

THE PRAGMATIC IMPLICATIONS OF OUR  
UTTERANCES:  
ETHICS AND ORDINARY MEANING

by  
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What is the relationship between ethics and meaning? To a certain extent this is the question that orients and determines the character of many current approaches to moral philosophy. The connection between the very possibility of meaning and ethics is given most clearly, perhaps, in contemporary pragmatism and deconstruction. Both movements use a similar critical vocabulary – referring to concepts, contexts, necessity, responsibility and pragmatic implications. At times the relation between deconstruction and pragmatism is seen to be one of friendly co-habitation (as in Richard Rorty's reading of Derrida). At other times pragmatism and deconstruction appear as exemplary of the great divide between continental and analytic approaches to philosophy. The debate between John Searle and Jacques Derrida over the determination of context stands as a reminder or reiteration of the differences between two traditions. Derrida is, according to Searle, no longer a participant in the philosophy of language; he has, somehow, *missed the present*.

when Derrida makes remarks like these he reveals not only his ignorance of the history of the philosophy of language, but his commitment to a certain traditional pre-Wittgensteinian conception of language (1994:639).

For Derrida, on the other hand, the debate with Searle may not even have taken place.<sup>1</sup> It is possible that the *mis*-understanding between Searle and Derrida marks a radical dissemination of language from its proper site (of intention, meaning or limited context). It is in the light of this debate and its subsequent importance for Derrida's own theorising of the relation between ethics and meaning that I will explore two approaches to ordinary language. Stanley Cavell's early defence of ordinary language is, like Searle's approach, strongly indebted to Wittgenstein and a theory of pragmatics. Cavell's defence shares with Searle a certain definition of philosophy; but I have chosen Cavell's account, rather than Searle's, for two reasons.

Firstly, like Derrida, Cavell sees his own description of philosophy's task as a repetition of the Socratic gesture (and in so doing locates his own work in a 'properly' philosophical context, as what philosophy *ought* to be doing). Secondly, Cavell's idea of a certain type of linguistic *necessity* seems remarkably close to current descriptions of the relation between ethics and language in continental philosophy, particularly that of Derrida. Ordinary language philosophy and pragmatism restrict their attention to the usage and effectiveness of language, and define this as the task of philosophy *per se*. Jacques Derrida has, in ways that seem similar, argued for a certain 'ethicity' of language revealed through the philosophical question. By taking these two examples of arguments which connect ethics with meaning I want to question the assumption that an understanding of meaning will clarify the status of ethics in philosophy, or the status of philosophy.

### I. Stanley Cavell and the Necessity of Meaning

Cavell's essay, 'Must We Mean What We Say?' (1976) is ostensibly a defence of a type of statement used by ordinary language philosophers, statements referred to by Cavell as 'descriptives.' This includes statements of *instances* such as,

'We say "I expect to finish this paper" but not "I expect two plus two equals four".'

It also includes statements of *explication* such as,

'When we say we "expect" we mean that an event may or may not follow.'

Or, alternatively,

'We don't use expectation about a finished event *unless we mean* that something of that event may or may not happen.'

We are confused, Cavell argues, if we object to these sorts of statements on *empirical* grounds or if we protest that a philosopher *can't know* what we mean when we say something like, 'I expect...'

These types of statements made in ordinary language philosophy have, for Cavell, a necessity which is neither analytic nor synthetic and it is this necessity which justifies the philosophers use of 'must' and 'when we say...'. The objection to ordinary language philosophy – that these statements using 'must' or 'we can't say' require a sort of *verification* misses the point. For there is an inherent normativity to which these 'musts' respond. To say, 'You can expect an event but you can't expect a logical truth' is not to establish a rule but to *remind us of a norm already established in language* (1976:22). The 'when we say ... we mean' and the 'we can say ... but we can't say ...' of ordinary language philosophy only *look* like prescriptives or imperatives (*ibid.*). They are, however, according to Cavell, *descriptives* and remind us of how we already use everyday language. These reminders are called for, not just because we sometimes misuse language – as when a philosopher asks of an action 'Is it voluntary?' or 'Is it good?' when we simply *don't use* the description of voluntary or good to describe certain actions. (We only use the word 'good' in cases of *morally relevant* actions and not for, say, mannerisms or habits; while we only use 'voluntary' in cases of possible coercion and not for actions that are capable of neither coercion nor decision.) Misuses such as these create philosophical conundrums – like questions of free will or the form of the good in general – which the ordinary language philosopher must repair. And it is in the ordinary language philosopher's reminder of how we use words that we also learn about our world.

Cavell's essay focuses on actions and the description of actions because action descriptions, he argues, already possess an explicit normativity and necessity. In this case, ostensive definitions are impossible; for actions are part of ongoing practices. In asking whether an instance of say, 'caring', really is an instance of 'care' we are really asking, not for a definition, so much as for a guiding description of norms and practices. The question of whether an action is or is not an instance of a certain type of description is a question of what we do and how we act. And this depends upon a shared context of 'self-definition' (1979:320)<sup>2</sup>. Action descriptions can, *in certain respects*, be likened to games. If I say 'I am playing chess' then I commit myself to certain rules; I must mean that I am following norms. If I make this statement and then throw the pieces around the room then either I don't know how to use the word 'chess' – I don't know the rules – or I don't mean what I am saying.

To mean what I say I must act in a certain way. So if my opponent says, 'You *must* move the pieces on the board' she is not uttering an imperative or a prescriptive, but only spelling out what 'chess' means and the legitimate occasions for its use. If I want to say 'I am playing chess' then I must mean that I am following rules, playing a game, moving pieces in a direction on a board. The 'must' of this normativity pertains to doing what I say I am doing properly, and for Cavell this 'must' inheres in the way we use action descriptions:

... it is a confusion to speak of some general opposition between descriptive and normative utterances, I am not thinking primarily of the plain fact that rules have counterpart (descriptive) statements, but rather of the significance of that fact, viz., that what such statements describe are *actions* (and not, e.g., the *movements* of bodies, animate or inanimate). The most characteristic fact about actions is that they can – in various specific ways – go wrong, and they can be performed incorrectly. This is not, in any restricted sense, a moral assertion, though it points the moral of intelligent activity. And it is as true of describing as it is of calculating or of promising or plotting or warning or asserting or defining. ... These are actions which we perform, and our successful performance of them depends upon our adopting and following the ways in which an action is done, upon what is normative for it. Descriptive statements, then, are not opposed to ones which are normative, but in fact presuppose them: we could not do the thing we call describing if language did not provide (we had not been taught) ways normative for describing (1976:23).

Actions are, to use Wittgenstein's terminology, part of a grammar. We recognise an action as an instance of *x* not because it *obeys* certain rules, but because it is performed as a recognised response in a context of social conventions. An action and the concept used to describe that action are not separate in the way that a thing and its name are separate; an action is only described *as an action* if it is performed in a certain way, or if it fulfils the (practical) criteria of the concept (1979:294). The criteria are *internal* to the concept. In some ways, then, moral descriptions are similar to the action descriptions in games. An action is only a recognised move in a game if it follows the rules; to take part in a game is to already be responsible, committed to

a certain way of proceeding and subject to certain 'musts' and 'oughts.'

However, the usual 'musts' and 'oughts' of moral arguments are, Cavell insists, not entirely of this rule-descriptive sort. In the context of a moral discussion protagonists do not describe rules that would establish a game. Rather, they discuss the efficacy or value of moves within a context *already* established as moral. Most statements in moral discussions take place *within* a shared context of concepts. It is only because we know how to use words like 'promise', 'duty', 'intend' or 'good' that we can *then* go on to discuss whether certain actions or occasions are accurate deployments of such concepts. If moral discussion is like a game it is so only because we are already implicated in the necessity of rules and recognition; and this follows from 'what it is to talk together' (1976:33). Concepts like 'promise' do not *establish commitment*; commitment follows from our use of concepts. It is the traditional philosopher's attention to justification and the formalisation of moral rules which has allowed the game and practice analogy to get out of hand (*ibid.*:24). For we only state a formalisation of moral rules, such as 'You ought to keep promises', when morality has broken down (1976:23; 1979:296). A typically *moral* 'must' or 'ought' would, according to Cavell, be more of the type: 'You ought to take a taxi home'. (And here we already *assume* a moral responsibility to not drive when intoxicated.) Similarly, a moral 'must' might take the form, 'You really must visit your mother'. (And this does not tell or prescribe a moral rule about social duty but, in assuming social duty and contexts, guides a specific action.) So, a philosopher's attention to promises as practices which *establish* commitment fails to recognise that the *concept* of promise is not one of establishing a contract but (like intending, expecting, wishing or predicting) works because we already understand ourselves as committed to concepts. If we use a concept, like promising, then we take part in a linguistic context; and in so doing we can't just say what we like. A *competent* moral speaker also knows what counts as a moral reason. This is not just *any* reason but one which accords with the use of moral concepts. In the case of promising one might plead overriding commitments, impediments or conflicts, but one cannot – *in the context of the ordinary usage of the concept of promise* – plead inconvenience. If so, one would not be using concepts rationally: that is, in the way of our established moral grammar.

The peculiarity of moral concepts lies in the fact that definition of context is also definition of what we are (1979:312). Any use of an action concept is verified, not epistemologically, by reference to extra-linguistic data, but by the norms of a practice.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, action descriptions and moral discussions are similar. In the case of game-type actions, however, there is a clear-cut distinction between rules and what Cavell refers to as 'modal imperatives.' A rule establishes a practice and takes the form of a *definition*. In the case of triathlons, for example, we might say, 'you must complete the full distance of the cycle before moving to the next leg.' (One would not be taking part in the action if one were not to act in such a way.) A 'modal imperative,' on the other hand, guides an action within a context of assumed rules. (Such 'oughts' direct an action so that it might be performed well.) For example, 'You ought to make sure your bike is ready for a quick change.' Or, 'You really must wear well-padded shoes.' There is a clear distinction between the necessary rules of the game which must be obeyed and the modal imperatives which guide an action within those rules. In the case of morality and moral disagreements, however, there is no such clear-cut distinction (1976:29; 1979:307). We may have formalised rules, but these occur after the event of the context being established through procedures and concepts. 'You ought to visit your mother' is typical of ordinary moral language, not as a rule, but as a guide within a context of promising, duty, or care. And if I disagree with this advice, by saying 'I visited last week' or 'I've already explained why I can't go as promised' then we are having a dispute about what stands for a case of duty or fulfilling a promise within a context where such concepts are used. The problem with a moral context is that it does not delimit concepts in the way games do, by giving clearly defined moves. But there is still a strong link between concept and context. If I say that I won't fulfil my promise to visit my mother because it's inconvenient then I must give *moral* reasons – those recognised, or possibly recognised, as a form of excuse. If I don't give such reasons, and it's quite possible that I won't, then the argument is no longer *moral*; it no longer accepts responsibility for the concept of promising. If we want to act morally then we can't just say what we like; we must mean what we say. We have to be answerable for the implications of our concepts. This is because concepts only work, or *are concepts*, insofar as they have implications, expectations of use and a regularity which is also a normativity.<sup>4</sup>

A link is made between morality and language by Cavell through this use of 'concept' and 'context'. Concepts work only because there are recognised and normative occasions for use. In the case of actions, the legitimate use of a concept is achieved, not by appealing to some object (as in typical knowledge claims), but by understanding what we do. In the case of a moral description, what we do (our moral context), does not rest upon formalised rules. Rules follow from the participation in a moral context, which demands a certain *use* of concepts and also defines what we are. The concept of a promise, for example, *presupposes* the recognition and responsibility of a shared language. Morality is, then, not a game *within language*. It works by acknowledging that our utterances and concepts cannot just mean what we want them to mean, and that 'we' are identical with a network of commitment, understanding and responsibility: 'the mutual meaningfulness of the words of a language must rest upon some kind of connection or compact among its users' (1979:22). If I don't recognise or if I violate that context by using concepts differently – if I argue that promises are valid only when convenient – then I am withdrawing myself from morality, from context. For the very concept of promise is not used that way. This is what enables Cavell to argue that Stevenson's emotivism (ibid.:272), as well as the theories of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, are arguments *against morality* (ibid.:290). The same might also be said for the common philosophical picture of moral language: rules, prescriptives, justifications and imperatives occur in the absence of morality. A moral disagreement is not about a rule or formal imperative but about appropriate description: 'Is this a fulfilled promise?'; 'Are you acting dutifully?'; 'Is this a legitimate exclusion?' And the answers to such questions can only take place in a context where the concepts of promise, duty and legitimacy are already operative. They are not concepts we choose or decide upon; as speaking animals *we are* our given moral context, the operation of a set of concepts. Our specific moral context might have been otherwise, but we speak and exist only within *some* context:

But using English now – to converse with others in the language, or to understand the world, or to think by ourselves – means knowing which forms in what contexts are normative for performing the activities we perform by using the language. ...

language provides us with ways for (contains forms which are normative for) speaking in special ways ... (1976:33).

If we were to argue that philosophy, however, is *not* about morality (the assumption of context) but ethics (the justification of context), Cavell offers an implicit answer. (This can also be understood by appealing to Wittgenstein's position on justification.) Certainty and justification can proceed only so far; we eventually arrive at the background and positions of our own concepts and no *justification* or explanation can ever give us more certainty than this very ground.<sup>5</sup> For Cavell, then, the formalisation of ordinary moral language into rules is not just *another dimension* of morality (or a philosophically 'higher' point of view). Moral language is essentially not formalisable, and this is because of its highly context-specific character. Not only is 'you ought to keep promises' not a typical feature of ordinary moral language; this de-contextualised rule precludes morality. For morality is not the imposition of rules and imperatives but an acceptance or recognition of what we already are, or our given position. The relation between ethics and meaning for Cavell is the relation between an action and its proper description. The necessity and normativity of this relation is pragmatic. The ordinary language philosopher, in reminding us of how we use an action description, is both telling us about that action and tidying up misuses of description. In such cases we are being reminded of what we already do and how we already proceed in order that we might *describe well*: understand our actions better and use our descriptions tidily. What makes moral description different from games, and more in need of philosophical house-keeping, is the (necessary) absence of rules. For Cavell, the ordinary language philosopher

... is certainly not *instituting* norms, nor is he *ascertaining* norms; but he may be thought of as *confirming* or *proving* the existence of norms when he reports or describes how we (how to) talk .... I have suggested that there are ways normative for instituting and ascertaining norms; and so are there for confirming or proving or reporting them, i.e., for employing locutions like 'We can say ...,' or 'When we say ... we imply -.' The swift use made of them by the philosopher serves to remind mature speakers of a language of something they know; but they would erroneously be employed in trying to report a special usage of one's own, and (not unrelated to

this) could not be used to change the meaning of an expression. Since saying something is never merely saying something, but is saying something with a certain tune and at a proper cue and while executing the appropriate business, the sounded utterance is only a salience of what is going on when we talk (or the unsounded when we think); so a statement of 'what we say' will give us only a feature of what we need to remember (1976:32-33).

In order to compare Cavell's position with Derrida's approach to the relation between meaning and ethics it might do to look at Cavell's recruitment of Socrates as typical of the procedure of ordinary language philosophy. Socrates, Cavell argues, reminds us of how we use words in everyday contexts and by so doing establishes their normativity. For example, *we can't say* 'justice is the advantage of the powerful'. This is not how the word is used. Further, according to Cavell, Socrates also asks us not just what we mean, but what we *really mean* (1976:20). By showing his interlocutors that their glib definitions lead to paradox, Socrates investigates what we do when we use a term *properly*. We don't describe a man who hands back an axe to a madman as just, so justice *can't mean* paying back what one owes. Nevertheless, asking what we *really mean* is still a reminder of language use and, in particular, everyday language use and ordinary contexts. We can't just say what we like; we must mean what we say. The use of a concept is already determined and to use it implies a *responsibility*. Any distinction between saying and meaning – 'No, that's not what I meant' – occurs *because* of the normativity of use. We can't just have words mean what we want them to mean; meaning depends upon recognition of shared use. Language use is, therefore, a form of responsibility.

The fact that Socrates's discussions often *don't arrive* at what 'we really mean' and that they frequently conclude by showing that no particular *use* of a concept, like justice, can give us its meaning is not explicitly considered by Cavell. This problem of providing a definition of a concept that would not be reduced to the specific occasions of its use is one later dismissed by Cavell in *The Claim of Reason* (1979). For Cavell, a concept is nothing other than its 'schematism' or 'the set of criteria on the basis of which the word is applied in all the grammatical contexts into which it fits and will be found to fit' (1979:77). To say that we have not defined a concept but only pointed to instances is to suggest that a concept might be *more*

than its use. This is a possibility not admitted by Cavell. Derrida, however, begins from the problem of a concept's *meaning* which will have to be, on his account, an ideality exceeding any particular use or occasion.

How important is it that Cavell's description of language usage is based primarily on action descriptions and the analogy of a game? For Cavell, this is because if language in general does have rules they are more like participation descriptions (as in games) than they are like prescriptives. However, Cavell also argues for a proper description of moral language, not as formal rules, imperatives or prescriptives, but as 'modal imperatives': moves within a context. As a consequence of beginning with actions and their own form of descriptive necessity, Cavell's account of the relation between morality and language offers itself as a description of accepted procedures according to already shared and recognised norms. If meaning is ethical or responsible for Cavell it is so only because meaning is nothing other than our constitutive implication in context and ordinary practice: 'what is normative is exactly ordinary use itself' (1979:21).<sup>6</sup>

Cavell's engaging example of what he sees as typical of the necessity in action descriptives is Kant's categorical imperative, which he describes as a 'categorical declarative' (1976:25). The formality or emptiness of Kant's imperative is explained by the fact that it is not an imperative at all. It does not tell us what to do, nor how to do it. Rather, it merely describes *how we use the word moral*, or what we *must mean* when we use ethical language. If I wish to describe what I am doing as moral then I must act in a certain way. We simply don't describe acts as moral that we also describe using the language of pleasure and desire; we *can't say* 'I behaved morally on this occasion because I hoped it would get me a promotion' or 'I behaved morally because of an overwhelming sense of fear'. This would clearly be a misuse of the word 'moral'; it would be ungrammatical in the Wittgensteinian sense. And by describing how we use the word 'moral', we are also telling ourselves what moral actions are. The categorical imperative describes what an action would be if it could be described as moral: 'it tells you (part of) what you in fact do when you *are* moral. It cannot – nothing a philosopher says can – insure that you will not act immorally; but it is entirely unaffected by what you do or do not want' (1976:25).

This example also demonstrates, however, the limits of Cavell's descriptive approach. For Kant's description of what we *must mean* by moral no longer appears as necessary (even in Cavell's sense). There have been philosophical assertions that what we mean by morally good *is* what is advantageous or what is pleasurable (from Thrasymachus to Nietzsche and Stevenson). While we might cite these assertions as typical examples of philosophers misusing language by taking it from its ordinary context (as does Cavell), there has been a forceful argument that our current *ordinary* usage of moral language is a misuse, and that our contemporary moral language is meaningless. Here, in authors as diverse as Jürgen Habermas and Alastair MacIntyre, the appeal is not to what we do when we use the word 'moral', nor to what we *must mean*, but what we *ought to mean*. Such philosophies *do* attempt to *establish shared usage*. According to Alastair MacIntyre, only an historical investigation that extends beyond current everyday usage is capable of rendering our ethical language coherent, of giving us back an ordinary context. MacIntyre's diagnosis of our loss of context, like Habermas's narration of the decline of a shared *Lebenswelt*, foregrounds the problem of any ethical theory of *description* (such as Cavell's): what if our everyday usage of ethical terminology is meaningless or dysfunctional? What if the recognised norms of moral description conflict with an earlier or more coherent moral context? How might we *decide* what a coherent or competent use is?

According to MacIntyre, the enlightenment attempt to provide a *justification* for ethics is a form of metaphysical over-reaching. The idea of providing our moral language and behaviour with a *foundation* is a mis-recognition of what moral language is. Such a striving for grounds only occurs when the social conditions of context have disintegrated. Like Cavell, MacIntyre agrees that morality can't be the explication of rules; we are only moral, and only speak morally, when we *already* understand ourselves as part of a moral context. MacIntyre's diagnosis of this loss of context implies that the responsibility and necessity which Cavell finds in *any* language have been lost in modernity. For MacIntyre, this loss of context can be attributed to social and historical circumstances. But for both Cavell and MacIntyre morality is only possible with a shared understanding that is also a form of shared self-definition. Philosophy can't be responsible for establishing morality; its task is a

more modest one. In reminding us about the proper use and meaning of our moral concepts, philosophy calls us back to context.<sup>7</sup>

Cavell's account of the responsibility of remaining within everyday or ordinary contexts is a particularly clear example of approaches to language and ethics which stress the value – if not the unavoidability – of shared understanding. Here, ethics is recognised social practice (and can therefore be likened to a language); ethics is grounded in everyday life and unquestioned implicit norms. When there is no longer coherence; when there is no longer the possibility of shared understanding; when meaning *does* seem to be a matter of whatever we want it to mean; when the 'musts' sound like imperatives rather than descriptives; then we might say that morality has broken down. (This is how Cavell describes those philosophical approaches that see morality as a form of force, persuasion or coercion. And this is how other philosophers, like Habermas and MacIntyre, have diagnosed modernity.) One can't just use words in a perverse manner: we *can't say* that justice is the advantage of the powerful. We must recognise that language, *as the very context of everyday life*, is our only domain of enquiry. It makes no sense, or is impossible, to provide a justification for shared understanding; for any justification would have to depend upon, rather than found, a moral context.

## II. Derrida: Ethics, Context and Concept

Before looking at Derrida's explicit arguments for the connection between ethics and meaning, we might begin by considering a famous phrase from one of his early essays where a clear distinction is being drawn between meaning and psychologism or historicism: '

Pure truth or the pretension to pure truth is missed in its meaning as soon as one attempts, as Dilthey does, to account for it from within a determined historical totality (1978:160).

Considered in the light of Cavell's essay, Derrida's phrase might be explicated in the following way. Dilthey cannot use 'truth' to describe historically relative understanding, for the very use of the word 'truth' commits us to a trans-historical claim. To use the word 'true' is to mean that something holds through history. To employ

the manner of ordinary language philosophy: 'We *can say* that mathematics is a form of pure truth but we *can't say* that pure truth depends upon context.' (Similarly, we might state, 'We *can say* "2+2=4 is given to us through reason", but we *can't say*, "I am going to write a history of reason".') The very meaning, usage or normativity of the words 'truth' and 'reason' precludes us from using them in this way.<sup>8</sup> 'Truth' has a certain *meaning*, and any explication of 'truth' *must* take into account the *meaning* of truth as neither historically nor psychologically contingent.

This translation of the Derridean commitment to the given meaning of terms, such as 'truth' and 'reason,' fits well with the description of Derrida as a critical inhabitator of the metaphysical tradition. On this picture Derrida would show that the way we use philosophical words, like 'truth,' or 'reason,' commits us to the claims of metaphysics – claims which are also, for Derrida, necessarily impossible. Derrida's 'deconstruction' of philosophy would therefore be an exposition of the inevitable compromise of philosophy's own constitutive concepts. Philosophy is nothing other than a use of certain concepts (like 'truth') but this use is *all* philosophy is and there are no objects which answer to its concepts. On this reading, the ethics of deconstruction would lie in the demonstration of the necessary limits of any claim to truth, universality or pure reason.<sup>9</sup> Like the ordinary language philosopher, and like certain interpretations of Nietzsche, Derrida's work would be a continual reminder that philosophy's lexicon is just that, a way of speaking, a forcefulness of utterance, or an accepted usage that represses the particularity or normativity of its context. The difference between Cavell and Derrida would, on this reading, be one of terminology and focus. Both would debunk the grand claims of philosophical justification; both would recognise philosophy as a form of text or way of writing.<sup>10</sup> Cavell restricts the philosophical scrutiny of terms to the contexts of everyday use, a use which determines a word's meaning or extension. Derrida's context, on the other hand, is the philosophical tradition. But both approaches might be seen as forms of pragmatism, where truth is established in language and is a question of grammar. What I wish to argue here, though, is that the context of philosophy for Derrida is not just another context; and this is not for the Nietzschean reason that metaphysics is a forcefulness which has forgotten its status as force.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Derrida, again unlike Cavell, does not just appeal to contexts but asks

a further question: 'What is the condition for the possibility of context?'. And it is in asking this question that, we might say, Derrida appeals to the context of philosophy. For Derrida, the question of a context's *possibility* is a necessary question; it is the necessity of this question that characterises the history of western metaphysics.

Both Cavell and Derrida tie language to responsibility, and both also argue that we can't just decide what a word will mean. The very capacity for meaning depends upon shared and recognised usage – or, in Derrida's terms, iterability. In speaking, we are already taken beyond the singular event of any supposed intent and placed within the pragmatic implications of our utterances. Both Derrida and Cavell suggest that the very possibility of meaning not only has an ethical dimension – we could say this about most things – but entails *responsibility*. But it is the character of this responsibility (and its generation from the way meaning is said to work) that also distinguishes the two philosophies.

What allows Derrida to say that 'pure truth is missed in its meaning' if this term is used in a certain way? At first glance it would seem contradictory for Derrida to appeal to context because, as his own arguments make clear, a context is not given as such but is always itself determined, delimited, used and interpreted. Derrida's ostensibly contradictory critique of context which is set alongside an argument for an inherent 'ethicity' and responsibility of language can only be explained, I would argue, by stressing a quite specific role for philosophy, and philosophy's relation to the everyday.

Derrida's argument for the necessary iterability of any meaningful term is at once a defence and critique of context. The possibility of a word's meaning is, he argues, that it be repeatable and recognisable in more than one instance. Its meaning has to be determined on any occasion of use, and each use, therefore, depends upon a different context. But if we accept this then we also acknowledge that context – as the determination of a word – depends upon the word's undecidability, its inherent capacity to be used in more than one context. Usage or context is not just a concept's normative determination; it also describes a concept's essential capacity to be determined differently. This being the case, each context – as a concept's determination – is a certain *decision* that limits a necessary undecidability. So, on this picture, we can't appeal to context as a *determined* or given boundary that will limit a term; for

each context is always the reactivation of a term. A context is itself a particular occurrence and not a simply given thing. A context itself has to be determined, inscribed, decided, marked off and limited:

For a context never creates itself *ex nihilo*; no mark can create or engender a context on its own, much less dominate it. This limit, this finitude is the condition under which contextual transformation remains an always open possibility (1988:79).

Derrida's terminology for dealing with the way context works is explicitly ethical; a context is juridical and decisive. Any attempt to see context as an immutably given thing and not a decisive event or act of limiting is, for Derrida, an act of 'policing', an invocation of unjustified imperatives precisely because language itself *is not limited* by context (ibid.:105). We can't place responsibility back onto contexts and say that terms must (responsibly) be used contextually, for we are also responsible for contexts. As the determination of concepts, contexts themselves are ethical events, and not sites within which the ethical could be grounded.

How Derrida arrives at this description and importance of context is not just a quibble *within* philosophy; for it concerns the very nature, and ethics, of the philosophical question. In order to explain what I mean by this, I want to return to an issue I raised earlier: the peculiar nature of the context of philosophy.

Derrida's particular commitment to the context of philosophy is inextricably linked to his theory of concepts. Derrida's argument regarding philosophy's history is made most clearly in his work on Plato and in his early interpretation of Husserl. Plato and Husserl are situated at the inauguration and culmination of Derrida's metaphysical tradition and are not philosophers among others; rather, they possess an exemplarity in the consideration of philosophical procedure. For it is the notion of philosophy as *logos* and as a resistance to *doxa* or explication that characterises Plato and Husserl respectively.

According to Derrida, the inauguration of philosophy with Plato occurs as the question of pure truth. Above and beyond any specific instance or particular occasion, philosophy establishes the *telos* of truth *in general*. Philosophy begins, then, in a movement of meaning; an *idea* of truth is established in which truth would be that which is eternally present. Philosophical truth remains true



regardless of its representational form or its historical articulation. As a persistent sense which is always repeatable, the goal of philosophical truth is *meaning*. Philosophy begins with the *idea of meaning*: a content that remains present or can be re-presented through time, regardless of inscription or repetition.<sup>12</sup> The notion of the concept, *as meaning which pertains across any context* is, for Derrida, the very possibility of philosophy. Philosophy is the possibility of the concept, as a meaning which cannot be reduced to a particular instance. This constitutes philosophy's 'double' ethic. Philosophy is at once a violent inauguration: an exclusion of all those supplements and contaminants that would mark a putatively pure sense. But this pure sense, *as pure and pre-inscriptive*, is also an 'opening' to a radical outside or unthought. What is 'opened' in the philosophical context is the question of that which exceeds all context, all opposition, all writing and all sense. Philosophy is not the articulation of this or that opposition, but *the grounding of opposition as such* in a commitment to the pure self-presence of an original sense. As a radical justification, philosophy is the 'opening' of the concept of the origin, upon which all other oppositions depend:

Plato thinks of writing, and tries to comprehend it, to dominate it, on the basis of *opposition* as such. In order for these contrary values (good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside, etc.) to be in opposition, each of the terms must be simply *external* to the other, which means that one of the oppositions (the opposition between inside and outside) must already be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition. And one of the elements of the system (or of the series) must also stand as the very possibility of systematicity or seriality in general (1981:103).

Platonism is, for Derrida, the inauguration or inscription of a context which opens the possibility of a truth beyond inscription. Platonism is not one context or system among others; it is a context in which the very notions of 'proper', 'meaning', 'truth' and 'sense' are inaugurated – notions crucial to the *normative* functioning of any context. Philosophy *opens context in general* by establishing a concept of truth. But the 'proper' meaning of truth, established in the Platonic division between philosophy and sophistics, itself takes place as a writing or mark. Philosophy is a sophistic which demands a meaning beyond its own writing. Philosophy cannot therefore be

reduced to mere rhetorical force, nor can it ever completely command the force it opens. This means that philosophy establishes the possibility of the *proper* sense (through the concept of meaning); at the same time this proper sense (because it has to be *differentiated* from the non-proper of sophistics) is marked by instability and the possibility of disruption:

The front line that is violently inscribed between Platonism and its closest other, in the form of sophistics, is far from being unified, continuous, as if stretched between two homogenous areas. Its design is such that, through a systematic indecision, the parties and the party lines frequently exchange their respective places, imitating the forms and borrowing the paths of the opponent. These permutations are therefore possible, and if they are obliged to inscribe themselves within some common territory, the dissension no doubt remains internal and casts into absolute shadow some entirely-other of *both* sophistics *and* Platonism, some resistance having no common denominator with this whole commutation (1981:108).

The philosophical goal of pure truth, pure self-present sense or logos, excludes the event, singularity, particularity or anteriority from which it emerges (1974:39). At the same time, the metaphysical concept of meaning or truth that exceeds any given instance is also an ethical opening: a directedness beyond any given content to a promise of meaning, a 'truth in general' (ibid.:3).

This is why Husserl's problem of ideality is, for Derrida, the culmination of metaphysics. Like Plato, and like Kant, Husserl asks the question of truth *in general*. Neither psychologism nor historicism will fulfil the requirements of the concept of pure truth. Furthermore, Husserl recognises that truth, *as truth* (according to its philosophical meaning) might have a certain history; it might be factually embodied in a set of texts or signs. But *as truth* it exceeds any totality of texts or signs. For the *idea* of truth is an opening, a positing of that which is true independent of any particular inscription; *as meaning*, the pure truth of the *logos* cannot, therefore, be contained within history, context or the particularity of an empirical instance:

For this *logos* which calls to itself and summons itself by itself as *telos*, and whose *dynamis* tends towards its *energeia* or *entelecheia* – this *logos* does not occur *in* history and does not traverse Being as a foreign empiricity into which both its metaphysical transcendence and the actuality of its infinite essence would descend. *Logos* is *nothing* outside history and being, since it is discourse, infinite discursiveness and not an actual infinity, since it is meaning (1978:166).

That Husserl was originally inquiring into the ideality of geometry and formal languages should, Derrida's reading suggests, not locate his inquiry within a specific region. For the pure concepts of Husserl's investigation exemplify *the* philosophical question (1978:167). Philosophy as a context establishes the meaning of certain terms – such as truth – which *in their very meaning* resist incorporation *within* a context. For it is the very *meaning* of truth to render any merely contextual definition incomplete. This can be expressed in Cavell's manner by saying that we *don't use* the word 'truth' to refer to what is contextually determined. We only say 'That is true' if it must pertain to any possible context. So, the philosophical meaning (use or performance) of 'truth' undermines any theory of use or performance. This is where Derrida's theory of meaning connects with ethics. The idea that certain philosophical concepts, by their very nature, *open* contexts is applied by Derrida to terms beyond those of geometry and formal meaning.

One of the clearest examples of the ethics of meaning and conceptuality lies in Derrida's use of the term 'justice'. Justice, as law and as a moral law, is in its very meaning not capable of being reduced to any particular instance. It would not be justice if it applied in this case but not in others. The meaning of justice is not a given but a teleology. The idea of a pure universal law can never be given; any particular example is contaminated by the specificity and singularity of its occasion and context. This is the very difference between the ideal purity of Law (the concept of Law) and the determination of laws. While justice is only given or made meaningful in contexts, its meaning exceeds any context:

No justice – let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws – seems possible or thinkable without the

principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present ... (1994:xix).

The inherent 'ethicity' of Derrida's context-opening concepts is a double one. Firstly, a concept such as truth, reason or justice in *its very meaning* opens a context; it inaugurates a sense which would hold in all possible contexts. These concepts broach the possibility of a non-contextual (ideal) legitimacy and in so doing demand that we not be satisfied with any contextual determination.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, however, these context-opening concepts and the very idea of ideality are only ever given *in contexts*. Consequently, the *telos* of purity or ideality can never be fulfilled (1988:119). This non-fulfilment of the *telos* of pure truth is, for Derrida, *necessary*. Concepts, as concepts, must determine a certain meaning; they must therefore mark, delimit, be traced or inscribed. As such, they can never be pure. They will always be the effect of a specific and singular iteration. (Or, in the terms of Derrida's debate with Searle: a type is only ever given as a token.) This is why Derrida's ethics of concepts is double-edged. Concepts are promises of pure meaning which can never be purely given. Further, the meaningful determination of a concept – such as using the word 'justice' within a context – is also a violation of the concept. To say, 'This *is* justice' is to foreclose the ideality of the term. Justice cannot be reduced to a representation or token *within* the structures of meaning or representation: 'justice risks being reduced once again to juridical-moral rules, norms, or representations, within an inevitable totalizing horizon' (1994:28). Philosophy is, for Derrida, a responsibility. The philosophical question is one of ideality, of pure meaning, of 'x in general' above and beyond any particular context. In asking this question the tradition of philosophy is also the opening of tradition: it demands a truth beyond any tradition-located *doxa*. However, this question is also necessarily unanswerable or impossible; for pure truth always exceeds the singularity of any definition. A delimitation or instantiation of truth is also a violence done to the ethical opening of truth. However, to *not* ask this question, to *not* do philosophy, or to remain silent would be a form of 'the worst violence' (1978:152).<sup>14</sup>

From this attention to the way concepts work Derrida argues for an 'ethicity' in all language. By defining intentionality – the aim for fulfilled sense – *as metaphysics*, Derrida lodges a metaphysical imperative at the heart of all meaning. Because a concept is iterable

and capable of being used beyond any particular context, a concept is never fully given. The non-fulfilment of a concept's intention is defined by Derrida as a promise or teleology. The philosophical question of truth is an opening of a concept's promise, a demand for a meaning not reducible to specific use. But philosophy is also a responsibility for the impossibility of this promise. The *idea* of pure truth, justice or reason necessarily represses the singularity of events. To demand an *idea* of truth, or any concept, one must repress the necessary non-ideality of a concept. It is in recognising this constitutive repression that philosophy for Derrida also acknowledges its inherent violence. The opening to pure truth is also an act of closure; for it establishes an idea of truth as complete self-presence.

This inherent connection between meaning and ethics relies, then, upon translating a feature of formal or ideal meaning into meaning in general. The idea that a concept is a promise is based on the idea that a concept's meaning is *never* fully instantiated. And Derrida is quite adamant that this is a peculiarly philosophical definition of the concept.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the use Derrida makes of conceptuality links it firmly to Kant's pure concepts of reason, which by their very nature do not permit of empirical determination.<sup>16</sup> The clear location of this definition of the concept *within* philosophy demonstrates that the link between ethics and meaning – here, the necessity of a concept's possibility – depends upon a prior definition of philosophy. Because philosophy is defined by Derrida as 'pure truth or the pretension to pure truth' it cannot accept any contextually determined meaning. It must, necessarily, exceed context. Any philosophical (or theoretical) consideration of a concept is a consideration of a *future opening* toward a meaning not given; it is also a consideration of an *anterior debt* to the concept's already inscribed 'inauguration' (the concept's condition).<sup>17</sup> If this temporality of concepts is ethical, this is because concepts *as such* are the vehicles of the metaphysical opening. Derrida moves from the inherently ethical character of the philosophical question that opens any single use of a concept, to the inherent ethics of all speaking. Speaking, as meaningful, is also a promising and an opening of context. In order to *mean*, I must speak conceptually; but if I do so, what I say cannot be contained within a context. For a concept only works if it can be used in more than one context. The condition for the possibility of a context is also what renders a context *necessarily* open. The *possibility* of philosophy (as the generality of concepts)

functions as a metaphysical imperative in all language. Because the question of a meaning that exceeds context *can* be asked, and because this question concerns a possibility of all meaning, it *ought* to be asked. For Derrida, this conceptual possibility, established in the idea of philosophy, is the possibility of ethics. It is always possible that any conceptual determination of a concept be opened by the question of a concept's meaning.

We have arrived, I would suggest, at a circularity. Unless we accept the idea that a possibility is a necessity,<sup>18</sup> we have to say that the inherent ethicity of language depends upon a definition of the philosophical question as the question of the *possibility* of a pure concept. But this philosophical question, as an opening, is also given an ethical justification; for it is defined by Derrida as a responsibility. However, as Heidegger said of his hermeneutic circle, this is not a bad circularity (1996:143); it demonstrates that any attempt to ground ethics philosophically already depends upon an ethically determined definition of philosophy. Furthermore, any attempt to link ethics to meaning depends upon our philosophy of meaning and what we see as a paradigm case of meaning. (And this, as Derrida himself points out is already ethical, or 'juridical'.) Derrida begins with formal or ideal meaning and regards the telos of pure sense and fulfilment as the intention of meaning in general.<sup>19</sup> The question that follows from this then is: what are the ethics of understanding language, as Derrida does, according to the *telos* of concepts? If the debate between Searle and Derrida can be 'decided' by saying that Searle concentrates on ordinary or uncontested usage while Derrida attends to the ideal of pure concepts, how do we decide upon which language paradigm is (or ought to be) normative? As Derrida himself suggests, any unquestioned refusal to consider non-ordinary cases is an act of illegitimate exclusion. But, as non-Derrideans like MacIntyre, Habermas and Cavell have also noted, an attention to ideality and justification also has its implications and *can* be seen as a symptom of a collapse of moral frameworks, contexts or traditions. If no single feature of language (*neither* the recognition that takes place in contexts *nor* the difference that renders each context specific) can determine the nature of meaning, then it seems that if there is an ethical *necessity* in language it may be as multi-faceted as the dimensions of meaning itself. Whereas Cavell's 'necessity' refers to the burden of sharing a language game and its recognised use, Derrida's necessity refers to the possible ideality of language, the *idea*

of a meaning beyond the specificity of context. And it is this possible opening of meaning that enables Derrida to speak of 'a radical and a priori necessary infidelity' in all language (1974:39). Can these forms of necessity be reconciled? What sort of necessity are we dealing with here? If the necessity is analytic – and has to do with the way we define what language is – then the necessity of ethics is only tied to the specific understanding of certain forms of meaning. Ordinary language may necessitate normativity *if* we define ordinary language as the recognition of already shared rules. Philosophical concepts might also necessitate an ethical opening *if* we regard such concepts as ideas: indications of a pure sense above and beyond any determination. But are these definitions of necessity themselves necessary?

If, unlike Derrida, we regard ideality, not as an explanation of language in general but as a particular and specific achievement of language, then we may have to think of different relations between ethics and meaning. The character of formal meaning is highly pertinent to specific ethical contexts (and it is not surprising that Derridean ethics has been spelled out most clearly in legal theory.) The task of law, for example, *can* be likened to the task of a formal language. The very idea of law or justice is that it will not be determined by any single interest or instance. Just as formal language may begin with the use or interest of a specific occasion or inscription, so a law always has an original event of judgement. In both law and formal languages the *origin* (or original context) of meaning is necessarily lost: the very formality of sense demands a detachment from the specificity of a first occasion or decision. Law, like formal truth, *is law or truth* only through formalisation. As such, it possess the ethicity or 'promise' which Derrida describes as both an opening and a necessary non-fulfilment. But there are other practices of meaning and understanding, I would argue, that are not adequately described according to the *telos* of ideality. Cavell's description of moral disagreement, for example, assumes that the question of a general or formal meaning is *not* asked. Further, it is seen as inherent to the practice of moral disagreement that what we mean by a term is not an ideal concept, what would stand as a good action on all possible occasions, but only what constitutes a good action in this case. It is *possible* that we might 'open' any moral disagreement by asking the question of a good action 'in general'. But is it necessary – ethically – that we do so? For Derrida the answer

is yes: to delimit a concept to a context and to exclude the possibility of the concept's opening is a denial of the ethical possibility of meaning. But would this be an exclusion? It would be so if, like Derrida, we regarded *all* speaking and meaning as intentionality: an aim for *fulfilment of sense*. But I think Cavell has given clear examples where this is not the case; where what we mean is *not* an idea or sense that would be trans-contextual: cases in which the question or idea of a concept does not arise. Are these occasions not ethical? Is ethics not (yet) taking place here?

We might take as an example the pro-choice/pro-life debate. Here we typically use the concept of 'right' – as that which applies to all regardless of circumstance. The debate then negotiates the respective rights of mother, foetus and possibly others concerned. Such a discussion *is* an ethical opening, a refusal to determine or decide any exclusive or exhaustive sense of 'right.' However, if we regard 'right' as an Idea, or as an opening of a concept to a *telos* we can only promise, our debate will reach paralysis. Rather than attend to the *meaning* of right it might be better to look at its use, how it works, whether it is grammatical to speak of a 'right to life'. And if such a use is now grammatical, then the language of 'right' may no longer be of any help. We might then want to ask about the character of the context that establishes ethics as a game of *rights*. We might, in short, need to 'go Foucaultian' or follow MacIntyre's path. Instead of acceding to the promise of our necessarily impossible ethical vocabulary as a set of *concepts*, we might question our practices and ways of life.

Formal meaning, natural languages and the regularity of practices possess *varying degrees of normativity* – from the established analytic necessity of a formal language to the mutual attunement<sup>20</sup> of agreed practices.<sup>21</sup> And if we accept that meaning varies depending on the *type* of language or practice, then there will also be different forms of linguistic responsibility depending upon whether we are dealing with law and concepts, or practices and procedures. No single theory of meaning can yield an ethics, nor can a definition of philosophy (or philosophical responsibility) follow from a *single type* of language. Furthermore, this differentiation of types of meaning cannot itself *decide* whether a concept is to be dealt with pragmatically or ideally. For as the forgoing discussion has set out to demonstrate, *deciding* on whether the context or concept is

ordinary/pragmatic or philosophical/ideal is itself ethically determining.

As we saw, for Cavell meaning is defined beginning primarily with action descriptions. Justification and judgement depend upon, and follow, an already given set of language agreements.<sup>22</sup> If games and practices are the starting point for our theory of meaning then it follows that philosophy will be an attention to usage and norms. Staying within contexts and everyday examples will constitute philosophy's proper task. When philosophy does produce *problems* of use or incoherence in games it will have to do so within the context of ordinary language, which will remain the last court of appeal. Justification is seen as a second possibility and not philosophy's essential, possible or constitutive procedure. The value of such a philosophy which begins and remains within everyday practices (and defines ethics and responsibility within practices) is this: ethics is not based on a break with everyday meaning. Being meaningful (or ethical) does not presuppose a *theory of meaning*<sup>23</sup> (as a telos towards pure sense or conceptual ideality). We are ethical, according to Cavell, in the same way that we engage in all sorts of practice: an action is an instance of x if we would use 'x' to describe it. Intentions, beliefs and values are a form of description, a particular use of terms. The *theory* of usage intervenes only – if at all – when things have gone awry. Context, or established usage *is* ethics and responsibility, and philosophers, no less than any other speakers, are equally responsible and context-bound. Cavell's ethics of meaning is intimately bound to the location of philosophy within the everyday. The definition of philosophy as elucidation and reminder is itself ethical. The defence of context and its ethics cannot ultimately take place *within philosophy*; for it rests upon an (already ethical) understanding of what philosophy is.

Derrida's response – that the very possibility of locating a context necessitates asking the question of the determination of that context – depends upon a definition of philosophy that has this value: the *possibility* of a critical opening or question is located in any use of language. All norms, as norms, also pose themselves as questions.

What I am suggesting is that it is the various dimensions and forms of meaning which enable the various dimensions of ethical life. What needs to be questioned is the putative intimate connection between ethics and meaning, as though deciding how our concepts work might also give us a form of ethical *necessity*. (Both Cavell and

Derrida foreground this term in different ways.) Neither the model of mutual attunement nor the redemptive question of the limit of understanding can decide *in advance* what ethics will be. There are conditions when a theory of pure conceptuality will be a relevant procedure in ethical debate: this will include instances of law, meta-ethics, institutional and constitutional definition. But there are also conditions where philosophy, by reminding us of and describing everyday use also makes a truly ethical intervention: in cases of feminist ethics or bio-ethics our meta-ethical concepts are often challenged by what it is we already do and practically endorse. In these cases the ethical dilemma and practice often question the validity of our rules and concepts, and not vice versa.

The possible solutions, I want to suggest, cannot be sorted out *within* a theory of meaning; what we understand as a 'special context' and the possibility of its recognition determines our theory of meaning. Take, for example, the Searle/Derrida debate. If we look closely at the arguments we can see that it's not possible to decide who is right. For the most part, Searle and Derrida agree on how language works. Both agree that the meaning of an utterance is determined by its use or performance in a context, and both agree that an utterance can be deployed in a number of contexts. Both also agree that a statement can be 'misused' – quoted, stated ironically, used in fiction, or mentioned in a 'special context.' Where the debate breaks down (or kicks in) is over the recognition of misuse or special contexts. For Searle, it is the very conventional working of language, or prior condition of background assumptions, that secures when an utterance is being used *indirectly*. There *may* be cases where we are not sure of how a statement or sentence is being used, but for the most part – and because of the very contextual and assumed nature of language – we recognise the special contexts of performance, irony, metaphor and mentioning (rather than use). For Derrida, however, it is the problem of how – or according to what convention – we recognise a non-conventional use that ought really to concern an inquiry into meaning. How do we decide what is, or isn't, a proper or conventionally agreed upon use?

For Searle, language use depends upon recognition and context. Any indirect speech act – such as irony or metaphor – can be recognised as such because we understand what our background assumptions are. An ironic statement is recognised *as ironic* because it is not used conventionally and does not agree with the context in

which it is uttered. To *decide* that a speech act is *indirect* demands that we know what our context is. But how is this determined? (This is, in fact, Derrida's critique of Searle. How is the limit and character of context itself decided?) In Searle's case, background assumptions, contexts and everyday use explain how utterances work and are recognised. Derrida's argument doesn't propose *another theory of meaning*. It points out that if we accept Searle's theory we also have to accept that contexts might not *fully* determine or enable *full* recognition of an utterance. The disagreement comes down to Searle's frustration that what matters is what *does* work and is recognised; what matters is the determination of meaning and the background of our utterances. Misuses are peripheral, and even ostensible non-ordinary uses (like irony and metaphor) can be explained in relation to the ordinary. For Derrida, however, *misuse*, quotation, non-recognition or the undecidability of utterances are essential, or necessary, to their working (and to the opening of the philosophical question). The disagreement between Searle and Derrida is therefore one in which the instability or undecidability of context is regarded as secondary or peripheral (Searle) as opposed to necessary (Derrida).

What gets determined as a 'proper' instance of meaning is also what decides the ethics of meaning. Searle's and Cavell's 'ordinary' recognition begins from everyday situations of unquestioned use, while Derrida's insistence on the possibility of the aim for *ideal* meaning begins from a definition of philosophical concepts. The link between ethics and meaning depends, then, on which aspect of meaning is determined (by our philosophy) as *properly* ethical. It cannot, therefore, be a question of *philosophy* deciding what ethics is or how philosophy might establish itself as ethics. This can be illuminated by returning to the figure of Socrates (a figure invoked by both Derrida and Cavell to different ends). Socrates both asks us what we mean and what we *really mean*. The Socratic reminder of our political responsibility, our conversational position and our fundamental finitude is close to Cavell's understanding of philosophy as endless responsibility. On the other hand, the interpretation of philosophy as 'Platonism', as an idea beyond everyday participation,<sup>24</sup> is clearly given in Derrida's definition of philosophy as a necessary impossibility. Both directions for philosophy are Socratic. Socratic irony is, after all, an ethical recognition of *both* sides of the philosophical equation: the

responsibility of our inevitable locatedness within a context, and the inadequacy of context to answer our deepest questions.

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#### Notes

1. 'What is the nature of the debate that seems to begin here? Where, here? Here? Is it a debate? Does it take place? ... If it takes place, what is its place?' (1988:29-30).
2. 'I have described moral arguments as ones whose direct point it is to determine the positions we are assuming or are able or willing to assume responsibility for; and discussion is *necessary* because our responsibilities, the extensions of our cares and commitments, and the implications of our conduct, are not obvious; because the self is not obvious to the self. ... Its rationality lies in following methods which lead to a knowledge of our own position, of where we stand; in short, to a knowledge and definition of ourselves' (1979:312).
3. It follows that concepts, for Cavell, are forms of use and interaction that precede strict formalisation. Searle, similarly, argues that a concept can't have strict boundaries and that the conditions for a concept's determination are *empirical* – the way words are used and what they conventionally do: 'the boundaries of the concept of a promise are, like the boundaries of most concepts in a natural language, a bit loose. But one thing is clear; however loose the boundaries may be, and however difficult it may be to decide marginal cases, the conditions under which a man who utters 'I hereby promise' are in a perfectly ordinary sense empirical conditions' (1969:178). What Searle means by empirical conditions are the assumptions of the context in which the word 'promise' is used. So promises *ought* to be kept, precisely because the concept (i.e. the assumptions and practice) of 'promise' already signifies obligation for this particular social usage. The passage from 'is' to 'ought' in the case of 'promise' is one of tautology: 'the tautology that one ought to keep one's promises is only one of a class of similar tautologies concerning institutionalised forms of obligation' (ibid.:185).

4. This notion of an inherent normativity in language is close to, but more far-reaching than, Searle's notion of 'institutional fact.' We can deduce *ought* (or value) statements from *is* (or fact) statements because, Searle argues, the fact of promising is not one of brute fact – an immutable part of the world – but a fact about our social and conventional world (1969:184-85): 'In the case of linguistic institutions, like promising (or statement making), the serious utterances of the words commit one in ways which are determined by the meaning of the words' (ibid.:189).
5. 'And here the strange thing is that when I am quite certain of how the words are used, have no doubt about it, I can still give no *grounds* for my way of going on. If I tried I could give a thousand, but none as certain as the very thing they were supposed to be grounds for' (Wittgenstein 1969:307). This is not to say that Wittgenstein, or Cavell, preclude questioning our conventions or grounds. It is just that, in the first instance, we have to recognise a certain *limit* to any act of grounding before that limit can be questioned. For a reading of Wittgenstein and Cavell that stresses the possibility of a criticism of internal criteria see Hilary Putnam's *Realism with a Human Face* (1990).
6. This is not to say that Cavell precludes the possibility of a justification of a norm. But while this possibility is admitted it is not seen as the distinguishing feature of what we mean by the ethical, and it is not seen as philosophy's task. (In fact, philosophers have been largely mistaken in regarding what we do in our moral discussions as a form of justification.) In usual moral discussion we justify *cases*: 'Is this an instance of promising?' The philosopher's error proceeds from thinking that moral discussion justifies, rather than assumes, norms.
7. The very practice of a philosophy that *points out* the constraints and norms of context might be seen to provide the coherence, stability and contextual security that are no longer socially given. Philosophy, in Martha Nussbaum's (1994) terms, for example, might be a form of therapy, a shared act of reflection in the absence of the specific local community of the academy. Despite his rejection of discourse ethics and neo-Aristotelianism, Habermas describes philosophy as inevitably secured within a *Lebenswelt*, with ethical justification being tied to the intersubjective responsibility of the public sphere. The necessary justification of our shared norms follows, for Habermas, from this intersubjective responsibility of speaking. In the ever expanding context-deprivation of modernity, philosophy can provide a sense of re-inclusion within a meaningful and determinate horizon.
8. Derrida does in fact use the example of 'reason' in his essay on Foucault. Foucault's claim to write a history *of* reason cannot, Derrida argues, be

- fulfilled. Any history depends upon narration, description, argument and meaning. The very *meaning* of reason – *as* meaningful sense – is such that it cannot be located *within* a history. The writing of history itself is an act of reason and can't delimit reason. We cannot use the word 'reason' as though it were an historical event. Here, Derrida appeals to the *meaning* of both 'history' and 'reason' in order to show that Foucault can't do what he says he is going to do – write a history of reason: 'If there is a historicity proper to reason in general, the history of reason cannot be the history of its origin (which, for a start, demands the historicity of reason in general), but must be one of its determined figures' (1978:43). A similar method is adopted in Derrida's debate with Searle. Searle claims that Derrida is mistaken in thinking that concepts *must* have clear boundaries if they are to be at all meaningful. Derrida responds by arguing that the *very meaning* of 'concept' implies just that: a fuzzy concept is no concept at all. We can't use the word 'concept' unless we are talking about clear boundaries (1988:116). Using the word 'concept' in the way that Searle does misses the very meaning of 'concept' – at least in its philosophical context (ibid.:123). (I will say more about the peculiarity of this context later).
9. On the possibility of such a reading of Derrida see Richard Rorty's 'Jacques Derrida' (1995).
  10. This is, of course, how Richard Rorty describes Derrida's philosophy – as a form of literary criticism. Cavell also describes philosophy as a type of text (1979:3).
  11. Cavell has also addressed a particular (transcendental) understanding of philosophy as 'endless responsibility' in an essay on Emerson, Coleridge and Kant. By asking the question of human condition, philosophy detaches itself from the world: it 'loses' the world in order to ask how a world is possible. In so doing philosophy is a non-acceptance of the world and, as such, a break with context. This seems closer to Derrida's understanding of the philosophical question as a break with any given context. But there is still an important difference: Cavell's sustained Wittgensteinianism sees philosophy's question and responsibility as thoroughly *within language*. Our finitude, the fact that we mean only within a given context, renders us belated; the world is already (and only) *our world*. As such, accounting for ourselves will be an endless responsibility for a language we don't decide upon but which is also all we have (and all we are) (Cavell 1985). For Derrida, however, the philosophical question takes us beyond context and signification. And it is this extension beyond context that presents us with a responsibility for the *unnameable or the absolutely singular*.

12. 'I would even go so far as to say that it is the interpretation of writing that is peculiar and proper to philosophy. I shall limit myself to a single example, but I do not believe that a single counterexample can be found in the history of philosophy as such ...' (1988:3).
13. It might be argued, in opposition to this possibility, that ethics for the most part works within context and only seeks trans-contextual justification when contextual harmony breaks down. But, for Derrida, the *possibility* of the *questioning* of context cannot be relegated to a marginal case or accident. This *possibility* is not within or part of a context, nor an accident which might befall a closed context. As the idea of a sense which holds *across context*, ideal meaning is the condition for the possibility of any context whatsoever. Cavell's argument that philosophers are *mistaken* when they see ethics as a question of justification or the founding of contexts, depends upon *deciding* to remain within context. It is this decision, this 'juridical' delimitation of context, which Derrida sees as the closure of the metaphysical opening of language.
14. Similarly, for Cavell the resistance to any game or language, the challenge to a community of speakers must also recognise our situation *within* that community; any pure 'outside' would be a position of silence, of saying nothing: 'I do not know in advance how deep my agreement with myself is, how far responsibility for the language may run. But if I am to have my own voice in it, I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me. The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for *someone* else's consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute' (1979:28).
15. 'And the philosophical theme, the signified concept, whatever may be its formal *presentation* – philosophical or mythic – always remains the force of law, the mastery or the dynasty of discourse' (1995:102).
16. For Kant, metaphysics must rest on concepts alone, independent of the specific determination of experience; only through such pure concepts is metaphysics possible. 'Metaphysics has to do not only with concepts of nature, which always find their application in experience, but also with pure rational concepts, which never can be given in any possible experience whatever. Consequently it deals with concepts whose objective reality (namely, that they are not mere chimeras) and with assertions whose truth or falsity cannot be discovered or confirmed by any experience. This part of metaphysics, however, is precisely what constitutes its essential end, to which the rest is only a means' (1950:75; 1784:§40).
17. Derrida's response to Searle makes the distinction between the ideal concepts of a theory or philosophy and the less rigorous notion of pragmatic

- concepts. The very idea of meaning, accordingly, depends upon the ideal concept of intentionality, the aim for a plenitude of fully determined sense: 'But if intentionality is to be described in its essence (which implies the *telos*), the movement toward plenitude must be considered essential and must be integrated into the ideal concept of intention. I say "ideal concept", i.e., also rigorous concept. If by pragmatic concept you mean one that is empirical and approximative, I have trouble seeing how it would be able to found, theoretically, seriously, a theory, like Searle's which is intentionalist through and through, treating intention as the founding principle that of all speech acts that are serious, literal and meaningful. ... I do not believe that the concept of "intention" can be treated as a "pragmatic concept", not at least if by that you mean a concept that is empirically useful, provisionally convenient, constructed without great rigor' (1988:128).
18. Of course, this is an important point and, in many ways, is one of the most significant features of Derrida's post-phenomenological philosophy. In strictly logical terms it would be illegitimate to conclude a necessity from a possibility. One can imagine a being *x* which could *possibly* gain a certain feature, event or predicate, but one could also imagine a world in which such a possibility never actually took place. And this counterexample would enable us to separate a *possible* predication from a being, and no necessity could be concluded from a possibility. Derrida's idea of 'structural possibility', however, needs to be understood in terms of a criticism of any such purely logical possibility. If an event or feature *can* be predicated of an entity then this tells us something about what that entity is. For Derrida, if an utterance *can* be misinterpreted then this has to do with the very structure of speaking. Only because an utterance is repeatable is it capable of communicating or being understood; but this condition of repeatability also means an utterance can be misunderstood. Thus, the *possibility* of misunderstanding has to do with the *conditions of possibility* of speech or writing. Only the appeal to some purely logical universe where such possibilities need not take place would be able to separate the possibility of misunderstanding from the necessarily iterable structure of speech. For Derrida, 'a possibility – a possible risk – is *always* possible, and is in some sense a necessary possibility' (1988:15). Derrida's passage from possibility to necessity is also achieved by an understanding of the *juridical* determination of language. If a possibility can be demonstrated, then the *exclusion* of this possibility as 'inessential', 'secondary' or 'accidental' is only achieved by a limitation or decision. It is in this respect that he asks, 'what would be meant by an "ordinary" language defined by the exclusion of the very law of language?' (ibid.:17). For Derrida, an exclusion of possibility as



neither essential nor necessary is, therefore, *juridical*, an effect of judgement. But this judgement is not a conscious decision within language. Rather, language itself, as determined, already exercises a juridical force. This can be likened to Cavell's comment on Wittgensteinian 'criteria'. Criteria are already in place in a language; judgements in the everyday sense do not establish criteria but depend upon them. Where Derrida differs from Cavell over the inherently juridical character of language is in his demand that the undecidability that precedes the determination of context be opened by the philosophical question. This question is always possible; its exclusion as inessential can only be the effect of a decision and never established a priori. For Derrida it is both important and necessary that language's implicit 'criteria' or decisions are 'opened' to question.

19. Cavell explicitly sets his focus on ordinary language against the domain of artificial or formal languages: 'Where your concern is one of constructing artificial languages, you may explain that you mean to be considering only the syntax (and perhaps semantics) of a language, and not its pragmatics. Or where it becomes important to emphasize a distinction between (where there has come to be a distinction between) scientific and metaphysical assertion, or between factual report and moral rule, you may set out a "theory" of scientific or factual utterance. In these cases you will be restricting concern in order to deal with certain properties of formal systems, certain problems of meaning, and to defeat certain forms of nonsense. ... But the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language is concerned less to avenge sensational crimes against the intellect than to redress its civil wrongs; to steady any imbalance, the tiniest usurpation in the mind' (1976:18).
20. 'The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually *attuned* top to bottom' (1979:32).
21. It might be valuable in this regard to recall Derrida's reading of Husserl. If, as Derrida argues, Husserl's task is the foundation of pure truth in *originating sense*, then Husserl's project will necessarily fail. For pure truth or formal meaning is only achieved once it has emptied itself of the particularity of content. But it is from this project that Derrida defines his own philosophical question of 'truth in general'. If we accept that formal meaning is an achievement of certain practices – logic, geometry, mathematics and so on – and is quite different from other less formalised language practices, then the Derridean 'necessary impossibility' of the question of pure truth does

not pertain to *all* instances of meaning. Where meaning is established as neither pure nor ideal – in natural languages or practices – then dispute will be resolved not by attending to the opening of a concept but to what we do, and might not do.

22. A similar point is made by Searle who argues that our understanding of what constitutes justification in logical arguments already presupposes certain values (1969:176).
23. I mean this in the Derridean and not Donald Davidson's sense. Davidson's argument that understanding a language requires a theory of meaning merely asks that we posit any language as relating to a world. It does not demand that we locate an understanding of *the conditions for the possibility of meaning* any act of meaning. By arguing that all speaking or meaning possesses an 'ethnicity' tied to the ideality of sense, Derrida implies that a theory of ideality is presupposed (however implicitly) in any act of meaning or intention.
24. 'The essential drift bearing on writing as an iterative structure, cut off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the ultimate authority, orphaned and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is precisely what Plato condemns in the *Phaedrus*. If Plato's gesture is, as I believe, the philosophical move par excellence, one can measure what is at stake here.' (Derrida 1988:8).

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