CHAPTER 1

Must we mean what we say?

That what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean is an idea which many philosophers find oppressive. It might be argued that in part the oppression results from misunderstanding, that the new philosophy which proceeds from ordinary language is not *that* different from traditional methods of philosophizing, and that the frequent attacks upon it are misdirected. But I shall not attempt to be conciliatory, both because I think the new philosophy at Oxford is critically different from traditional philosophy, and because I think it is worth trying to bring out their differences as fully as possible. There *is*, after all, something oppressive about a philosophy which seems to have uncanny information about our most personal philosophical assumptions (those, for example, about whether we can ever know for certain of the existence of the external world, or of other minds; and those we make about favorite distinctions between "the descriptive and the normative," or between matters of fact and matters of language) and which inveterately nags us about them. Particularly oppressive when that philosophy seems so often *merely* to nag and to try no special answers to the questions which possess us—unless it be to suggest that we sit quietly in a room. Eventually, I suppose, we will have to look at that sense of oppression itself: such feelings can come from a truth about ourselves which we are holding off.

My hopes here are modest. I shall want to say why, in my opinion, some of the arguments Professor Mates brings against the Oxford philosophers he mentions are on the whole irrelevant to their main concerns. And this

Since writing the relevant portions of this paper, I have seen three articles which make points or employ arguments similar to those I am concerned with: R. M. Hare, "Are Discoveries About the Uses of Words Empirical?" *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LIV (1957); G. E. M. Anscombe, "On Brute Facets," *Analysis*, Vol. XVIII (1957-1958); S. Hampshire and H. L. A. Hart, "Decision, Intention and Certainty," *Mind*, Vol. LXVII (1958). But it would have lengthened an already lengthy paper to have tried to bring out more specifically than will be obvious to anyone reading them their relevance to what I have said.

will require me to say something about what I take to be the significance of
proceeding, in one's philosophizing, from what we ordinarily say and
mean. That will not be an easy thing to do without appearing alternately
trivial and dogmatic. Perhaps that is only to be expected, given the depth
and the intimacy of conflict between this way of proceeding in philosophy
and the way I take Mates to be following. These ways of philosophy seem,
like friends who have quarreled, to be able neither to tolerate nor to ignore
one another. I shall frequently be saying something one could not fail to
know; and that will appear trivial. I shall also be suggesting that some-
thing we know is being overemphasized and something else not taken
seriously enough; and that will appear dogmatic. But since I am commit-
ted to this dialogue, the time is past for worrying about appearances.

⌒

Professor Mates is less concerned to dispute specific results of the
Oxford philosophers than he is to question the procedures which have
led these philosophers to claim them. In particular, he doubts that they
have assembled the sort of evidence which their "statements about ordin-
ary language" require. As a basis for his skepticism, Mates produces a
disagreement between two major figures of the school over the interpret-
ation of an expression of ordinary language—a disagreement which he
regards as symptomatic of the shallowness of their methods.[1] On Mates'
account of it, the conflict is not likely to be settled successfully by further
discussion. We are faced with two professors (of philosophy, it happens)
each arguing (claiming, rather) that the way he talks is the right way and
that what he intuits about language is the truth about it. But if this is what
their claims amount to, it hardly seems worth a philosopher's time to try
to collect evidence for them.

   To evaluate the disagreement between Austin and Ryle, we may distin-
guish among the statements they make about ordinary language, three
types:[2] (1) There are statements which produce *instances* of what is said in

---

1   I am too conscious of differences in the practices of Oxford philosophers to be happy about
    referring, in this general way, to a school. But nothing in my remarks depends on the
    existence of such a school—beyond the fact that certain problems are common to the
    philosophers mentioned, and that similar questions enter into their attempts to deal with
    them. It is with these questions (I mean, of course, with what I understand them to be) that
    I am concerned.
2   Perhaps I should say "ideal" types. The statements do not come labeled in the discourse of
    such philosophers, but I am going to have to trust that my placing of statements into these
    types will not seem to distort them.

a language ("We do say . . . but we don't say—"; "We ask whether . . . but we do not ask whether—"). (2) Sometimes these instances are accompanied by *explications*—statements which make explicit what is implied when we say what statements of the first type instance us as saying ("When we say . . . we imply (suggest, say)—"; "We don't say . . . unless we mean—"). Such statements are checked by reference to statements of the first type. (3) Finally, there are *generalizations*, to be tested by reference to statements of the first two types. Since there is no special problem here about the testing of generalizations, we will be concerned primarily with the justification of statements of the first two types, and especially with the second.

Even without attempting to be more precise about these differences, the nature of the clash between Ryle and Austin becomes somewhat clearer. Notice, first of all, that the statement Mates quotes from Austin is of the first type: "Take 'voluntarily' . . . : we may . . . make a gift voluntarily . . ."—which I take to be material mode for, "We say, 'The gift was made voluntarily.'"(The significance of this shift of "mode" will be discussed.) Only one of the many statements Mates quotes from Ryle is of this type, viz., "It makes sense . . . to ask whether a boy was responsible for breaking a window, but not whether he was responsible for finishing his homework in good time.. . . "The statements of Ryle's which clash with Austin's are different: "In their most ordinary employment 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' are used . . . as adjectives applying to actions which ought not to be done. We discuss whether someone's action was voluntary or not only when the action seems to have been his fault . . . etc." These do not produce instances of what we say (the way "We say 'The boy was responsible for breaking the window'"does); they are generalizations—as the phrases "actions which" and "only when" show—to be tested by producing such instances.

It is true that the instance quoted from Austin does go counter to Ryle's generalization: making a gift is not always something which ought not to be done, or something which is always someone's fault. There is clearly a clash here. But is our only intelligent course *at this point* to take a poll? Would it be dogmatic or unempirical of us to conclude simply that Ryle is wrong about this, that he has settled upon a generalization to which an obvious counterinstance has been produced? It is, moreover, an instance which Ryle himself may well be expected to acknowledge as counter to his generalization; indeed, one which he might have produced for himself. The fact that he did not need indicate only that he was too quick to accept a generalization, not that he is without (good) evidence for it. One of Mates' objections to Ryle can be put this way: Ryle *is* without evidence—anyway, without very good evidence—because he is not

entitled to a statement of the first type (one which presents an *instance* of what we say) in the absence of experimental studies which demonstrate its occurrence in the language.

To see that this objection, taken in the general sense in which Mates urges it, is groundless, we must bear in mind the fact that these statements—statements that something is said in English—are being made by native speakers of English. Such speakers do not, in *general*, need evidence for what is said in the language; they are the source of such evidence. It is from them that the descriptive linguist takes the corpus of utterances on the basis of which he will construct a grammar of that language. To answer *some* kinds of specific questions, we will have to engage in that "laborious questioning" Mates insists upon, and count noses; but in general, to tell what is and isn't English, and to tell whether what is said is properly used, the native speaker can rely on his own nose; if not, there would be nothing to count. No one speaker will say everything, so it may be profitable to seek out others; and sometimes you (as a native speaker) may be unsure that a form of utterance is as you say it is, or is used as you say it is used, and in that case you will have to check with another native speaker. And because attending so hard to what you say may itself make you unsure more often than is normal, it is a good policy to check more often. A good policy, but not a methodological necessity. The philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language, in his use of himself as subject in his collection of data, may be more informal than the descriptive linguist (though not more than the linguistic theorist using examples from his native speech); but there is nothing in that to make the data, in some general way, suspect.

Nor does this imply a reliance on that "intuition or memory" which Mates (p. 68)[3] finds so objectionable. In claiming to know, in general, whether we do or do not use a given expression, I am not claiming to have an infallible memory for what we say, any more than I am claiming to remember the hour when I tell you what time we have dinner on Sundays. A normal person may forget and remember certain words, or what certain words mean, in his native language, but (assuming that he has used it continuously) he does not remember the *language.* There is a world of difference between a person who speaks a language natively and one who knows the language fairly well. If I lived in Munich and knew German fairly well, I might try to intuit or guess what the German

---

3 Page references to Mates' paper, "On the Verification of Statements About Ordinary Language," throughout this essay are according to its occurrence in the collection entitled *Ordinary Language,* V. C. Chappell, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964).

expression for a particular phenomenon is. Or I might ask my landlady; and that would probably be the extent of the laborious questioning the problem demanded. Nor does the making of either of the sorts of statement about ordinary language I have distinguished rely on a claim that "[we have] already amassed ... a tremendous amount of empirical information about the use of [our] native language" (Mates, ibid.). That would be true if we were, say, making statements about the history of the language, or about its sound system, or about the housewife's understanding of political slogans, or about a special form in the morphology of some dialect. But for a native speaker to say what, in ordinary circumstances, is said when, no such special information is needed or claimed. All that is needed is the truth of the proposition that a natural language is what native speakers of that language speak.

<div align="center">∽</div>

Ryle's generalization, however, requires more than simple, first level statements of instances; it also requires statements of the second type, those which contain first level statements together with an "explication" of them. When Ryle claims that "... we raise questions of responsibility only when someone is charged, justly or unjustly, with an offence," he is claiming both, "We say 'The boy was responsible for breaking a window,' but we do not say 'The boy was responsible for finishing his homework in good time,'" and also claiming, "When we say 'The boy was responsible for (some action)' we imply that the action was an offence, one that ought not to have been done, one that was his fault." I want to argue that Ryle is, in general, as entitled to statements of this second type as he is to statements of the first type; although it is just here that the particular generalization in question misses. We know Austin's example counters Ryle's claims because we know that the statement (of the second type), "When we say, 'The gift was made voluntarily' we imply that the action of making the gift was one which ought not to be done, or was someone's fault" is false. This is clearly knowledge which Mates was relying on when he produced the clash between them. I will take up statements of the second type in a moment.

Before proceeding to that, let us look at that clash a bit longer: its importance has altered considerably. What Austin says does not go fully counter to Ryle's story. It is fundamental to Austin's account to emphasize that we cannot *always* say of actions that they were voluntary, even when they obviously were not involuntary either. Although we can (sometimes) say, "The gift was made voluntarily," it is specifically not something we can say about ordinary, unremarkable cases of making gifts. Only when the

action (or circumstances) of making the gift is in some way unusual (instead of his usual Christmas bottle, you give the neighborhood policeman a check for $1000), or extraordinary (you leave your heirs penniless and bequeath your house to your cat), or untoward (you give your rocking horse to your new friend, but the next morning you cry to have it back), can the question whether it was voluntary intelligibly arise. Ryle has not completely neglected this: his "actions which ought not be done" and his "action [which] seems to have been ... [someone's] fault" are clearly examples of actions which are abnormal, untoward, questionable; so he is right in saying that about these we (sometimes) raise the question whether they were voluntary. His error lies in characterizing these actions incompletely, and in wrongly characterizing those about which the question *cannot* arise. Normally, it is true, the question whether satisfactory, correct, or admirable performances are voluntary does not arise; but this is because there is usually nothing about such actions to question; nothing has gone wrong.

Not seeing that the condition for applying the term "voluntary" holds quite generally—viz., the condition that there be something (real or imagined) fishy about any performance intelligibly so characterized—Ryle construes the condition too narrowly, supposes that there must be something *morally* fishy about the performance. He had indeed sensed trouble where trouble was: the philosophical use of "voluntary" stretches the idea of volition out of shape, beyond recognition. And his diagnosis of the trouble was sound: philosophers imagine, because of a distorted picture of the mind, that the term "voluntary" must apply to all actions which are not involuntary (or unintentional), whereas it is only applicable where there is some specific reason to raise the question. The fact that Ryle fails to specify its applicability precisely enough no more vitiates his entire enterprise than does the fact that he indulges a mild form of the same vice he describes: he frees himself of the philosophical tic of stretching what is true of definite segments of what we do to cover *everything* we do (as epistemologists stretch doubt to cover everything we say), but not from the habit of identifying linguistic antitheses with logical contradictories:[4] in particular, he takes the question, "Voluntary or not?" to mean, "Voluntary or involuntary?" and seems to suppose that (responsible) actions

---

4   The harmfulness of this habit is brought out in Austin's "A Plea for Excuses," reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, eds. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961). Pages 130ff. of his paper contain an elaborate defense of (anyway Austin's version of) "ordinary language philosophy." No one concerned with the general subject of the present symposium (or, in particular, with the possibility of budging the subject of moral philosophy) should (=will) neglect its study.

which are not contemptible must be admirable, and that whatever
I (responsibly) do either is my fault or else is to my credit. These antitheses
miss exactly those actions about which the question "Voluntary or not?"
really has no sense, viz., those ordinary, unremarkable, natural things we
do which make up most of our conduct and which are neither admirable
nor contemptible; which, indeed, could only erroneously be said to go on,
in general, in *any* special way.[5] Lacking sureness here, it is not surprising
that Ryle's treatment leaves the subject a bit wobbly. Feeling how enor-
mously wrong it is to remove "voluntary" from a *specific* function, he fails
to sense the slighter error of his own specification.[6]

I have said that the ordinary language philosopher is also and equally
entitled to statements of the second type I distinguished, which means that
he is entitled not merely to say what (words) we say, but equally to say what
we should mean in (by) saying them. Let us turn to statements of this type
and ask what the relation is between what you explicitly say and what you
imply; or, to avoid begging the question, ask how we are to account for the
fact (supposing it to be a fact) that we only say or ask A ("X is voluntary," or
"Is X voluntary?") where B is the case (something is, or seems, fishy about
X).[7] The philosophical problem about this arises in the following way:

> Philosophers who proceed from ordinary language are likely to insist
> that if you say A where B is not the case, you will be misusing A, or

5 Austin's discovery (for our time and place, anyway) of normal action is, I think, important
   enough to bear the philosophical weight he puts upon it—holding the clue to the riddle of
   Freedom. (See Chappell, op. cit., p. 45.) A case can also be made out that it was failure to
   recognize such action which produced some of the notorious paradoxes of classical
   Utilitarianism: what neither the Utilitarians nor their critics seem to have seen clearly
   and constantly is that about unquestionable (normal, natural) action no question is (can
   be) raised; in particular not the question whether the action ought or ought not to have
   been done. The point is a logical one: to raise a question about an action is to put the action
   in question. It is partly the failure to appreciate this which makes the classical moralists
   (appear?) so moralistic, allows them to suppose that the moral question is *always* appro-
   priate—except, of course, where the action is unfree (caused?). But this is no better than
   the assumption that the moral question is *never* appropriate (because we are never *really*
   free). Such mechanical moralism has got all the punishment it deserves in the recent
   mechanical antimoralism, which it must have helped inspire.
6 At the same time, Ryle leaves "involuntary" as stretched as ever when he allows himself to
   speak of "the involuntariness of [someone's] late arrival," *The Concept of Mind* (London:
   Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1949), p. 72.
7 I realize that the point is controversial and that in putting so much emphasis on it I may be
   doing some injustice to the point of view I am trying to defend. There may be consider-
   ations which would lead one to be more temperate in making the point; but against the
   point of view Mates is adopting, it seems to me to demand all the attention it can get.

distorting its meaning. But another philosopher will not want to allow that, because it makes the relation between A and B appear to be a logical one (If A then B; and if not-B then not-A); whereas logical relations hold only between statements, not between a statement and the world: *that* relation is "merely" conventional (or, even, causal?). So the occasion on which we (happen to?) *use* a statement cannot be considered part of its meaning or logic. The solution is then to call the latter the semantics of the expression and the former its pragmatics.

But if we can forget for a moment that the relation between A and B *cannot* be a logical one, we may come to feel how implausible it is to *say* that it is not logical; or rather, to say that nothing *follows* about B from the utterance of A. It is implausible because we do not accept a question like "Did you do that voluntarily?" as appropriate about any and every action. If a person asks you whether you dress the way you do voluntarily, you will not understand him to be curious merely about your psychological processes (whether your wearing them "proceeds from free choice . . . "); you will understand him to be implying or suggesting that your manner of dress is in some way peculiar. If it be replied to this that "voluntary" does not *mean* "peculiar" (or "special" or "fishy") and hence that the implication or suggestion is part merely of the pragmatics of the expression, not part of its *meaning* (semantics), my rejoinder is this: that reply is relevant to a different claim from the one urged here; it is worth saying *here* only if you are able to account for the *relation* between the pragmatics and the semantics of the expression. In the absence of such an account, the reply is empty. For consider: If we use Mates' formula for computing the pragmatic value of an expression—"He wouldn't say that unless he . . ."—then in the described situation we will complete it with something like ". . . unless he thought that my way of dressing is peculiar." Call this implication of the utterance "pragmatic"; the fact remains that he wouldn't (couldn't) say what he did without implying what he did: he MUST MEAN that my clothes are peculiar. I am less interested now in the "mean" than I am in the "must." (After all, there is bound to be some reason why a number of philosophers are tempted to call a relation logical; "must" is logical.) But on this, the "pragmatic" formula throws no light whatever.

What this shows is that the formula does not help us account for the element of necessity ("must") in statements whose implication we understand. But it is equally unhelpful in trying to explain the implication of a statement whose use we do *not* understand (the context in which the

formula enters Mates' discussion). Imagine that I am sitting in my countinghouse counting up my money. Someone who knows that I do that at this hour every day passes by and says, "You ought to do that." What should we say about his statement? That he does not know what "ought" means (what the dictionary says)? That he does not know how to use the word? That he does not know what obligation is? Applying the formula, we compute: "He wouldn't say that unless he asks himself whenever he sees anyone doing anything, 'Ought that person to be doing that or ought he not?'" This may indeed account for his otherwise puzzling remark; but it does so by telling us something we did not know about *him*; it tells us nothing whatever we did not know about the words he used. Here it is *because* we know the meaning and use of "ought" that we are forced to account in the way Mates suggests for its extraordinary occurrence. I take Mates' formula, then, to be expandable into: "Since I understand the meaning and use of his expression, he wouldn't say that unless he . . . ". Perhaps Mates would consider this a distortion and take a different expansion to be appropriate: "He wouldn't say that unless he was using his words in a special way." But now "say that" has a very different force. The expanded form now means, "I know what his expression would ordinarily be used to say, but he can't wish to say that: I don't understand what he is saying." In neither of its expansions, then, does the formula throw any light on the way an expression is being used: in the one case we already know, in the other we have yet to learn. (Another expansion may be: "He wouldn't say that unless he was using X to mean Y." But here again, it is the semantics and pragmatics of Y which are relevant to understanding what is said, and the formula presupposes that we already understand Y.)

Our alternatives seem to be these: Either (1) we deny that there is any rational (logical, grammatical) constraint over the "pragmatic implications" of what we say—or perhaps deny that there *are* any *implications*, on the ground that the relation in question is not deductive—so that unless what I say is flatly false or unless I explicitly contradict myself, it is pointless to suggest that what I say is wrong or that I must mean something other than I say; or else (2) we admit the constraint and say either (a) since all necessity is logical, the "pragmatic implications" of our utterance are (quasi-)logical implications; with or without adding (b) since the "pragmatic implications" cannot be construed in terms of deductive (or inductive) logic, there must be some "third sort" of logic; or we say (c) some necessity is not logical. None of these alternatives is without its obscurities, but they are clear enough for us to see that Mates is taking

alternative (1),[8] whereas the philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language is likely to feel the need of some form of (2). Alternative (2a) brings out part of the reason behind the Oxford philosopher's insistence that he is talking logic, while (2b) makes explicit the reason other philosophers are perplexed at that claim.[9]

The difference between alternatives (1) and (2) is fundamental; so fundamental, that it is very difficult to argue. When Mates says, "Perhaps it is true that ordinarily I wouldn't say 'I know it' unless I felt great confidence in what I was asserting . . .," what he says is not, if you like, *strictly* wrong; but it is wrong—or, what it implies is wrong. It implies that whether I confine the formula "I know . . ." to statements about which I feel great confidence is *up to me (rightly* up to me); so that if I say "I know. . ." in the absence of confidence, I have not misused language, and in particular I have not stretched the *meaning* of the word "know." And yet, if a child were to say "I know . . ." when you know the child does not *know* (is in no position to say he knows) you may reply, "You don't really mean (N.B.) you *know,* you only mean you believe"; or you may say, "You oughtn't to say you *know* when you only *think* so."

There are occasions on which it would be useful to have the "semantic-pragmatic" distinction at hand. If, for example, a philosopher tells me that the statement, "You ought to do so-and-so" expresses private emotion and is hortatory and hence not, strictly speaking, meaningful, then it may be worth replying that nothing follows about the meaning (semantics) of a statement from the way it is used (pragmatics); and this reply may spare our having to make up special brands of meaning. But the time for that argument is, presumably, past.[10] What needs to be argued now is that something *does* follow from the fact that a term is used in its usual way: it entitles you (or, using the term, you entitle others) to make certain inferences, draw certain conclusions. (This is part of what you say when you

---

8 'As is most clearly shown where he says (p. 72) ". . . When I say 'I may be wrong' I do not *imply* that I have no confidence in what I have previously asserted: I only indicate it." Why "only"? Were he willing to say ". . . but I do (inevitably) indicate it," there may be no argument.

9 Alternative (2b) has been taken—for different, but not unrelated, reasons in the writings of John Wisdom, e.g., "Gods," in *Logic and Language,* 1st series, Antony Flew, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd., 1951), p. 196; in S. Toulmin, *The Place of Reason in Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1950), p. 83; and in S. Hampshire, "Fallacies in Moral Philosophy," *Mind,* Vol. LVIII (1949), 470f.

10 It was essentially the argument with which the pragmatists attempted to subdue emotive "meaning." See John Dewey, "Ethical Subject·Matter and Language," *Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. XLII (1945), 701ff.