricably interwoven with nonverbal actions and with the surroundings in which both verbal and nonverbal actions take place. Both Wittgenstein and Dewey call our attention to the embodied nature of speaking subjects and the material conditions of language use. Wittgenstein argues that our linguistic practices are supported by stable regularities in the environment, and that if these natural regularities changed so would our practices (PI §142 and PI II.xii). On the other hand, the embodiment of speaking subjects and the material aspects of communicative contexts figure prominently in Dewey's "naturalistic" account of language as "the tool of tools" (1988a [EN], p. 134). This first point about the heterogeneous character of communicative contexts can be described as the thesis of the *materiality* of language and discursive contexts, which is repeatedly emphasized by Wittgenstein and Dewey. They stress, even more emphatically, that language and its contexts of use are action oriented. The intimate bond between words and actions is precisely what the

Wittgensteinian notion of a language game is supposed to underscore: "I shall [. . .] call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" (PI §7); "the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (PI §23). In a similar vein, Dewey refers to language use as *agency* and to speakers as *agents* (EN p. 137 and p. 139). On his view, "language is primarily a mode of action" (EN p. 160). Therefore, the relevant contexts in which language use has to be understood are practical contexts of action. This second point about the heterogeneous character of Wittgenstein's and Dewey's holism can be described as the *performativity* of language and discursive contexts, which thematizes the inseparability of words and actions. As Wittgenstein puts it, "words are deeds" (1980a [CV], p. 46).

Materiality and performativity are only two of the crucial features of language and discursive contexts that Wittgenstein's and Dewey's contextualism brings to the fore. Two other central dimensions that we have to take into account are *sociality* and *temporality*. Both Wittgenstein and Dewey underscore the social character of the contexts in which words and sentences acquire meaning. For Wittgenstein, only in the context of a shared practice does a word have meaning (PI §§208ff). Similarly, Dewey emphasizes that the context in which words gain meaning is a context of social cooperation. In order to be able to reconstruct the meaning of words and sentences, he tells us, "we have to be able to re-instate the whole *social context* which alone supplies the meaning" (EN p. 160; my emphasis). Furthermore, both Wittgenstein and Dewey emphasize the temporal dimension of discursive contexts of communication. Wittgenstein argues that the meaning of a term cannot be derived from a single application or instance of use, and that we cannot understand the meaning of a term unless we consider the use of the term over time (PI §§141ff). The meaningful use of a word is not something that can happen only on one occasion; rather, it is something that requires "a regular use," "a custom" (PI §198; see also §199). Similarly, for Dewey, communication takes place in cultural and natural contexts that have a history and exhibit a temporal structure: a temporal context of interaction that can be described as "a scene of incessant beginnings and endings" (EN p. 83). It is important to note that communicative contexts are temporally structured and temporally extended, that they have a past and a future. Although it may seem trivial, this temporal point is worth emphasizing because it runs against the *temporal fixity* that afflicts many standard views of language. This diachronic and historical view calls into question the fixing glance of the reifying or decontextualizing perspective, which tries to freeze meaning in an instant, in a frozen time slice that encapsulates all possible uses and ossifies semantic content.

When the contexts of language use are thought of as heterogeneous wholes that are material, performative, social, and temporal, they are the *pragmatic*

contexts of communication to which Wittgenstein and Dewey call our attention. Not only the rest of this chapter, but also the rest of this book, is an elucidation of these four central dimensions of pragmatic contexts of communication. These features of discursive contexts are crucial to understanding the idea of contextual determinacy, that is, to understanding how meanings acquire (transitory and imperfect) determinacy when contextualized. Both Wittgenstein and Dewey explain the contextual formation and transformation of meaning in a strikingly similar way. They both argue that the meaning of words and sentences becomes contextually determinate through the *tacit agreement in action* of the participants in communicative practices. This notion of tacit agreement in action brings together the four central dimensions of language use and discursive contexts (to repeat: materiality, performativity, sociality, and temporality). In what follows I examine Wittgenstein's and Dewey's accounts of contextual determinacy through practical agreement.

For Wittgenstein, communication and rule following presuppose "a consensus of action" or "an agreement in forms of life." This claim brings out a *contextualist* point about intelligibility: what we say and do acquires significance only against a *background* or in a *context*, namely, the background or context provided by a *practice*, a shared way of doing things. As early as 1939 Wittgenstein argues that the contextual determinacy that our words acquire depends on the practical agreement underlying our practices. This agreement, he emphasizes, is not "a consensus of opinions" but "a consensus of *action*: a consensus of doing the same thing, reacting in the same way" (1975 [LFM], pp. 183–84). Communication involves the coordination of action and requires a particular kind of *social bond*: it requires seeing others as partners, that is, as engaged in a joint activity (whether the activity involves cooperation, competition, or any other kind of intersubjective relation). On Wittgenstein's view, a linguistic practice always has a practical point that normatively structures the communicative exchanges that take place in it. Wittgenstein emphasizes that it is "immensely important" that our uses of language have "a *point*" (LFM p. 205), that is, that they play a role in regulating our dealings with the world and with each other, that they be integrated in our forms of life. But having a point, he remarks, is always "a matter of degree"; and the extent to which a use of language has a point depends on the context in which that use figures. Thus meaning becomes determinate in particular contexts of action. What we say and do acquires significance only against the background of a tacit agreement in action. When this background agreement is lost, actions and utterances become incomprehensible. Wittgenstein argues that if we were to encounter activities in which we could not see any underlying practical agreement among the people engaged in it, we would not be able to see any meaning in them, but only nonsense, unintelligible movements and noises: "*the whole point* of what they are doing seems to be lost, so that we would say, 'What the hell's the *point* of doing this?'" (LFM p. 203).

In the *Investigations* too Wittgenstein emphasizes that the lack of agreement “would make our normal language-games lose their point” (PI §142).

On Wittgenstein’s view, meaning depends on the normative structuration of linguistic activities according to the practical agreement of their participants. The agreement in action underlying a language game is exhibited in what Wittgenstein calls “a technique of use,” a shared way of doing things (cf. e.g., 1978 [RFM] I.143ff). It is important to note that the techniques of use that render a meaning contextually determinate cannot be captured in a list of rules or, we could add, in a network of interconnected sentences or a translation manual. A technique of language use is something that necessarily remains in the background: it is not a further set of propositions or rules; it is a skilled activity, something that can only be *shown* in actions. Techniques are embodied in what practitioners do “as a *matter of course*” (PI §238). On Wittgenstein’s view, our shared techniques of use simply do not leave room for radical indeterminacy. These techniques do not draw a sharp boundary around the meaning of terms, but they make meaning *as determinate as it needs to be* for the purposes of particular activities. Whether the term “rabbit” refers to rabbits, to rabbit stages, or to undetached rabbit parts is a doubt that simply does not enter into the minds of those who use this term to coordinate their actions (for instance, rabbit hunters). But should it enter? Is it a *reasonable doubt*? The skeptic¹⁷ will insist that what is in question is not whether as a matter of empirical fact these alternative interpretations are in fact considered, but rather, whether they should be. Ignoring nonstandard interpretations of our words, or pretending that they don’t exist, won’t do if these interpretations have a legitimate claim to be considered. Our refusal to consider these interpretations out of mere stubbornness would undermine the normative validity of our claims concerning meaning.

The crucial argumentative move here is to shift the burden of proof onto the shoulders of the skeptic. Wittgenstein’s contextualist considerations show that the normative structure of our practices *excludes* certain interpretations from the meaning of our words; and this *normative exclusion* constitutes a prima facie reason against considering them, for their consideration runs against the agreement in action underlying our practices and threatens these practices with “losing their point.” So, with a prima facie reason *against* interpretations that don’t fit the background consensus of action of a practice and in the absence of any reason *for* them, the balance tips against the skeptical semantic hypotheses and, therefore, they should be considered an illegitimate intromission in our appraisals of meaning. But it is important to note that these interpretative hypotheses are deemed unworthy of consideration—an illegitimate intromission in our semantic evaluations—only insofar as they are mere logical possibilities, that is, *until reasons for them are given*. It is important to note that this is a shift of the burden of proof and not a direct and final