

speaking from elsewhere



a new contextualist perspective
on meaning, identity, and discursive agency

josé medina

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A New Contextualist Perspective on
Meaning, Identity, and Discursive Agency

José Medina

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*To my siblings, Inma and Joaquín,
for all those times we have spoken to each other from elsewhere.*

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Introduction

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from *one side* and you know your way about; you approach the same place from *another side* and no longer know your way about.

—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §203; my emphasis.

THE AIM OF THIS BOOK is to articulate and defend a new kind of contextualism that brings together converging trends in post-analytic and neo-pragmatist philosophy as well as in theories of identity across disciplines (Philosophy, Women's Studies, Sociology, and Political Science). The book discusses influential contextualist perspectives in philosophy of language (esp. Wittgenstein's, Dewey's, and Austin's), in feminist theory (esp. Butler's), and in social and political theory (esp. Bourdieu's). What the book offers is a critical elucidation of our situated perspective as speakers, agents, and community members. Many philosophical accounts of the positionality of our perspective have been offered. Among the most influential ones are Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The View from Afar*. Reacting against these accounts, many contextualists have characterized our positionality as *The View from Here*: a good example in the Wittgenstein literature is Peter Winch; a good example in the pragmatist literature is Richard Rorty. These spatial conceptualizations of our positionality as speakers, thinkers, and agents offer different views of how we shape our meanings, develop a sense of self, and form a voice. In this book I argue that these conceptualizations rest on problematic assumptions about what constitutes the inside and the outside of our linguistic practices, assumptions that become distorting for our elucidations of meaning, identity, and agency. I propose and defend an *eccentric* kind of contextualism that calls into question the traditional dichotomies between the inside and the outside of language and the false dilemma between internalism and externalism in the philosophy of language. This eccentric contextualism is what I call *a View from Elsewhere*.

My *view from elsewhere* is a contextualist account of discursive practices that exhibits two crucial features: a thoroughgoing pluralism, which is elaborated throughout the book with the *polyphony thesis* that applies in different ways to meaning, identity, and agency; and a *normative perspective* that emphasizes the responsibility of speakers and the critical power of their agency. The central theses of this contextualist view are developed through an argument about the instability and eccentricity of linguistic perspectives, and through an argument about the critical and transformative power of marginal discourses for questioning and challenging the limits erected in language, that is, for interrogating and contesting the normative boundaries of our discursive practices. The continuous emphasis on the margins of our language games that you will notice throughout the book conveys what is most distinctive about my philosophical perspective, underscoring the pluralism and the normative-critical standpoint of my eccentric contextualism.

I develop my own contextualist account of meaning, identity, and discursive agency by engaging critically with some of the most influential views in the literature and by drawing on Wittgenstein, pragmatism, and Speech Act Theory. My interpretation of Wittgenstein figures prominently in my discussions of meaning, identity, agency, normativity, and community in the four chapters of the book. In these discussions I have also relied heavily on my interpretation of pragmatist figures and particular aspects of their philosophical views: Dewey's view of meaning for chapter 1; Mead's view of identity for chapter 2; and Bourdieu's theory of *the habitus* for chapter 2. I also make ample use of Speech Act Theory, especially in chapter 3, in which I develop my own interpretation of Austin's view, which I term "the New Austin." This interpretation contrasts sharply with the traditional reading of Austin that has been so influential both in Anglo-American and in French philosophy of language. I use this interpretation to save Austin's view of the performative from his critics (esp. Derrida). I also put Austin's view in dialogue with contemporary feminist theory—in particular, with Butler's performativity theory—and I draw the political implications of performative accounts of speech such as Butler's and mine. But, besides Austin's and Butler's views of the performative, a Wittgensteinian elucidation of speech acts animates my argument from the beginning.

In chapter 1, I develop an argument against semantic skepticism and I articulate an account of the *contextual determinacy* of meaning through my interpretation of Wittgenstein's and Dewey's philosophy of language. According to my contextualist perspective, semantic determinacy is the always fragile and relative accomplishment of communicative interactions and is always undergoing transformation. What distinguishes my view from traditional contextualist perspectives is the thesis that meanings are not susceptible of localization: they cannot be confined to *anywhere in particular* and always remain constitutively elusive. There is always more to meaning than what a single context by itself

can offer. And this is not a claim made from *nowhere*, a claim that requires that we abandon the situated perspective of language users and adopt an impossible acontextual view. Rather, it is a claim made from *elsewhere*, that is, a claim about particular contexts made from the perspective of other contexts. Thus my view underscores the crucial importance of *intercontextual relations*. Paralleling this argument about meaning, I will then argue in chapter 2 that the identity of a speaker is abstract and empty (radically indeterminate) when considered outside particular contexts of action and interaction, but it becomes *contextually determinate* in relation to particular communities and practices. My central thesis here is that identity involves a social bond, a constitutive relation to others, which is at the same time a constitutive relation to differences: one's identity is bound up with the identity of others and, therefore, with differences. Drawing on Mead, Bourdieu, and Butler (among others), I develop an account of the performative and unconscious formation of identity through the address of the other. This account involves an examination of the way in which speakers' identities are interwoven and dialectically entangled with each other's in discursive practices. The most fundamental notion of my contextualist view of identity is the notion of a *voice*. By calling attention to our voices, my contextualist view tries to underscore that the identity of a speaker is embodied, situated, relational, and multifaceted.

Building on this view of speakers' voices, chapter 3 offers a contextualist account of discursive agency or performativity that challenges some of the central presuppositions of classical Speech Act Theories. As an alternative to the standard one-factor accounts of performativity that focus exclusively either on intentional or on social aspects of communication, I defend a hybrid notion of agency that defies both determinism and voluntarism. What is at the core of this hybrid notion is the dialectical relation between contextual constraints and discursive freedom. With this hybrid notion of agency my contextualist view of performativity reformulates the notion of *discursive responsibility* (i.e. the responsibility of particular speakers and particular linguistic communities for the words they use and how they use them). I argue that although a speaker is not the free and autonomous source of her own agency, she is an active participant in the production of speech, contributing to the chains of performances through which linguistic practices are maintained and reproduced. Therefore, speakers must assume responsibility for their contributions to the maintenance and perpetuation of discursive practices. This is what I call "echoing responsibility."

Intercontextual relations are forged performatively through the echoing of our speech acts, which signify by invoking, implicitly or explicitly, other contexts—past, future, and contemporaneous contexts, both actual and possible or imaginary ones. The notion of *intercontextuality* captures well how past, present, and future contexts interpenetrate each other and become tied together in

a nondeterministic way through our performances and ongoing negotiations. On my view, discursive agency involves a process of constant recontextualization or *echoing*, in which our discursive acts are constantly being oriented by histories of use and at the same time they are constantly reorienting these histories as well. We have to take responsibility for continuing or discontinuing available discursive contexts in particular ways through our agency, but also for opening up *new contexts*, contexts that by definition have not yet been legitimated by any normative framework. Thus my contextualist view of agency emphasizes the crucial importance of opening up discursive spaces for critique and transformation, for radical resignification or *echoing*.

Using my contextualist account of discursive agency and responsibility, I conclude the book with a discussion of the space for *critique and subversion* in our discursive practices. The goal of my eccentric contextualism is precisely to show how we can critically exploit discursive limitations, how we can make limits productive. My contextualist view underscores *the critical productivity of discursive limits* and gives center stage to those who speak at the limits or on the margins of our discursive practices. It is for this reason that I conclude with a discussion of *marginal discourses* in the final chapter. My *view from elsewhere* calls attention to the critical and transformative potential of the eccentric speech of those who have a frontier identity and speak on the border of what is deemed unsayable and nonsensical, troubling the always contingent boundary historically erected between the sayable and the unsayable. These marginal discourses that speak on the borders or at the limits constitute a risky speech that has a dangerous and precarious life. For trying to speak at the limits or on the margins of discursive practices is always perceived as a menace, as a threat to the very normative identity of what counts as legitimate speech. Through a discussion of imposed silences and marginalized standpoints, my polyphonic contextualism tries to show that our linguistic practices always exhibit an irreducible diversity and heterogeneity of points of view that cannot be subsumed under a unified perspective. I will argue that silences can always be broken, but they cannot be altogether avoided, that is, we cannot break all silences once and for all: breaking linguistic barriers and dismantling censorship mechanisms (whether explicit or implicit) is a never ending task. I will conclude this discussion and the book with the critical challenge that my polyphonic contextualism raises for the study of discursive practices, namely, to elucidate how silences can be broken, how linguistic communities can be disrupted, and how new communities can be created. It is our responsibility as speakers and community members to open up discursive spaces for new voices and to facilitate new discourses that can break up silences and empower marginalized voices.

Chapter I

Contextualizing Meaning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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