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2013

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

Svensson, T. (2013). *The Balance of Meaning : Exploring the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms*. [Doctoral Thesis (monograph), Studies in Faith and World Views].

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# The Balance of Meaning



# The Balance of Meaning

Exploring the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms

Thord Svensson



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Allhelgona Kyrkogata 8  
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ISBN 978-91-7473-765-3

Printed in Sweden by Media-Tryck, Lund University  
Lund 2013

To Jessika



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## Acknowledgements

Although only my name appears on the cover of this study, I do not suffer from the illusion that others have not played an important role in making it come about. In what follows, I wish to express my gratitude to those people.

Thank you to my main supervisor Catharina Stenqvist for believing in this project and my capacity to execute it, especially in times when I have had doubts about both. Throughout the process of writing this book, she has given me intellectual freedom to develop and grow as an independent thinker while at the same time letting me benefit from her extensive philosophical wisdom and experience whenever this has been called for.

My previous assistant supervisors Erica Appelros and Lars Haikola have also contributed with relevant comments. I am especially indebted to Ingar Brinck, my present assistant supervisor who, although she came in late in my research, has been an invaluable help in making me see things clearer and has offered me many constructive suggestions on how to improve my work. I am also grateful to the opponent at my final seminar, Björn Ramberg, for giving me positive feedback on the whole project as well as many constructive remarks on how to clarify certain key points of my study. My good friend Mårten Ericson has also been of great assistance in helping me prepare the text for printing. Of course, for all errors and poor argumentation that remain, I am solely responsible.

I am also thankful to my present and former colleagues at the philosophy of religion seminar at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, including Andreas Nordlander, Martin Lembke, Roy Wiklander, Per Lind, Matz Hammarström, Andreas Seland, Johan Modée, Leif Stille, Gerth Hyrkäs, Ervik Cejvan, Lena Hansen, Patrik Fridlund, Ulrica Fritzson, KG Hammar, Elisabeth Gerle and Jerker Karlsson. They have all been helpful in offering me tough, but relevant, questions about my project and in providing me with an intellectual platform which excels in its wonderful capacity to combine good humour with high qualitative thinking.

On a more personal level, I am thankful to my loving parents for so many things. I am sad that my mother cannot be with me as I finish this book; among the many important things she taught me, she made me realize, more than any other person, that books and words matter! My father is not a philosopher in the

academic sense, but his wisdom exceeds mine in so many ways. Dad, I have felt your caring thoughts and encouragement throughout this process. I also wish to thank Tolga Basal, for simply being the person and good friend he is.

Last, but certainly not in any sense least, I am so very much indebted to Jessika, my love and my friend, for giving me time, understanding and support beyond compare and reason. In describing our workload the last months, balance is not the word that comes to mind. Jessika, I am so glad and grateful to have you by my side and as mother to our children. Speaking of them, thanks to my daughters, Emilia and Ella, for simply being part of my life and for being the joy you are.

I have also received financial support from Helge Ax: son Johnson foundation, which I of course am grateful for.



## 1

## Introduction

## 1.1 The elusive meaning of religious and existentially important terms

Concerning the question ‘What is time then?’ Augustine famously declared that if nobody would ask him, he would know. However, he continued his well-known line of thought by conceding that ‘...if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I know not’.<sup>1</sup> Seldom have so few words so aptly articulated an experience common to many of us in that we both know, and yet do not know, what time is. This is not unique for our notion or experience of time though; we appear to be in the similar ambivalent position with regard to love, art, personal identity, friendship and justice. That is, as long as no one asks us about what, for instance, friendship and love is we are rather able to distinguish the friend from the foe and the loving from the hateful. However, if somebody would ask us for a more precise account of what love or friendship is, many of us would find ourselves in a similar position as Augustine concerning time. In some sense we seem to know enough about certain religious and existentially important features of the world only to realize that our accounts of them are incomplete and possibly inaccurate. This circumstance also seems to be manifested linguistically in that we appear to be partly ignorant about the meaning of certain terms of religious and existential concern. That is, even though we commonly consider ourselves as rather competent at using terms like ‘God’, ‘friendship’, ‘justice’ or ‘love’, we may also sense that the complete or exact

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, St., *Confessions*, (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1951), book XI, chapter XIV.

meaning of each word – what it expresses or is about – evades our comprehension.

One may naturally wonder if the latter is at all possible. Can the meaning of our own words go beyond what we recognize the meaning to be and hence be what I in this study call *recognition-transcendent* to people in ordinary and competent use of them?<sup>2</sup> One circumstance that may make us sceptical about the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words is that it appears to presuppose a delicate, perhaps untenable, balance: The meaning, it seems, must be external and objective enough for us to possibly be ignorant of it but internal and subjective enough for us to be committed to it; to be what we mean by the terms. Obviously, not every unrecognized fact or circumstance has a bearing on the meaning of our terms. We must somehow be committed and connected to this fact or circumstance for it to be relevant to what we mean by our words. Usually we are committed to a certain meaning by knowing and intending it, but, clearly, this option cannot work in the case of recognition-transcendent meaning. This is, I suggest, what makes the very idea of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words difficult to make sense of; it presupposes some distance between ourselves and this meaning, but not too much distance because then it would not qualify as our meaning.

This study is an investigation into this matter, that is, into the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms.<sup>3</sup> I thus set out to examine if, and if so, to what extent and in what sense such words can have a meaning beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them presently recognizes.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion ‘recognition-transcendent’ will be specified in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> The expression ‘existentially important terms’ will be specified in the next section.

## 1.2 The objective

The objective of the present study is to examine the following:

In what sense and to what extent, if at all, can the semantic meaning of religious and existentially important words be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them?

In this section I specify my objective by explaining in more detail the key-notions used to express it. I will call the semantic meaning of words as used by person  $p$  *recognition-transcendent* if the meaning is what it is independent of  $p$ 's direct recognition of it. This very concise explication may initially be unpacked by considering how this notion has been used with regard to a distinct but similar subject matter. For instance, in the context of philosophical reasoning about religious beliefs, the possibility of recognition-transcendent truths is commonly discussed. Although this is not the subject matter of the current study, it seems helpful to initially draw upon it in order to explain what is. Just as it appears possible to examine if something can be true but principally beyond our recognition, that is, true regardless of whether we are ever able to verify, or even know, the content of such truths, it seems possible and important to examine if religious and existentially important words can mean something beyond our recognition.<sup>4</sup>

To elaborate on this, I will examine to what extent one should accept an *idealist* or a *realist* interpretation of the meaning of such words. The reason for introducing this terminology into the current context is the following: The pos-

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<sup>4</sup> We may also notice an important difference between the hypothesis of recognition-transcendent truths and recognition-transcendent meaning because the former are commonly assumed to be principally unrecognizable to humans or any sentient being, but this is not true of the latter hypothesis as I construe it. In fact, to the extent the meaning of terms may be recognition-transcendent, one important purpose of my study is to examine how one may go about to find out what it is.

sibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words presupposes that it is possible to separate some part of the semantic meaning of terms from the comprehension of the meaning possessed by the ordinary user of those terms. And this latter possibility, in turn, seems to presuppose some sort of realist account of the meaning of these words in the sense that the meaning exists independently of the user's direct recognition of it. This does not need to imply that the meaning is forever beyond the user's recognition, only that it does not need to be presently and directly recognized by the user for it to be constitutive of the words' meaning as they use them. In contrast to such a realist account of meaning, we may consider what can be categorized as an idealist conception. According to this idealist conception, the meaning of a word is in the "eye of the beholder" and that what is not directly conceived by its user does not matter as far as the meaning of the word is concerned. To the extent one is committed to the idealist conception, the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning seems to be excluded or severely diminished.

In exploring to what degree the meaning of religious and existentially important words is to be interpreted realistically or idealistically in the sense described, I will not examine if nor assume that all properties, relations and objects should be construed either realistically or idealistically.<sup>5</sup> As a presupposition for my investigation, I will rather assume that every property, object and relation can be positioned along a spectrum of properties, relations and objects from recognition-transcendent to recognition-dependent ones. The location of some objects along this spectrum seems easier to pinpoint than different ones. For instance, even if all humans have failed to recognize the existence of a certain mountain, the mountain itself would appear to remain unaffected by this. A mountain thus exemplifies the kind of object that belongs to the recognition-transcendent end of this spectrum. It does so in virtue of being what it is, independent of our knowledge about it. In contrast, the property of being worth one dollar or being pretty does not seem to hold independently of anyone's recogni-

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<sup>5</sup> The latter stance or option would of course make my impending investigation superfluous (because if all properties are to be regarded idealistically, so will semantic ones).



tion of these properties.<sup>6</sup> Such properties are much closer to the recognition-dependent end of the spectrum in the sense that they are what they are as a result of being recognized by someone. The question I investigate in this study is whether the semantic meaning of religious and existentially important words can be more like the recognition-transcendent nature of the mountain or more like the recognition-dependent nature of being pretty or being worth one dollar. That is, do these words only have meaning to the extent that this meaning is recognized by the competent and ordinary user of them; for the same reason as a dollar is only worth one dollar because this is directly recognized by someone, or may we postulate a meaning beyond this? How to respond to this latter question seems less settled or certain, which obviously contributes to the importance of executing my investigation.

A circumstance that adds a certain amount of complexity to this question, and also my investigation, is that to what extent the meaning of words is recognition-transcendent, if to any extent, may vary for different types of terms. That is, the meaning of different terms may to some degree be located at different positions within the spectrum in question; hence we cannot presuppose that the meaning of all terms should be placed at the same position within the spectrum. Due to this, I have to sort out to what extent terms of religious and existential importance in particular can be recognition-transcendent; because what may be true for a certain kind of terms with regard to this matter may not be true for religious and existentially important terms.

Due to the fact that I will examine *in what sense and to what extent* the meaning of certain words can be recognition-transcendent, I will not from the outset put forward a more exact and distinct account of what it is for the meaning of a word to be recognized or unrecognized by its user. I will rather assume

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<sup>6</sup> The same can be assumed for such properties as being married, having a name and owning property. Sometimes the former type of properties, exemplified through the mountain, is called natural while the latter type is called social. I also realize that one may wish to question or qualify this distinction (between natural and social properties), perhaps by saying that what we identify as a mountain is also in principle dependent on humans in the same sense as being pretty. In either case, one may argue, we need to conceptualize the mountain or the dollar *as a* mountain or *a* dollar. I will return to this matter towards the end of chapter 3.

that our pretheoretic and basic account of what this can amount to is sufficiently substantial and specific to make sense of my objective. This does not of course mean that the notion of 'recognition-transcendent' will be left unspecified throughout my study. On the contrary, as I proceed with my investigation I examine how one may construe and develop this notion more precisely for the purpose of making sense of the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning.

To exemplify, I will for instance examine if the grounds for postulating such a meaning may be either more a priori or more a posteriori oriented. That is, to the degree that a competent and ordinary user of a religious and existentially important term can be ignorant of any aspect of its meaning, is the explanation for this mainly due to insufficient information about the underlying nature of some feature of our universe that is accessible through scientific research? Or is the explanation for this rather due to insufficient information about our linguistic and conceptual practices that may be accessible to us through an a priori oriented conceptual analysis? (I consider scientific research within physics and biology as examples of a posteriori oriented investigations and versions of intuition-driven conceptual analysis as examples of a priori oriented investigations.) To the extent that the latter is true, it may also be concluded that the meaning is implicitly recognized by its user, although not explicitly so, which, if accepted, would indicate more precisely in what sense the meaning of terms may be recognition-transcendent to competent and ordinary users of them. I will also examine to what scale both explanations can contribute to an overall explanation of how a competent and ordinary user of a religious and existentially important term can be ignorant of any aspect of its meaning.

Of course, in investigating if the meaning of a certain category of terms can be recognition-transcendent, it is hard to avoid the question for what reason and in what sense the meaning is so. It is however important to stress this aspect of my subject matter because what explains recognition-transcendent meaning, if anything, also determines what kind of investigation we need to perform in order to become, hopefully, less ignorant of it.

In stating my objective, I have also made use of the notion of an *ordinary and competent user of words*. The reason behind this expression is that I need to qualify the objective to prevent it from becoming somewhat trivial, because in a certain sense it is undoubtedly true that a word may have a particular meaning even if I fail to know it. For instance, at a certain time in my life, as an infant, I did not know the meaning of any word. It would hence not be a surprising fact

that the word 'picture', 'pen' and 'book' had meanings before I came to know of them. It would be unsurprising because as an infant I was not yet a competent or ordinary user of them and therefore not expected to know the meaning of them. Even if the meaning of these words may be considered recognition-transcendent to me as an infant, it would only be so in a trivial sense.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting upon this circumstance should make us realize that the relevant and interesting question to pursue is whether the meaning of religious and existentially important terms may be recognition-transcendent to people who can be reasonably viewed as committed to this meaning, that is, to people in competent and ordinary use of them. Of course, the exact meaning of a 'competent and ordinary user' of a term can be interpreted and developed differently and also vary from context to context.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, I will also naturally return to this notion and the qualification it expresses as I proceed with my investigation.

My interest in the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words is mainly directed at what I call *religious and existentially important terms*. The notion of religious terms is both intuitive and elusive. The latter circumstance is manifested in the well-known problem of trying to define the term 'religion' or 'religious'.<sup>9</sup> I do not want to engage in any deeper discussion about how to analyse either notion, and I think nothing important will be lost from ceasing to do so. By religious words I basically mean singular or general terms

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<sup>7</sup> The meaning would be recognition-transcendent to me (as an infant) in the same non-interesting sense as the meaning of 'computer' would be recognition-transcendent to a person living during the medieval era; of course such a person does not know the meaning of 'computer', but he is not expected or supposed to; the meaning of 'computer' would be recognition-transcendent to him pretty much in the same sense that the meaning of nearly all Chinese words is currently recognition-transcendent to me.

<sup>8</sup> We should realize that we cannot make the requirement expressed through this notion too strong; we cannot for instance define 'competent user' to mean someone with infallible and complete comprehension of the meaning of words because that would rule out the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning from the outset.

<sup>9</sup> This is a well-known problem within philosophy of religion, but for some explicit account of it, see for instance Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 23–24 or Arie L. Molendijk, 'In Defence of Pragmatism' in Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk (eds) *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 3–10. This term may also be an example of the kind of terms I will be exploring in my study.

commonly and originally found within contexts of religious worship and practice and which, within such contexts, are intended to fulfil some religious-oriented purpose, like for instance expressing certain religious beliefs or values or to refer to some extraordinary being or dimension.<sup>10</sup> Paradigmatic examples would be 'God', 'sacred', 'spirit', 'almighty', 'Karma' or 'soul'. By existential terms I mean those terms that commonly or traditionally have been used to express and refer to what is of existential concern to us humans. To some degree this will vary from person to person and from culture to culture, but it seems that terms like 'free will', 'mind', 'life', 'knowledge' and 'personal identity' can be considered representative examples of this kind of terms. What they express and are about seem to matter deeply to how one thinks about and values one's life, existentially speaking. What such terms express may also of course be relevant within a more traditional religious context, but they are not limited to it. What I mean, and also what I want to stress, by introducing the notion of 'existentially important terms' is that it is not only within the context of a religious tradition that many of us ponder about and seek to settle the deep questions of life. The words we use to express our existential concern are hence not limited to words only or mainly found within the religious context and it is important that we take this circumstance into account.

Let me also make some clarifying points about the kind of *meaning* of religious and existentially important words I intend to examine, although I wish to stress that this cannot be made too specific from the outset, for a very natural reason: The purpose of my study is to examine to what extent the semantic meaning of certain words can possibly be recognition-transcendent and for this reason, I wish to avoid putting forward a notion of this kind of meaning that from the outset excludes accounts of semantic meaning that would be relevant

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<sup>10</sup> I consider this to be along the line of Victoria Harrison's account of religious language. She writes for example that, 'In short, it would seem that the religiosity of language cannot lie in the actual words used but in something else. I suggest that that "something else" consists principally, although not exclusively, of two factors: first, the "religious" purpose some language serves, and, secondly, the overtly "religious" context of some linguistic uses. The term "religious language," as used here, then, should be regarded as shorthand for "language that is used either to serve a religious purpose or in a religious context, or both".' See Victoria Harrison, 'Metaphor, Religious Language, and Religious Experience', *Sophia*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2007, p. 128.

to consider. For this reason, in phrasing and making sense of the objective, one must have a moderately open mind about how to define semantic properties more precisely. (To some extent this resembles my reason for not putting forward a more exact account of the concept of ‘recognition-transcendent’; concerning both features it is my intention to examine how one may interpret and construe them more exactly for the purpose of making sense of the idea of recognition-transcendent meaning.) Moreover, due to the fact that my study will take into consideration many different accounts of what constitutes the semantic meaning of words, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to put forward a neutral and substantial account of the meaning of words that does equal justice to all these different accounts.

Still, some initial and elementary account is of course possible and desirable. When I examine the meaning of words it is the property of *meaning* rather than the words themselves that is of interest to me. Moreover, although I address the meaning of existentially important words, I do not deal with what can be called an existential meaning in the sense intended when one believes that some action, one’s life or even the whole universe has a (or has no) deeper meaning for me personally or for all humans. It is thus the linguistic, rather than the existential, meaning that is my concern. When theorizing the meaning of words it is also common to differ between the semantic and pragmatic meaning of words and between a semantic and pragmatic study of their meaning. With regard to this distinction, my interest is more directed towards the semantic meaning of words than the pragmatic one.<sup>11</sup> It is also common to differ between

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<sup>11</sup> However, I should also concede that I am not very fond of this distinction in that the difference between a semantic and pragmatic study of words sometimes seems to be less distinct and commonly agreed upon. By a pragmatic approach and study some appear to mean the study of what is being implied and conveyed by the use of words apart from whatever the semantic meaning of these words may contribute to it. Some also seem to think that pragmatic oriented research investigates what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate uses of words. It may for instance be considered inappropriate to use difficult and technical terms when explaining something to children. Others put the emphasis on how the context can have a bearing on what certain indexical words, like ‘I’, can mean. It also seems that some hold the pragmatic study to simply be about the *use* of words, what we do with them. Relative to these possible accounts of what a pragmatic study of words amounts to or consists of, I would say that my study is not pragmatic in the sense expressed by the two initial accounts, and not so much in the sense expressed by the third account, but perhaps in the fourth

the meaning and referent of a word and between the intension and extension when considering a general term. With reference to how I have stated my objective, one may get the impression that I will be concerned with the meaning, rather than the referent, of religious and existentially important terms (and then also the intension rather than the extension of a general term). However, the referent is also sometimes regarded as constitutive of the meaning of a term (and so is the extension in the case of a general term). For this reason the expression or concept of 'the meaning of a word' is rather ambiguous; sometimes we mean its intension, sometimes its extension.<sup>12</sup> My approach to this situation can be characterized as inclusive rather than exclusive in that I consider both senses of the meaning of words; for instance, one of the subquestions that I address is in what sense the referent of a singular term or the extension of a general term can be constitutive of a term's meaning and then possibly account for how the meaning of that term can be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user.

I will not only, however, consider semantic meaning in terms of intension or extension. Theories of language that place great emphasis on their actual use rather than on some mentally possessed intension or extra-mental objects belonging to the extension of terms will also be taken into account. As I proceed with my investigation, I will also come across issues about semantic internalism and externalism and individualism and anti-individualism about semantic meaning. I will also draw upon and make use of certain well-known distinctions, such as those between a semantic referent and speaker referent of a term and between a person's idiolect and sociolect. Each notion will be made precise in the context in which they are introduced and employed.

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sense, but mainly then because I find this specification of pragmatics to be too imprecise to distinguish it from semantics. Some philosophers of language would for example say that the semantic meaning of words is its use, without thinking that they, for this reason, are only putting forward a pragmatic thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, the notion of meaning can be ambiguous for more than this reason.

## 1.3 Recognition-transcendent meaning in philosophy of religion

To the extent that the very possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of terms makes sense, it would not seem to be limited to religious or existentially important terms like ‘God’ or ‘free will’. This is true. I do, however, believe that the possibility of such a meaning is especially relevant to consider in relation to such words. In this section I address why and how. This will make more explicit how my study connects to dominant questions and approaches within contemporary and traditional philosophical thinking about religion, but also with issues of existential concern outside the traditional context of religion. As I proceed many more examples will be added and explored.

(1) When theorizing religion we commonly aim to do justice to and deepen our comprehension of words used in a certain religion. How do we realize such an ambition? That is, how should one define and measure the accuracy of an analysis of what the words used in a religious context mean, if the meaning for example is to be construed *cognitively* or *non-cognitively* or *literally* or *figuratively*? Must one’s analysis of such issues, for instance, be accepted by people belonging to the religion in which the words are found and used? Or can one rather assume this to be less important, perhaps by thinking that people may be mistaken about the meaning of words commonly used to express the core claims of the religion they themselves preach and practise? Consider for example the position advocated by philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips. He stated that many religious terms do not mean what religious people usually think they mean: ‘In response to my work, they have said that if believers reject the accounts of their belief I offer, their rejection is the last word on the matter. The believers’ account is final [...] According to the impatient philosophers, we must accept the believers’ gloss. The suggestion is baffling.’<sup>13</sup> If Phillips is correct, to

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<sup>13</sup> See D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 243. For a different and somewhat opposite position, see P. F. Bloemendaal, *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of D. Z. Phillips’s Philosophy of Religion*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p. 388–389.

what extent or in what sense more precisely may religious people be mistaken or ignorant in this respect? This question connects directly to the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words, that is, if one can distinguish the meaning of these words from the conception of it held by the ordinary user of them. Consequently, the possibility of such a meaning is highly relevant to consider with regard to the more general study of the meaning of religious and existentially important words, and hence also with regard to our more general ambition to do justice to religion.

(2) Within religious contexts, we find that the precise meaning of words is the object of extensive reflection and disagreement. Many have sought to present an adequate account of the meaning of, for instance, 'God', 'religion', 'sacred' or 'soul', but no one has come up with an analysis which all, or most, people agree upon. Also, outside such religious contexts the same seems to be true of 'justice' and 'free will' and many similar words. The continued dissatisfaction with our analyses of what people mean when talking about free will, God and the mind, combined with the fact that we are still looking for a proper account, seems to indicate that we implicitly or explicitly presuppose that these words express or denote something which, so far, has not been fully or adequately accounted for.

One may of course think that this presupposition does not apply to all or most philosophical thinkers within the current intellectual climate.<sup>14</sup> This may be true, but even if the presupposition seems more plausible to certain thinkers than to others, this may be enough to motivate a critical investigation of it; that is, as long as many people find the presupposition intelligible or at any rate seem to act upon and reason along something like it, this would warrant a critical study of it.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, when reflecting on the meaning of 'wisdom' or 'justice'

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<sup>14</sup> That is, one may feel inclined to suggest that it is only accurate as far as I have in mind thinkers working within a somewhat traditional philosophical or analytic paradigm; the majority of these thinkers may perhaps be willing to accept the possibility of our terms having a so far unrecognized meaning but, our hypothetical objector may continue, we should be careful not to ascribe this conviction to the majority of philosophical thinkers in general.

<sup>15</sup> However, I think that the presupposition is more widespread than commonly assumed. Even thinkers that would be hesitant to say that they are believing in and searching for an absolute or metaphysically true meaning of 'gender', 'race', 'culture' or 'justice', perhaps like a Platonic entity corresponding to each term,



it is also commonly assumed that we are not only dealing with the meaning of the English word 'justice' and 'wisdom' (or the Swedish word 'rättvisa' and 'vishet') but also with more substantial and general issues beyond the domain of any specific language, like what justice and wisdom are. The reason for thinking so is the conviction that questions about the nature of wisdom and justice, to a significant degree, cannot be resolved without finding out what we mean by 'wisdom' and 'justice'.<sup>16</sup> To the extent this is true, the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words seems directly connected to the "big questions of mankind" and our hope and ambition to successfully deal with them.

(3) The possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious terms also seems important to examine with regard to the fact that many religious beliefs and words are intended to be about a transcendent entity. This entity is sometimes viewed as radically different compared to anything we humans are accustomed to and for this reason thought to be partly or completely incomprehensible to us humans. Although difficult to comprehend, many reli-

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may still accept that we can get a more accurate account of what these terms mean beyond what the ordinary user of them thinks and knows about the meaning. That is, they may still think that we are entitled to assume a gap between what the ordinary and competent user of them claims the meaning to be and what can be considered the real meaning of them; they just approach and argue for this possibility differently than, say, the Platonist. Let me offer one example of this. I assume that the position of social constructivism may be considered a non-traditional philosophical perspective. Social constructivist Sally Haslanger still believes that the meaning of our own terms may escape us: 'It is an important part of the social constructionist picture that, to put it simply, our meanings are not transparent to us: often ideology interferes with an understanding of the true workings of our conceptual framework and our language. More specifically, ideology (among other things) interferes with our understanding of our classificatory practices, suggesting to us that we are finding in nature divisions that we have played an important role in creating.' See Sally Haslanger, 'What Good Are Our Intuitions – Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, vol. 80, no.1, 2006, p. 92. I consider her position to be an important but not unique example of the fact that the idea of a recognition-transcendent meaning is not only accepted within a traditional or analytic philosophical paradigm.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Oswald Hanfling, *Philosophy and Ordinary Language, The Bent and Genius of Our Tongue*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 17 for support of this position. See also Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998a), p. 41–42 for a similar idea.

gious people usually wish to refer to and describe this entity, and it is an old and difficult question precisely how and to what extent our words may express something accurate about such an entity. Of interest to my study and its objective is the suggestion that for such “God-talk” to be at all possible, the meaning of the words composing it must also partly be recognition-transcendent to us; because if these words are used to describe real features of this transcendent entity, features that we are currently ignorant of, part of the meaning expressed by these words must also presently be beyond our recognition.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, anyone interested in the intelligibility of such God-talk should also be interested in the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious words.

Please be aware that matters 1–3 are just some examples of how the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of terms are related to important issues within philosophy of religion and existential thinking about life more generally.

## 1.4 Outline and material

In this section I outline the content and purpose of each chapter and how the more specific issues explored in each of them connect and are directed towards

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, the suggestion that one can only describe God’s properties analogically seems to rely on this presupposition because, according to this suggestion, God possesses the property of wisdom relative to the kind of being God is, just like wise dogs are wise according to how dogs can be wise and humans are wise in the sense that humans can be wise. Although reflection on this analogy between how humans, dogs and God are wise is thought to help us appreciate the meaning of statements like ‘God is wise’, the complete meaning of it is not recognizable to us because we do not have a complete account of what kind of being God is. Christian thinkers influenced and committed to the Thomist tradition are accustomed to this line of thinking and also the more general idea that the meaning of statements like ‘God is all good’ or ‘God is perfect’ goes beyond what they recognize it to be. See for instance Paul A. MacDonald Jr., *Knowledge and the Transcendent, An Inquiry into the Mind’s Relationship to God*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 179–184f., and Brian J. Shanley, O. P., *The Thomist Tradition, Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 52, or more generally, p. 44–67 for more on this.

the overall objective of my study. This will also reveal which philosophical thinkers and theories more specifically that will be considered and drawn upon within my study. In chapter 2 I begin by introducing the thesis of soft (and strong) contextualism and, in connection to this, what I call an idealistic and individualistic account of the meaning of words. Since I will be exploring to what degree the meaning of a word can be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user, it seems important to initially identify and exemplify what account of the meaning of words we need to reject or modify to make sense of recognition-transcendent meaning of words. Soft contextualism and the individualistic and idealistic conception of meaning of words are put forward for this reason, that is, to exemplify such an account.

For the purpose of considering and exemplifying the opposite account, I present the position of social externalism. The core idea of this position is that the content of a person's beliefs and the meaning of their words may not only depend on what they "have in their head", that is, what they consider the meaning to be. It may also partly depend on what people in their linguistic community mean by these words, even when the person is partly ignorant or mistaken about this. In virtue of containing this idea, social externalism seems to offer us a proposal on how the meaning of words may be recognition-transcendent to the competent user of them.<sup>18</sup>

I mainly consider social externalism for illustrating one sense in which the meaning of a religious and existentially important word may be held to be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary user and also to some extent to prepare the ground for introducing and exploring the possibility of a more extensive and relevant kind of recognition-transcendent meaning of such words. Even if one would accept the account of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words offered by the social externalist, one may find this account of limited interest because it still assumes that someone has a complete understanding of the meaning of these words. It may also not be the kind of recognition-transcendent meaning that is most relevant in relation to religious and existentially important terms.

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<sup>18</sup> In exploring this position I will mainly draw upon certain theses and thoughts presented by Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge.

Considering this circumstance, one may naturally wonder if it is possible for a whole community of people, and not just some people within it, to be mistaken about what they mean by the words they use.<sup>19</sup>

In the remaining part of my study I set out to examine this possibility, the possibility of a communal recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words. In chapter 3 I initially approach this possibility by exploring if the meaning of the religiously and existentially important term 'God' can be recognition-transcendent in virtue of being identified with the mind-independent object it possibly refers to, so to the extent that the ordinary and competent user of 'God' is ignorant about the referent of 'God', he is also ignorant of the meaning of 'God'. To resolve the viability of this proposal, I examine to what extent people in a religious community can use 'God' to refer to a certain object independently of the descriptions or mental representations they explicitly or implicitly associate with 'God'.

In the same chapter I also consider the possibility of treating certain general terms of religious and existential importance, like 'life' and 'justification', as natural kind terms for the purpose of exploring if the meaning of them can be recognition-transcendent in the same sense that the meaning of 'gold', according to natural kind externalism, may be held to be. That is, can the meaning of 'life' and 'justification' be recognition-transcendent by being tied to undiscovered natural kinds referred to by each term? In exploring this option, I do not only examine if a whole community of people in use of religious and existentially important terms may be ignorant of what they mean by them, but also if the meaning in question can be a posteriori oriented recognition-transcendent. This is important to sort out because, to the extent this is true, it would indicate that how we have traditionally gone about trying to define what life or justification

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<sup>19</sup> However, the hypothesis does not presuppose that precisely everyone in the community must be mistaken about the meaning of the word, because it may be that just a few people within the religious community use the word. We are rather examining if it is possible for some people to be wrong, with regard to what they mean by a word, without relying on someone else in the same community being correct. It is this we wonder about when we ask if a whole community may be mistaken because if no member must be correct for someone else to be mistaken, everyone can, in principle, be mistaken.

is, by relying on conceptual analysis, may have been seriously inappropriate. I will argue that the basic approach considered in this chapter seems to face some difficult problems and, to the degree that it does not, the approach does not appear to apply to all terms of religious and existential importance.<sup>20</sup>

Partly for this reason, I will in chapter 4 consider a different approach to making sense of a communally recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms. More precisely, I examine to what extent such words can have a meaning that goes beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them directly recognizes but which, in theory, can be accessible to them through intuition and intellect (rather than through a scientific a posteriori oriented investigation). I call this specification *S*. In trying to make sense of the possibility expressed by *S*, I consider an approach that I call ‘intuition-driven conceptual analysis’. According to one version of this approach, some aspect or feature of a term’s meaning may be implicit in the use of the term and possible to make explicit by intuitively reflecting on how the term should be used in a certain fictive and specially tailored scenario. Hence, by intuitively contemplating extraordinary uses of a term one is believed to be able to discover semantic features of it that otherwise may go unnoticed.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from discussing to what extent and in what sense intuition-driven conceptual analysis is applicable to religious and existentially important words, I naturally also discuss the viability of the approach itself. Lately, the appeal to one’s intuition within the context of conceptual analysis has come into question.

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<sup>20</sup> One reason for continuing to explore the possibility of communal recognition-transcendent meaning beyond the idea initially considered in chapter 3 is that the idea may have a limited application within the more general context of religion. One reason for this is that the idea of tying the meaning of ‘God’ to a certain mind-independent object presupposes a particular type of religious conviction not endorsed by every religious devotee. Since I do not wish my study to be limited in this sense, I find it important to continue my investigation about the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning beyond the proposal considered in chapter 3. Another reason for carrying on my investigation is that existentially important terms like ‘life’ and ‘knowledge’ do not evidently fall into the category of natural kind terms and, moreover, even if they do, this does not rule out the possibility of a more foundational kind of recognition-transcendent meaning of terms; in fact, it may even presuppose it.

<sup>21</sup> As Frank Jackson puts it: ‘The role of the intuitions about possible cases so distinctive of conceptual analysis is precisely to make explicit our implicit folk theory...’ See Jackson, 1998a, p. 38.

What is commonly brought into question by some contemporary critics is the universality and stability of what people think is intuitively correct to say about the possible uses of certain terms. Others have argued that recent research within psychology suggests that the very target of conceptual analysis, at least if we identify the target with some mental representation or cognitive capacity, appears to be too flexible and indeterminate for it to be suitable for any analysis worthy of our time and effort. Drawing upon this criticism and possible responses to it, I try to sort out what to reasonably expect from intuition-driven conceptual analysis and what this entails for the nature and possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words. I argue that, given a certain account of it, intuition-driven conceptual analysis may, in some measure, offer an important suggestion on how to make sense of specification *S*.

In chapter 5 I turn to a different aspect of the idea of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words. To introduce this idea, recall that the possibility of such a meaning demands a delicate balance: The meaning must be sufficiently external and objective for us to possibly be ignorant of it but also sufficiently internal and subjective for us to be committed to it; to be what we mean by the terms. This suggests that anything too external in relation to our use of a word will not qualify as its meaning and, indeed, this is the problem that I will be primarily occupied with in this study. However, some thinkers would contend that the meaning, to qualify as our meaning, must also be balanced from the opposite end; that is, it cannot be too internal or too subjective. It is for instance not enough that it is only recognized by one person. More precisely, they assert that any distinction made between correct and incorrect uses of a word must be recognized by someone else apart from the person using the word; if not, the distinction made is too subjective to measure up to an objective distinction between correct and incorrect uses of the word.

If correct, this position, commonly called the *community-thesis*, would seem to put the very possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning in jeopardy. For this reason, it seems to be important to examine the community-thesis in the current context. It would also seem to discredit the appeal to intuition considered in chapter 4 because if a person's intuition is supposed to tell them how they should use the word in a fictive scenario, it seems that, according to the community-thesis, the intuition of just one person is not enough. In considering the community-thesis, I mainly attend to certain theses put forward through

Saul Kripke's reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein on rule following and positions advocated by Martin Kusch and David Bloor.<sup>22</sup>

In chapter 6 I consider to what degree the Wittgensteinian notion of 'grammar' can help us make sense of specification *S*. In doing so, I will principally consider the position of the Wittgenstein influenced philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips. In a number of writings, Phillips has argued that the grammar of words used in the religious context has commonly been misinterpreted. Highly relevant for my study is his idea that the religious believer, who can be assumed to be an ordinary and competent user of religious words, is not excluded from this charge; they too, according to Phillips, can be guilty of committing this kind of mistake. Hence, although the meaning of religious terms is internal to the religious practice, it may not be transparent to the people belonging to it. To the extent this is true, it would imply that the meaning of religious words can be recognition-transcendent to their ordinary and competent user. Due to this and the fact that Phillips' position has been the object of much discussion, it seems relevant and warranted to consider his position within the context of this study and to relate it to some of the theses previously put forward in it. Much of the chapter will naturally be concerned with to what degree religious people in principle can be committed to a grammar for the words they use without knowing it.

In my conclusion in chapter 7, I draw together and comment on the main result of the investigations pursued in each chapter and the bearing it has on the objective of my study.

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<sup>22</sup> Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); David Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1997); Martin Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement, the Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

## 2

# Recognition-transcendent meaning and social externalism

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I open up my investigation of the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms. I begin by introducing the theses of soft and strong contextualism. To present one main motivation for the former thesis in section 2.3, I present what I call an idealistic and individualistic account of the meaning of words. In section 2.4 and its subsections, by drawing upon certain thoughts presented by Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge, I present the position of social externalism.<sup>23</sup> The core idea of this position is that the content of a person's beliefs and the meaning of their words may not only depend on what they "have in their head", that is, what they recognize the content or meaning to be. It may also partly depend on the definition of the terms recognized within their community, either by the majority of people or an expert, even when they are partly ignorant or mistaken about this definition. In section 2.5 I consider to what degree and in what sense social externalism may account for a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms, presupposing the viability of the position. Section

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<sup>23</sup> Burge himself seems to prefer the notion of *anti-individualism*, but then he seems to have much more in mind. By this notion he includes for instance the thought that mental content and linguistic meaning can depend on physical features and not just social ones. In fact, anti-individualism is not so much a thesis about what determines the nature or content of a mental state as a thesis, which the term also indicates, about what does not. In this chapter I wish to concentrate on the social aspect of anti-individualism and then 'social externalism' seems more appropriate.



2.6 contains a summary. My main reason for considering social externalism is essentially two-fold: To present an initial account of how the meaning of a word may be considered to be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user and, by doing so, to some extent prepare the ground for the introduction of a more global and relevant kind of recognition-transcendent meaning of words than the one offered through social externalism.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 Soft (and strong) contextualism

Some defend the idea that a religion may only be fully known from the inside, from the perspective of the serious devotee of the religion in question. In arguing for this idea, some contend that what distinguishes the member from the non-member of a religion in this respect is that the former has had some religious and extraordinary experience which is invaluable for being able to make full sense of the content of that religion. By virtue of having had such an experience, people belonging to a religion are thought to be in a privileged and unique position with concern to knowing the content of the specific religion they adhere to. This is also commonly thought to extend to the meaning of the religious words of this religion, that is, only people seriously belonging to a religion can fully come to know what the words within that religion mean. To the degree that the latter is the case, this can be regarded as an instance of what I will refer to as *strong contextualism*. Strong contextualism is a thesis about linguistic competence and meaning, which states that only people belonging to a community or tradition, such as a religious one, are able to recognize the complete semantic meaning of the religious words employed within it.

However, drawing upon a distinction between knowing and having an experience of something, one may suggest that the religious experience of a devotee does not automatically put them in a privileged position of knowing the

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<sup>24</sup> For this reason, I will not in this chapter consider the viability of this position. I will however return to this position in chapter 3.

meaning of religious terms of their religion. To exemplify this distinction, assume that you wish to know more about the nature of a type of mental illness, say schizophrenia. In that case, it may be better to consult with a psychiatrist than with people suffering from it.<sup>25</sup> The latter have a direct experience of the illness in question and it may be important to communicate with them if you want to know what it is like to live with this illness. However, if you want to know more about the illness itself, the meaning of 'schizophrenia', the doctor may be the best source to consult. Moreover, even if it is true that religious devotees commonly associate some type of experience with the use of certain religious words and that this kind of experience may be difficult to communicate to someone else, one may wonder how it would be possible to establish that they are having the same type of experience? Recall, it does not seem possible to communicate the content of it.<sup>26</sup> I do not, of course, intend my critical remarks to support a more substantial and conclusive verdict on the viability of what I call strong contextualism, in general or in the context of religion.

However, even if one is sceptical of strong contextualism, perhaps for the reason just given, one may still accept that people who preach and practise a certain religion know the meaning of the key terms of that religion. That is, one may still find it plausible to assume that people in frequent and serious use of certain religious terms know the meaning of them, for how else are they, for instance, able to operate with them confidently and seemingly accurately? This does not entail that people "outside" the religion cannot come to know the proper meaning of the terms used within it, only that people "inside" the religion cannot fail to. To accept this line of thought is to accept and apply the

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<sup>25</sup> See Kai Nielsen 'Can Anything be Beyond Human Understanding?' in Kai Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 148–153 for similar thoughts.

<sup>26</sup> For this reason one may also perhaps question if or how it has any bearing on the common meaning of the religious words they use. With regard to this, one may also question to what extent one may reasonably argue for strong contextualism by drawing upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language as, for example, Genia Schönbaumsfeld does. See Genia Schönbaumsfeld, 'Worlds or Words Apart? Wittgenstein on Understanding Religious Language', *Ratio*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2007, p. 422–441.

thesis of *soft contextualism* to the context of religious words.<sup>27</sup> Soft contextualism is a thesis about linguistic competence and meaning which states that people employing a word frequently and with serious intent cannot, as a general rule, fail to know the meaning of it. That is, as far as ‘God’, ‘immortality’, ‘holy’ or ‘soul’ has a certain meaning within a specific religious community, the thesis states that this meaning is transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them, that is, to the “typical” member of this religious community. The thesis does not mean or presuppose that each and every word in such a community has a determinate meaning; only that to the degree that the words have meaning, this meaning is, in principle, known to their ordinary and competent user. Hence, if you wish to know what people within a particular religion mean by some words commonly used within it, you should ask them and they will be able to offer you a full and adequate account of what they mean. To contrast the two theses introduced, we may say that according to strong contextualism, only people belonging to a religion can know the complete meaning of words within it while according to soft contextualism, the same people cannot be ignorant of it.

In this study I will focus on soft contextualism. The reason for doing so is that it seems to be incompatible with the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words.<sup>28</sup> That is, if for instance the ordinary and competent user of certain religious and existentially important words, as a general rule, cannot fail to know the meaning of them, the meaning can obviously not

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<sup>27</sup> Both theses were originally introduced in Thord Svensson, ‘Soft Contextualism in the Context of Religion’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2011, p. 179–192.

<sup>28</sup> Also strong contextualism seems to be incompatible with the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning, but due to the fact that this thesis is in dispute, it seems better to work with a less controversial thesis but which is still incompatible with the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning. Our investigation of soft contextualism will, however, also be relevant for anyone interested in, or even defending, strong contextualism because if we, for instance, as a result of the impending investigation, were to become sceptical of soft contextualism, we would also seem to have reason for doubting the intelligibility of strong contextualism. It would for example be difficult to maintain that only people belonging to a religious tradition can know the proper meaning of the words employed within it – which is the thesis of strong contextualism – if they can be mistaken about the meaning – which a rejection of soft contextualism would imply.

be recognition-transcendent to them. In other words, whatever is recognition-transcendent to the competent user of these words, this cannot have a bearing on what these words mean as they use them. Hence, in exploring the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious words, I also examine the viability of soft contextualism in the context of religion.

In the next section I will present what I consider to be one main motive for soft contextualism, an idea that I identify as an idealistic and individualistic account of the meaning of words. This idea can be described in more than one way, but for a reason which will unfold as I proceed, I will describe it by drawing upon the notion of rule following.

## 2.3 A rule-oriented account of linguistic idealism and individualism

People are usually familiar with the idea and practice of rule following. Most adults are for example accustomed to following the rules for addition or for driving on the right-hand side of the road.<sup>29</sup> Although rule following is a quite common and well-known feature in people's lives, people seem less familiar with the suggestion that rule following can be used to account for linguistic meaning and competence. Let us see how one can think about this by returning to the example of addition. In following the rule for addition we seem to operate according to a *general* formula or principle. This seems true and reasonable because the opposite does not. That is, assume that our concept of adding up is

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<sup>29</sup> True, the rule for addition may not be of the same kind as the rule for driving on the right-hand side of the road. The rule for addition has a constitutive status or function in the sense that one cannot add up but then also choose to add up according to the rule for addition. Rather, if you do not follow the rule for addition, you do not add up at all; hence we cannot separate the activity of addition from our rule for addition. In this sense, the rule for addition is an example of what is commonly called a *constitutive* rule. Compare this to when you are not following the rule for driving on the right-hand side of the road. In this case you are still driving; hence this rule regulates, rather than constitutes, the activity of driving. It is thus an example of what is commonly called a *regulative* rule and perhaps what we most commonly mean by following a rule.

accompanied by a *specific* instruction for each two figures one can add together, such as, 'when you add  $2+2$ , you get 4', 'when you add  $2+3$ , you get 5' and 'when you add  $2+4$ , you get 6' and so on. Most of us would surely hold that this does not only appear to be a very complex and tiresome account of adding up, it is also an unfamiliar one. It does not seem to do justice to how we actually reason or proceed when we add up numbers. Why not? Because in learning how to add up, we are usually not instructed to memorize such specific formulas for every two numbers one might add up; we rather seem to follow a general rule assumed to apply to all figures.<sup>30</sup> Although the figures we add up may vary from case to case, the general principle of adding up does not.

Something similar seems to be going on concerning our use of many words. Consider for instance the use of a general term, like that of 'mug', 'nature' or 'religion'. Although such terms can be used in various contexts and about distinct and moderately different entities, something about how they are applied seems to remain constant. To exemplify this, consider a person's ability to categorize certain objects as belonging to the extension of 'mug'. In having acquired this linguistic competence, it does not seem likely that he has come to know that one particular object is called a mug (perhaps a favourite item in his cupboard at home), and this specific object too (another similar shaped item positioned on the desk in his office) and so on. If that were the case, his linguistic competence as far as 'mug' is concerned would consist in the possession and consultation of a very long and constantly expanding list of particular objects being accepted as mugs. That is, what explains his linguistic competence as far as 'mug' is concerned would be similar to the previously considered and rejected proposal concerning what it is to know how to add up (like 'when you add  $2+2$ , you get 4', 'when you add  $2+3$ , you get 5' and so on). That proposal was objected to as being all too complex and disjunctive in nature to account for some-

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<sup>30</sup> One can also question if it even would be practically possible to grasp and operate with a separate instruction for each possible calculation in that this would appear to lead to a state of "information overload". But fortunately for us, this does not appear to be how we go about adding up. In knowing how to add up we are rather, as remarked, expected to have a general idea about what adding up amounts to in each case we add up.

one's mathematical competence and the general idea manifested in the proposal would seem equally inadequate to account for someone's linguistic competence.

It thus seems more reasonable to assume that a person, in coming to know the meaning of 'mug', has acquired a general rule for its proper use. For instance, when the word is a general term they know the rule that determines what belongs to its extension.<sup>31</sup> This does not need to mean that a person has been taught this only through an explicit and verbal instruction. The person can rather be assumed to have grasped the rule by being introduced to some paradigmatic examples of what for example 'mug' applies to. From this, the person is expected to have acquired some idea, the rule, which makes them capable of extrapolating beyond the original examples. Once this rule is grasped, one can also assume that they do not need to think of it explicitly each time they wish to use 'mug' in accordance with the rule. It may rather be assumed that they have gained a disposition to arrange certain objects as being of a general sort. To make this account more distinct, I will also assume that the content of the rule, followed by a person in this sense, is rather transparent to them; to exemplify this, they will for instance have little difficulty in explaining the content of the rule to someone else.<sup>32</sup>

The current account of linguistic competence and meaning seems to entail that what I mean by a term cannot go beyond the rule I follow in using it. For this reason, if you and I apply a word according to the same rule, we use it with the same meaning and to the extent you follow a different rule than I do, we use it with a different meaning. The very idea that the meaning of a word cannot go beyond what its user knows about it may be construed and defended differently.

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<sup>31</sup> Of course, the general idea that one may analyse linguistic meaning and competence in terms of rule following is not my own. It has been developed by others and is most commonly associated with the philosophy of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein. The same idea is also commonly used to account for what it is to know and possess a concept.

<sup>32</sup> I know that this qualification may be questioned and in chapter 4 and 6 I will to some extent do that myself. But for the moment we can assume this account because it will not matter as I turn to the position of social externalism. That is, for the social externalist, the meaning of terms used by a person can go beyond what they think the meaning is, regardless if they are able to offer an explicit account of the rule they follow or not.

However, to compare linguistic competence to what is involved in following a rule, and even to analyse the former in terms of the latter, seems especially helpful to emphasize and motivate this idea. The reason for this is that it seems only possible to follow a rule if one grasps what the rule requires. True, a person may *act in accordance* to a rule without knowing the rule, but to *follow the rule* in the ordinary sense of the word, they must know it; the rule must be the reason for their behaviour. Consequently, to the extent we analyse linguistic competence and meaning of words in terms of rule following, we seem entitled to conclude that a competent and ordinary user of a word cannot be ignorant of its meaning, because the meaning cannot extend beyond the rule for its use and the content of the rule, in turn, cannot extend beyond what they recognize it to be; because, as just remarked, to follow a rule without knowing it does not seem possible.<sup>33</sup> Differently put, one only follows a rule to the extent that it is the reason for one's behaviour.

To the degree one adopts this line of reasoning one seems committed to what I would call an idealistic and individualistic conception of linguistic meaning and competence: individualistic in that the (idiolectic) meaning of the words used by a person is constitutively dependent on that person alone and nothing else (although it may still be *causally* dependent on someone else in the sense that the person may have come to know the rule from someone else) and idealistic with regard to how the meaning is dependent on that person, in being determined and limited relative to what they recognize it to be. In what follows, I identify this conception as one main motivation for the thesis of soft contextualism because to the extent that we accept this conception of linguistic meaning and competence, we have good reason to think that religious people cannot use

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<sup>33</sup> For a more general articulation of this thought, we can consider how Robert Briscoe explains individualism: '[F]or the individualist, there is no notion of correct explanation of idiolectal meaning such that even if an agent has provided what, by ordinary standards, is a correct explanation of her *understanding* of her use of a word in a certain context, she may have provided only an incomplete or partially incorrect explanation of what she actually *means* by it. (This, of course, is not to deny the obvious point that an individual may have a defective understanding of words in the *sociolect*.)', See Robert Briscoe, 'Individualism, Externalism and Idiolectal Meaning', *Synthese*, vol. 152, no. 1, 2006, p. 101.

words with a meaning they are ignorant of. This is, if we recall, what the soft contextualism thesis states.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.4 Social externalism

In this section and its subsections, I present the position of social externalism. In doing so, I describe and draw upon some basic features of Hilary Putnam's 'hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour' and Tyler Burge's version of social externalism.

### 2.4.1 Putnam's hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour

Through the publication of *The Meaning of Meaning* (1975) Hilary Putnam contributed extensively to making *semantic externalism* an important and influential philosophical position. In arguing for this position, Putnam objects to the fusion of two common theses about the meaning of a word: (1) that the meaning of a term (its intension) determines its extension and (2) that knowing the meaning of a term (its intension) is to be in a certain psychological state.<sup>35</sup> According to Putnam, these theses have been thought to be inseparable. Putnam however, sets out to show that they cannot be conjoined. In this chapter I will be concerned with one aspect of his position, the social aspect believed to be

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, this presupposes the reading of rule following presently offered; but see Ruth Garrett Millican 'Truth Rules, Hoverflies, and the Kripke-Wittgenstein Paradox', in *Philosophical Review*, vol. 99, no. 3, 1990, p. 223–253 for a different account.

<sup>35</sup> So even if the meaning of words is mind-independent in virtue of being abstract, as Frege would say, his position is still, according to Putnam, affected by this because grasping the meaning is an act of the mind; see Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of Meaning", in (eds) Andrew Pessin & Sanford Goldberg, *The Twin Earth Chronicles: Twenty Years of Reflection on Hilary Putnam's "The Meaning of Meaning"*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 6.



captured by his ‘hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour’. In chapter 3 I turn to a different aspect of his position.

Recall the rule-oriented account of linguistic meaning and competence presented in the previous section. A constitutive feature of this account was that the meaning of a term is connected to a rule for its use in that what I mean by the term is determined and limited to whatever rule I follow in using the term. Hence, what rule I follow in categorizing objects as belonging to the extension of a certain term determines what I mean by it. As previously remarked, if I and someone else do not pick out the extension according to the same rule, we would not be using the term with the same extension and, in a certain sense, we would not use the word with the same meaning.

Putnam objects to this individualistic oriented conception of meaning. He does so by presenting the hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour. To consider one of his most well-known examples of this phenomenon, let us assume that I am not able to distinguish between elms and beeches. That is, if I had an example of each tree before me, I would not know which tree is an elm and which one is a beech. That would not however according to Putnam stop me from referring determinately to elms when I use the word ‘elms’. Why is this the case? Because someone else in my community knows what elms are and how they are to be distinguished from beeches. All I need to know is some very basic facts about elms and an intention to defer to those people within my community who know what elms are. If I measure up to this, I can be deemed to use the term with the same meaning as more knowledgeable people within my community do. Hence, what I mean by ‘elm’ is not determined by or limited to what I know or whatever rule I follow in using the word. And to the extent that what is true of ‘elm’ is applicable to more terms, the meaning of them too can go beyond what I recognize it to be.

In exemplifying what the hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour amounts to in the case of ‘gold’, Putnam writes:

...everyone to whom gold is important for any reason has to *acquire* the word “gold”; but he does not have to acquire the *method of recognizing* if something is or is not gold. He can rely on a special subclass of speakers. The features that are generally thought to be present in connection with a general name – necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the extension, ways of recognizing if something is in the extension (“criteria”), etc. – are all present in the linguistic

community *considered as a collective body*; but that collective body divides the “labor” of knowing and employing these various parts of the “meaning” of “gold”.<sup>36</sup>

And in expressing the idea in question more generally, Putnam writes:

Whenever a term is subject to the division of linguistic labor, the “average” speaker who acquires it does not acquire anything that fixes its extension. In particular, his individual psychological state *certainly* does not fix its extension; it is only the sociolinguistic state of the collective linguist body to which the speaker belongs that fixes the extension.<sup>37</sup>

According to Putnam, for me to use the term ‘gold’ with the same extension as everyone else, I do not need to know how to identify objects of gold. Concerning this, I may rather rely on someone else, presuming I belong to a community of people in which someone else is competent enough to perform the task. As stated by Putnam, what most of us mean by ‘gold’ may then be determined by what only a few of us know about it; the ignorant defer to the less ignorant.

Putnam does not think that a person can know all too little about what belongs to the extension of ‘gold’ and still use the word with its standard meaning. As he puts it, ‘we don’t assign the standard extension to the tokens of a word *W* uttered by Jones *no matter how* Jones uses *W*’.<sup>38</sup> What this remark from Putnam points to is that if a person thinks that ‘gold’ refers to abstract objects or is the name of a particular, that person’s conception of ‘gold’ is too inaccurate. This qualification of his position can also be connected to how I have qualified the objective of my study. If we recall, we are exploring to what extent the meaning

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<sup>36</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 29.

of a term can be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user. The precise meaning of an 'ordinary and competent' user can to some degree be construed differently, but for the moment we may interpret this to entail that a person who, for instance, thinks of gold as an abstract entity does not qualify as an competent user of the word 'gold'. Such a person is thus not entitled to use the word with the same meaning as people who know the meaning more accurately, but if his conception is not flawed in this strong sense, he is permitted to do so.<sup>39</sup>

It is also evident from the way Putnam describes his proposal that he considers the division of linguistic labour to be a possibility, more common at certain stages in the history and development of a community of people than at others. That is, he does not seem to mean that you have to belong to a community of people for your words to have any meaning or that you have to defer to someone else for your words to have the meaning they have within a community. With regard to the latter, this will for example not be required if you are an expert on what the words in question express and refer to. Hence, in difference to the position commonly referred to as the community-thesis, which I will consider and object to in chapter 5, the division thesis does not state or suggest that one has to belong to a community of people to mean something by the words one uses; from Putnam's viewpoint, the social context is more of a resource than a requirement.

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<sup>39</sup> We may also emphasize that to the extent we are concerned with Putnam's position we are concerned with the meaning of words in a person's idiolect. It is also for this reason Putnam's division hypothesis opposes the individualist conception of the meaning of words previously considered. See also Briscoe 2006, p. 99 for the same observation.

### 2.4.2 Burge's social externalism

Tyler Burge has presented and argued for a position similar to Putnam's "division hypothesis". In one sense, Burge's position can be seen as a development of Putnam's thesis, from being strictly about the meaning of words to also being about the content of mental states. According to Burge, a person's representational mental states – like their thoughts or beliefs about gold, universities or tables – should be individuated partly in relation to the social context of the individual, or more precisely the linguistic community they are a member of. That is, the content of a person's beliefs is identified relative to their social setting and is not just a matter of what's inside their head, that is, what they grasp.<sup>40</sup> According to the same position, the meaning of the words they use to communicate the content of their beliefs to someone else may also be held to be determined relative to the community of people they are a member of rather than being solely determined by what is inside their head. In fact, one main reason for why the person can be ignorant of the content of their own beliefs is that they are ignorant of the ordinary definition of terms they uses to report and express their beliefs. Even if a person misinterprets the socially accepted meaning of these words, they can still, according to Burge, employ them to accurately identify and communicate their mental content.<sup>41</sup> That is, to have a belief accurately identified and reported by certain terms (a 'that clause' in Burge's terminology), the person does not need to have a complete or correct account of the meaning of the terms in question (or the content expressed by the 'that clause').<sup>42</sup> In this sense a person can, according to Burge, accurately use words with a meaning that is beyond their present recognition.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Burge 1979, p. 79. See also Burge 'Postscript to "Individualism and the Mental"' in Tyler Burge, *Foundations of the Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 151.

<sup>41</sup> See for example Burge 1979, p. 79–80. He writes for instance: '...a generally competent speaker is bound to have numerous words in his repertoire, possibly even common words, that he somewhat misconstrues. Many of these misconstruals will not be such as to deflect ordinary ascriptions of that-clauses involving the incompletely mastered term in oblique occurrence'. See Burge 1979, p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> As Burge writes: 'In an ordinary sense, the noun phrases that embed sentential expressions in mentalistic idioms provide the *content* of the mental state or event. We shall call that-clauses and their grammatical

Burge presents and argues for his position by the use of several thought-experiments. In perhaps his most well-known one, Burge describes a person, let us call him Bert<sub>i</sub>, who has several accurate beliefs about arthritis. Apart from his many correct beliefs about arthritis, he also however believes that it is possible to develop arthritis in one's thigh and that this, as a matter of fact, has happened to him (this is of course not true because arthritis, in its standard definition, can only affect the joints). In Burge's own words:

A given person has a large number of attitudes commonly attributed with content clauses containing 'arthritis' in oblique occurrence. For example, he thinks (correctly) that he has had arthritis for years, that his arthritis in his wrists and fingers is more painful than his arthritis in his ankles, that it is better to have arthritis than cancer of the liver, that stiffening joints is a symptom of arthritis, that certain sorts of aches are characteristic of arthritis, that there are various

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variants "*content clauses*." Thus the expression 'that sofas are more comfortable than pews' provides the content of Alfred's belief that sofas are more comfortable than pews. My phrase 'provides the content' represents an attempt at remaining neutral, at least for present purposes, among various semantical and metaphysical accounts of precisely how that-clauses function and precisely what, if anything, contents are.' See Burge 1979, p. 74.

<sup>43</sup> And, just like Putnam, Burge does not only intend the meaning seen as part of some sociolect but the meaning of the words seen as part of that person's idiolect. As Robert Briscoe explains: 'Burge's claims concern the semantics of *idiolects*, i.e., meaning and reference in the language system of an individual speaker.' See Briscoe 2006, p. 99. Something analogous is also true of how Burge claims to do justice to the content of a person's belief. In describing a person's beliefs about something it is commonly assumed that one should take into consideration that person's perspective on what the beliefs are about. In arguing for social externalism, Burge intends to respect this consideration. To use Burge's own example, if a person does not know that 'Mt. McKinley' and 'the highest mountain in the United States' denote the same mountain we should for instance not describe that person's intention or wish to climb Mt. McKinley by saying that 'he has a wish or intention to climb the highest mountain in the United States'. Differently put, if this person expresses his desire by saying: 'I wish to climb Mt. McKinley' we cannot express and report this by saying 'He wishes to climb the highest mountain in the United States', because this is not what he wishes to do. Sometimes this is expressed as if 'Mt. McKinley' in the former statement has an oblique occurrence. See Burge 1979, p. 76. To some extent Burge does not only want to respect this consideration, he also builds on it in arguing for his position; see for instance Burge 1979, p. 92 for an example of this.

kinds of arthritis, and so forth. In short, he has a wide range of such attitudes. In addition to these unsurprising attitudes, he thinks falsely that he has developed arthritis in the thigh.<sup>44</sup>

When Bert<sub>1</sub> consults with his doctor, he is naturally informed about the standard definition of 'arthritis' and that whatever the problem is with his thigh it has nothing to do with arthritis. In developing his thought-experiment, Burge then depicts a second person, Bert<sub>2</sub>, who is molecule-for-molecule identical to Bert<sub>1</sub>, but who happens to live in a different society.

The second step of the thought experiment consists of a counterfactual supposition. We are to conceive of a situation in which the patient proceeds from birth through the same course of physical events that he actually does, right to and including the time at which he first reports his fear to his doctor. Precisely the same things (non-intentionally described) happen to him. He has the same physiological history, the same diseases, the same internal physical occurrences. He goes through the same motions, engages in the same behaviour, has the same sensory intake (physiologically described). His dispositions to respond to stimuli are explained in physical theory as the effects of the same proximate causes. All of this extends to his interaction with linguistic expressions. He says and hears the same words (word forms) at the same times he actually does. He develops the disposition to assent to 'Arthritis can occur in the thigh' and 'I have arthritis in the thigh' as a result of the same physically described proximate causes.<sup>45</sup>

In the second part of the thought experiment, Burge thus describes a different and contrafactual society within which 'arthritis' is a name for a disease that affects both joints and thighs. So when Bert<sub>2</sub> consults with his doctor he will not

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<sup>44</sup> Burge 1979, p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> Burge 1979, p. 77–78.

be told to change his belief about arthritis. He and his doctor will instead try to establish if this, in fact, is what explains the pain Bert<sub>2</sub> has in his thigh.

The relevant question and the reason behind the thought-experiment is this: Before Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> talk to each doctor, do they have the same thoughts and beliefs? And do they express the same meaning when they say to the doctor: 'I think I have arthritis in one of my thighs'? That is, do the words they use have the same idiolectic meaning? How one responds to this question depends on what one thinks determines the content of a person's mental content and the meaning of the words they utter.

Let us begin by considering the response one may expect from someone advocating the idealistic and individualistic conception of linguistic meaning previously considered. Such a person may feel inclined to hold that Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> have the same beliefs and express the same meaning when, for instance, saying that 'I suspect that I have arthritis in one of my thighs' since they are internally alike. Recall how Burge sets up the thought-experiment: Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> are identical as far as their molecular structure is concerned.<sup>46</sup> If nothing is different between them in this respect, how can they possibly be held to have or express different beliefs? According to this analysis and assessment, what is not transparent to Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> cannot matter for what propositional attitudes they have and if what is transparent to Bert<sub>1</sub> is no different from what is transparent to Bert<sub>2</sub>, they cannot possibly have different beliefs.<sup>47</sup> Hence, they possess

<sup>46</sup> As Burge writes and previously quoted: 'We are to conceive of a situation in which the patient proceeds from birth through the same course of physical events that he actually does, right to and including the time at which he first reports his fear to his doctor. Precisely the same things (non-intentionally described) happen to him. He has the same physiological history, the same diseases, the same internal physical occurrences. He goes through the same motions, engages in the same behavior, has the same sensory intake (physiologically described)....'

<sup>47</sup> Burge also seems to think that something like this reasoning lies behind certain critical responses to his position: 'These treatments are based on a model that likens the relation between a person and the contents of his thought to seeing, where seeing is taken to be a kind of direct, immediate experience. On the most radical and unqualified versions of the model, a person's inspection of the contents of his thought is infallible: the notion of incompletely understanding them has no application at all. [...] The model tends to encourage individualistic treatments of the mental. For it suggests that what a person thinks depends on what occurs or "appears" within his mind. Demythologized, what a person thinks depends on the power and

the same beliefs and express the same meaning when saying 'I think I have arthritis in one of my thighs'. Even if the notion 'arthritis' is defined differently within each one's community, this difference does not affect what Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> mean as long as they are uninformed about this difference. That is, it has no bearing on what they mean and believe as long as this conventional meaning is unrecognized by them. And of course, even if we did not consider this line of response in the context of Putnam's hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour, basically the same line of reasoning can be used to object to his position.

Burge, in contrast, thinks that the mental content of each individual is different, and the very purpose of the thought-experiment is of course to hold constant the facts that may appear to be content-individuating – for instance what is transparent to Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub> – while encouraging us to conclude that they, in fact, possess beliefs and concepts with different content. The reason for this is the social difference between Bert<sub>1</sub> and Bert<sub>2</sub>: how each person's community and its experts define 'arthritis'. Even though Bert<sub>1</sub> has an inaccurate conception of the meaning of 'arthritis', he intends to talk about the same disease as his better-informed peers do when talking about arthritis, that is, he intends to use the word with the same intension and extension as they do. For this reason he is to be attributed the same notion as them. In contrast, Bert<sub>2</sub>, even though he is a physical duplicate of Bert<sub>1</sub>, should not be held to possess the same notion as Bert<sub>1</sub> since his society has a different definition of arthritis. And to the extent Bert<sub>2</sub> is committed to the definition of 'arthritis' accepted and used within his community, he should be ascribed a different notion, and be held to use the word 'arthritis' with this communal meaning.<sup>48</sup>

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extent of his comprehension and on his internal dispositions toward the comprehended contents.' See Burge 1979, p. 103.

<sup>48</sup> Burge explains this as follows: 'We suppose that in the counterfactual case we cannot correctly ascribe any content clause containing an oblique occurrence of the term 'arthritis'. It is hard to see how the patient could have picked up the notion of arthritis. The word 'arthritis' in the counterfactual community does not mean *arthritis*. It does not apply only to inflammations of joints.' See Burge 1979, p. 79.



An important assumption for Burge's analysis is thus that Bert<sub>i</sub> intends to talk like everyone else in his community. According to Burge, this is not a peculiar or unwarranted assumption. As Burge puts it: 'The subject's willingness to submit his statement and belief to the arbitration of an authority suggests a willingness to have his words taken in the normal way regardless of mistaken associations with the word.'<sup>49</sup> He also writes: 'Speakers commonly intend to be interpreted according to standards of usage that are in some respects better understood by others.'<sup>50</sup> So the idea that people are committed to the conventional meaning is a premise in his argumentation and one that can be considered to be empirically supported by the fact that people commonly accept correction by others. In a concluding fashion, Burge writes.

The upshot of these reflections is that the patient's mental contents differ while his entire physical and non-intentional mental histories, considered in isolation from their social context, remain the same. [...] The difference in his mental contents is attributable to differences in his social environment.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Burge 1979, p. 101. Åsa Maria Wikforss puts it: 'The reason why the patient should be ascribed the community concept, despite his incomplete understanding of it, is that he is committed to the community practice and intends to speak of the same disease as the medical experts within his community do. This commitment is shown by the fact that the patient, when discussing his illness with his doctor, is willing to *stand corrected*...' See Åsa Maria Wikforss, 'Social Externalism and Conceptual Errors', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 203, 2001, p. 220.

<sup>50</sup> See Tyler Burge, 'Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2003, p. 684.

<sup>51</sup> Burge 1979, p. 79. Or as he also writes: 'In sum, the patient's internal qualitative experiences, his physiological states and events, his behaviourally described stimuli and responses, his dispositions to behave, and whatever sequences of states (non-intentionally described) mediated his input and output – all these remain constant, while his attitude contents differ, even in the extensions of counterpart notions. As we observed at the outset, such differences are ordinarily taken to spell differences in mental states and events.' Ibid

Thus, what Bert<sub>1</sub> has in ‘his head’ is not enough to identify and pick out the content of his own beliefs. Differently put, the complete content of these beliefs do not need to be transparent to him for it to be what he believes.<sup>52</sup> And he does not need to have a completely accurate account of the communal meaning of certain words to be able to employ them to adequately express the content of his beliefs.

We should note that Burge does not intend to put forward a general version of the specific idea that a person’s religious beliefs can be the result of their religious upbringing. That is, we should differ between Burge’s idea and another commonly accepted idea, that a religious devotee is often socialized into a religion in virtue of adopting the beliefs of their parents or the surrounding culture within which they have been brought up.<sup>53</sup> Since this idea is what many people commonly have in mind when they accept that the beliefs of a person and the meaning of their words are dependent on their culture, it is important that we distinguish between this idea and the one presented by Burge.<sup>54</sup>

Let us consider another example. Burge thinks for instance that people should be deemed to possess the normal concept of a contract, and to be attributed beliefs described through this concept, even when they only have a partly correct conception about what a contract is. As an example of such a flawed conception of a contract, they might think that an oral agreement does not constitute a binding contract. According to Burge, such a misconception

<sup>52</sup> As Keith Donnellan states: ‘...what is wholly within our minds, as one might put it, is not sufficient to determine, for example, what we believe.’ See Keith Donnellan, ‘Burge Thought Experiments’ in *Reflections and Replies, Essays on the Philosophy of Tyler Burge*, (London, MIT Press, 2003), p. 69.

<sup>53</sup> Burge also does not think that the meaning of words and content of thoughts are recognition-transcendent through being hidden deep down in the person’s psyche. He writes: ‘The thought experiment indicates that certain “linguistic truths” that have often been held to be indubitable can be thought yet doubted. And it shows that a person’s thought *content* is not fixed by what goes on in him, or by what is accessible to him simply by careful reflection. The reason for this last point about “accessibility” need not be that the content lies too deep in the unconscious recesses of the subject’s psyche. Contents are sometimes “inaccessible” to introspection simply because much mentalistic attribution does not presuppose that the subject has fully mastered the content of his thought.’ See Burge 1979, p. 104–105.

<sup>54</sup> For a very influential work along this line of reasoning, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality, a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

does not stop them from having “contract thoughts” to the same degree as people whose conception of the notion of a contract is not flawed in this sense. It would for instance be accurate to report that ‘Susan thinks that she just signed a contract’ even if her idea of a contract is incorrect in this sense.

We may also more explicitly give emphasis to an important difference between Burge’s and Putnam’s positions. Putnam would say that what a person has in their head (their concept) might not be sufficient enough to establish what certain terms in this person’s idiolect refer to. If this is taken to mean that what a person believes or thinks does not fixate the extension of these terms, Burge would object to this because, according to him, the person’s thoughts and beliefs may, in fact, do this once they are individuated socially. That is, on Burge’s position, what a person believes is also determined externally and once we realize this, we should conclude that their beliefs can fix the extension of their terms.<sup>55</sup>

Let me close this section by putting forward my formulation of social externalism, which I will use in this study. Although it is naturally strongly influenced by the positions and theses of Putnam and Burge, I have no intention to let it precisely mirror the position of either of them:

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<sup>55</sup> See for instance Tyler Burge ‘Concepts, Definitions, and Meaning’, *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1993, p. 319 where he writes that Putnam ‘...maintains that one cannot hold both that knowing the meaning of a term is a matter of being in a certain psychological state and that the meaning of a term fixes its reference or extension. The argument is that one cannot hold these two principles because the reference of the term may be fixed even though the speaker’s knowledge of the referent is incomplete. The reference depends on non-cognitive relations between the speaker and the referents of his terms that are beyond anything the speaker knows. [...] This argument is unsound. The argument would succeed if the meaning of a speaker’s term or concept were reducible to what he believed, knew, or understood about its meaning, content, or referent; or if a speaker’s psychological state consisted in elements of his psychology that could be described independently of relations to the environment or of what concepts he has. But neither of these conditions holds.’ In contrast to Putnam’s position, Burge’s version of social externalism is also held to apply more generally, not only to natural kind terms but to nearly all kinds of terms. He writes: ‘The argument has an extremely wide application. It does not depend, for example, on the kind of word ‘arthritis’ is. We could have used an artifact term, an ordinary natural kind word, a color adjective, a social role term, a term for a historical style, an abstract noun, an action verb, a physical movement verb, or any of various other sorts of words’. See Burge 1979, p. 79.

**Social externalism:** The idiolectic meaning of a term can partly extend beyond what the ordinary and competent user of it recognizes it to be in virtue of being determined by definitions and conventional usage accepted within the linguistic community they belong, and are committed, to.

Social externalism, on this construal, entails that the meaning of a person's words and the content of their thoughts may not be fully accounted for by what the person explicitly or implicitly recognizes the meaning or content to be.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.5 Social externalism and religious and existentially important terms

So far in this chapter I have described certain key thoughts from the positions of Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam with regard to how the meaning of words used by one person can depend on someone else. In this section I will discuss what positive bearing this position can have on the key question explored in this study: Can the ordinary and competent user of religious and existentially important words be ignorant about their meaning?

Let us initially recollect what a recognition-transcendent meaning of words presupposes and consider how social externalism may basically seem to account for this presupposition. If we recall, the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of a term requires that the meaning in question is external and objective enough for the user to be ignorant of it but internal and subjective enough

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<sup>56</sup> One may of course try to capture the gist of much of what Putnam and Burge are claiming without giving up on some kind of individualism. One attempt to do so is to say that the competent user of 'gold' for instance either implicitly or explicitly recognizes that the meaning of this term is constitutively dependent on features they may know very little about. Knowing this, they may defer to someone else and say 'I mean what they mean'. According to some individualists, this act of deferring is still in the person's "head". In chapter 3 I will return to this kind of elaboration or interpretation of social externalism.

for them to be committed to it. Social externalism, if accepted, may account for this delicate balance as follows: As a result of being captured by an expert-user or the communally accepted definition of a term, the meaning of the term is external and objective enough in relation to the single user for them to be mistaken about it. At the same time, this user may be committed to the meaning, partly by virtue of having a moderately accurate account of the meaning and partly in being committed to what more knowledgeable people within their community decide the meaning to be. The position of social externalism, if considered viable, thus seems capable of making sense of the delicate balance involved in the idea of recognition-transcendent meaning.

Someone may of course wish to object to this and argue that to the degree we are drawing upon social externalism, we are not actually considering if or how the meaning of religious and existentially important words can be recognition-transcendent to the competent user of them but to someone less competent.<sup>57</sup> And to the extent this is true, social externalism would not qualify as a relevant position as far as my study is concerned. Although I may have some sympathy with this objection, one should also bear in mind that one cannot be too strict in applying this qualification, partly because that may rule out the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning from the outset and partly because how this notion should be construed must, to some degree, be permitted to vary with different theories.<sup>58</sup> According to the social externalist, linguistic competence is a matter of degree and people with different degrees of competence may be taken to use words with the same meaning as long as they are suf-

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<sup>57</sup> See for instance John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 201 or Tim Crane, 'All the Difference in the World', in (eds) Andrew Pessin & Sanford Goldberg, *The Twin Earth Chronicles: Twenty Years of Reflection on Hilary Putnam's "The Meaning of Meaning"*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 298.

<sup>58</sup> One may also recall that the main motive behind this qualification was to express and stress my intention to examine to what extent the meaning of a term can be recognition-transcendent to someone that can be held committed to this meaning. And according to the social externalist, this can apply to people who lack a complete and accurate conception of its meaning.

ficiently competent.<sup>59</sup> We may also recall that, according to the social externalist, a person is not free to buy into the communal meaning of words just because they wish to do so, something more is required from them.<sup>60</sup> A person who, for example, thinks that love is a concrete object one can pick up and put in one's bag knows all too little about the ordinary meaning of 'love' to be qualified to use it with the same meaning as more knowledgeable people. And a person who holds the same idea about 'God' and 'spirit' would also know too little about what these words mean to be able to use them with their ordinary meaning. So although it is possible to make up for a lack of linguistic competence by being committed to someone else's usage and competence, one cannot only rely on that kind of commitment.<sup>61</sup>

Social externalism would appear inconsistent with what I have called an individualistic conception of the meaning of words, because on this conception the meaning of words is strongly dependent on and limited to what the user of them understands. Moreover, this conception was also identified as one main motivation behind the thesis of soft contextualism which stated that people employing a word frequently and with serious intent cannot, as a general rule, fail to know the meaning of it. To the extent that we accept social externalism we thus find ourselves with a reason for either rejecting or qualifying this thesis too. For a social externalist, the soft contextualist-thesis would, I suppose, make

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<sup>59</sup> For some criticism of social externalism along this line, see for instance Gabriel Segal, *A Slim Book About Narrow Content*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p. 65–66f. See also Akeel Bilgrami, *Belief and Meaning – The Unity and Locality of Mental Content* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), chapters 2 and 3 for similar concerns.

<sup>60</sup> If we remember, as Burge sets up the thought-experiment, Bert<sub>1</sub> has many correct beliefs about arthritis.

<sup>61</sup> As Burge writes: 'What a person understands is indeed one of the chief factors that bear on what thoughts he can express in using words. If there were not deep and important connections between propositional attitudes and understanding, one could hardly expect one's attributions of mental content to facilitate reliable predictions of what a person will do, say, or think. But our examples provide reason to believe that these connections are not simple entailments to the effect that having a propositional attitude strictly implies full understanding of its content.' See Burge 1979, p. 89. So we seem to come across the idea of a balance about meaning within Burge's position; moderate inadequate comprehension of what certain terms mean should not stop people from using them with the complete meaning of them. See also Wikforss 2001, p. 221 for more on this.

more sense if applied to a community of religious people as a whole rather than to each and every member of that community. That is, the social externalist may concede that someone within a community must know the complete and adequate meaning of the terms used within it. However, although only a few people within such a community may (and need to) know the complete meaning of certain religious terms, it is still possible for most, or all, people within it to use the words with this meaning. We may also give emphasis to the fact that to the extent one accepts social externalism, one is only opposing the individualistic, and not the idealistic, conception of meaning because the meaning is still, as just remarked, known by someone.

Applied to a religious context, the social externalist position would seem to mean that many people within a religious community can use terms to refer to important figures in the history of the community or to identify and describe the content of the religious beliefs they cherish and hold true, without themselves knowing enough to be able to distinguish between these and what would be important religious figures and beliefs for a similar but distinct religious community. And to the degree that 'God', as is used in some Judaeo-Christian contexts, refers to an extraordinary and transcendent being, social externalism would let us accept that most people within such contexts can use 'God' to refer to the same divine object although only perhaps some of them have an adequate account of the meaning of 'God'. That is, some people within the religious community know the meaning and referent of 'God' completely and people within the same community who do not, can still be held to use the term with the communally endorsed meaning as a result of deferring to the former. Recall however, that the latter group of people cannot be too ignorant.

One may also suggest that religious people do not, in general, belong to one religion rather than a different one entirely as a consequence of what they know, but partly in virtue of holding themselves committed to one religious authority rather than an alternative one. Hence, if one wishes to analyse membership in a religion and what this presupposes and requires, this may have less to do with what each member grasps and believes (in the psychological and narrow sense) and more to do with which religious authorities they hold themselves committed to. Social externalism also has a bearing on how the meaning of some religious words is best studied. For instance, to reveal what the words of a person's idiolect mean, one may have to look beyond what that person comprehends and also consider what their peers know and think about it.

However, although one may think that social externalism accounts for how the meaning of certain terms may be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and (moderately) competent user of them, I think that this kind of recognition-transcendent meaning may be of limited interest and importance with regard to some terms of religious and existential importance. The reason for thinking so is that we simply have no established definition for many such terms, and we are instead in search for one. This seems to indicate that social externalism may not offer us a complete account of how the meaning of all such terms can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. Hence, we need to continue our investigation.

## 2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have put forward some theses about what determines the meaning of words in a person's idiolect. According to the individualistic and idealistic conception of this matter, the meaning is dependent on the person's conception of it alone. The meaning of words as they use them cannot extend beyond what they consider the meaning to be, without of course denying that the meaning of words as they are used in their community by others can do so. I have also argued that this position on meaning is what lies behind the thesis of soft contextualism, also introduced in this chapter. Soft contextualism states that people employing a word frequently and with serious intent cannot, as a general rule, fail to know the meaning of it. Naturally, to the extent we accept the individualistic and idealistic conception of meaning, the possibility of the meaning of words being recognition-transcendent seems very limited. As a partial contrast to this conception, I presented the position of social externalism according to which also the idiolectic meaning of words can go beyond the user's own conception of it. In virtue of this, social externalism seems to account for how the meaning of some religious and existentially important terms may be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. However, it does so in a sense that does not apply to all terms of this category, an observation that I will expand on in the next chapter.



## 3

# The possibility of a community-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms

## 3.1 Introduction

We are assuming that recognition-transcendent meaning of words presupposes a delicate balance between what can be considered the adequate meaning of words and what the ordinary and competent user of them recognizes the meaning of them to be: The meaning must be external and objective enough in relation to the user for them to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, the meaning must be internal and subjective enough for them to be committed to it.<sup>62</sup>

If one accepts the position of social externalism, one may account for this balance by saying that a person can use a word with its ordinary meaning (rather than with some deviant one) although their account of the ordinary meaning is incomplete or mistaken. They can do this in virtue of being committed to the definition of the term being accepted within their community, either by the majority or some expert, presupposing that their comprehension of the definition is sufficiently accurate. In this sense, social externalism may seem to account for how some part of the meaning of a term can be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary user. And to the degree one accepts the position of social external-

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<sup>62</sup> Also recall that this does not entail that the meaning of the word is forever beyond the competent user's recognition, only that it does not need to be currently recognized by them to qualify as the meaning of it.

ism and applies it to religious and existentially important terms, it seems to offer us an account of how the meaning of such terms can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and (moderately but sufficiently) competent user of them.

To the extent we are only considering this explanation of how people of a religious community can be ignorant about what they mean by a word, the possibility of everyone in that community being wrong about what they mean by the word does not seem to make much sense; because according to social externalism, as I have construed it, someone within the community has to know the complete meaning of the word, which the rest of the people can be committed to, but possibly mistaken about. For an expression of this line of reasoning, we may consider the following quotation from James Higginbotham:

It is clear enough how an individual's conception of the meaning of a word can be partial or mistaken: the individual has picked up the word somehow, and is committed, and intends, or has no choice but, to mean by it what others mean; but the individual has got only partial information, possibly mixed in with various errors. It is far from clear how a whole population's most competent users can be partial or mistaken, for it is their activities that give the words what meaning they have, and their conceptions of meaning are canonically evidenced by those activities.<sup>63</sup>

According to Higginbotham, the possibility of a whole community being mistaken about what they mean by a word may be difficult to make sense of.

Although it may seem hard to make sense of this possibility, the purpose of this chapter (and the following one) is to examine precisely this.<sup>64</sup> I thus set out to examine in what sense an entire community of people, like a religious one, and not only some people within it, can be held to be wrong about what they

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<sup>63</sup> James Higginbotham, 'Conceptual Competence', *Philosophical Issues*, vol. 9, 1998, p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> Although not in direct opposition to Higginbotham's position.

mean by a word; that is, if some part of the word's complete meaning can extend beyond what all people in the community recognize it to be. Differently put, I am about to examine if we need to reject or modify the thesis of soft contextualism when applied to a religious, or any, community as a whole.<sup>65</sup> I will label this the hypothesis of a communally recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words and occasionally refer to the meaning explored through it as *community-transcendent meaning*. However, for the hypothesis to be confirmed it does not need to be the case that precisely everyone in the religious community must be mistaken about the meaning of words used within it because it may be that only a few people within the religious community use them. I am rather examining if it is possible for some people to be wrong, with regard to what they mean by certain words, without relying on someone else in the same community being correct.<sup>66</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is thus to address and examine the possibility of a communally recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially

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<sup>65</sup> To express this through the terminology put forward in this study, we are about to examine if we have good reason to go beyond, not only an individualistic, but also an idealistic conception of the meaning of religious and existentially important words, and adopt a realistic conception of this meaning. It is also for this reason that it is important to examine the hypothesis regardless if we accept the position of individualism or social externalism presented in the previous chapter because they both construe the meaning of words idealistically. According to both theories, as I have interpreted them, someone has to know the meaning, either the user himself or someone else in his community which he defers to. One may also relate this hypothesis to the possibility considered in the previous chapter by saying that we then explored if a "layperson" can be partly ignorant about the meaning of some of the words they use by deferring to an "expert" using the same words, and that we in this chapter are about to examine if also the expert can also be mistaken about the meaning of these words. One may also however consider the possibility to be explored in this chapter independently of the one presented in the previous chapter. If we recall, Putnam's hypothesis of a division of linguistic labour was not held to apply to all terms and both his hypothesis and Burge's thesis presupposed that the person was committed to the expertise of someone else or its communal meaning. Even if a person did not defer to someone else, we may still wonder if they can be mistaken or ignorant about the meaning of their own words. More generally put, can we only be mistaken about the meaning of our words in relation to what *someone* else knows about this meaning or also in relation to *something* else?

<sup>66</sup> It is this we wonder about when we ask if a whole community may be mistaken because if no member must be correct for someone else to be mistaken, everyone can, in principle, be mistaken. Moreover, the purpose is not to examine if the meaning of certain words actually is recognition-transcendent in this sense; we are only concerned with the possibility of the meaning being so.

important words. I will do so by critically considering the viability of a certain proposal on how to make sense of this hypothesis, namely if the meaning of such terms can be recognition-transcendent as a result of being identified with the mind-independent object they refer to; either a particular object or a type of object. In considering the former option, I will focus on one common term of religious and existential importance, that of 'God' as it is used within the Judaeo-Christian community or more generally.<sup>67</sup> As I proceed, I will also consider the possibility of treating certain general terms of religious and existential importance as natural kind terms. I return to my reason for considering this possibility, but the basic motive for doing so is that it may make it possible to apply the position of semantic externalism to these terms in a manner that would be highly relevant for the objective of this chapter and my study. For instance, can the meaning of 'life' be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user by virtue of being identified with a hitherto undiscovered natural kind?

I proceed as follows: In section 3.2, I describe some basic and, for the discussion that ensues, relevant features of the descriptivist and the causal theory of reference. For a reason that will surface as I proceed, I will then in section 3.3 and its subsections examine to what extent the causal theory is correct and applicable to the term 'God'. In doing so I mainly consider William Alston's Kripke-influenced proposal on how 'God' can and commonly do refer to its bearer and relate this to thoughts from John Searle, Frank Jackson and Keith Donnellan among others. In section 3.4 and its subsections I introduce and assess the possibility of interpreting certain general terms of religious and existential importance, like 'life' and 'knowledge', as natural kind terms. Section 3.5 contains a summary of the main points put forward and argued for in the chapter.

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<sup>67</sup> One reason for choosing this term is that it is commonly taken to refer to a mind-independent particular; hence in treating this term as a referring one we do not seem to do any deep injustice to it. Of course, not everyone would agree on this. D. Z. Phillips whose position I will consider in chapter 6 would object to this interpretation of the use of 'God'. It nonetheless seems to be a common enough position to take it seriously. The term is also rather well known and well used within many religious contexts outside the Judaeo-Christian context.

## 3.2 Sophisticated descriptivism and the causal theory of reference

In this chapter I will initially examine to what degree the meaning of ‘God’ can be tied to a mind-independent object, assumed to be the referent of ‘God’, so that to the extent that the ordinary and competent user of ‘God’ is ignorant about the object referred to by this term, they should also be thought to be ignorant about the meaning of ‘God’. For this proposal to be plausible, at all, it is naturally required that the proper meaning of ‘God’, partly or completely, is tied to its referent rather than to the conventional use or definition of it.<sup>68</sup> This is, however, not enough. For the proposal to be considered a suggestion about how the meaning of ‘God’ may be recognition-transcendent, we must also assume that people can refer to an object without having a complete or correct picture of it. We need to add this assumption because if we rather presume that people can only refer to an object in virtue of knowing it completely or substantially, it would not be possible to be ignorant of it and still refer to it (and whatever meaning the referent may be constitutive of, we would also not be ignorant of this). For this reason it will be important to examine to what extent the referent of ‘God’ possibly and commonly is determined independently of the descriptions and mental representations that the ordinary and competent user associates with ‘God’. Before I begin to tackle this matter more directly, I will offer a rudimentary account of certain key theses and key thinkers that will play an important role in my upcoming investigation of it.

According to one common philosophical idea, people are able to refer to an object as a result of knowing what is uniquely true of it. To be capable of referring to an object is thus to be able to pick it out, to separate it from everything else as a consequence of knowing some distinguishing feature(s) of it. We may

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<sup>68</sup> That is, if the use and definition of ‘God’ exhausts whatever meaning the term has, then the object referred to does not add anything to the meaning of ‘God’. This would not make the referent religiously or existentially unimportant, but it would make it irrelevant as far as the semantic meaning of the term is concerned.

apply this idea to the common and referring use of an ordinary name; the use we engage in when we for instance use a name like ‘Aristotle’ or ‘San Francisco’ to refer to a certain person or city. According to the idea under consideration, we commonly associate some information to each name, like ‘Plato’s most gifted student’ or ‘the city connected to the Golden Gate Bridge’, and whatever object that is picked out from the information associated with it, is the referent. With regard to this idea, it is common to distinguish between two versions. According to what can be called *basic descriptivism*, a name refers to its bearer due to being connected to a specific identifying description uniquely true of its bearer.<sup>69</sup> In contrast, and according to what can be called *sophisticated descriptivism*, a name is associated with a number of descriptions and the name refers to whatever a certain amount of these descriptions are uniquely true of.<sup>70</sup> Some descriptions may also be more important than others. According to this latter version of de-

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<sup>69</sup> Two thinkers commonly held to advocate this version of the idea are Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege. Russell for example thought that an ordinary name is a description in disguise. According to him: “‘Romulus’ is not really a name but a sort of truncated description. It stands for a person who did such-and-such things, who killed Remus, and founded Rome, and so on”. See Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 79. Frege seems to defend descriptivism by assuming an intimate connection between the name, some descriptive meaning attached to it and what the name refers to. More specifically, according to Frege and his terminology, a term has a *sense* and this sense determines what the name refers to. In one of his most well-known texts on this matter, he asserts that the sense contains the *mode of presentation*: ‘It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign (name, combination of words, letter), besides that to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained.’ See Gottlob Frege, ‘On Sense and Reference’ in (eds) Peter Geach and Max Black, *Translations From the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 57. With regard to Frege, one should notice however that the precise sense in which he is held to be a true believer in descriptivism has come to be discussed. For a critical discussion about this, see for instance Michael Dummett, *Frege – Philosophy of language*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), p. 97–98 or p. 110–111 and Richard Heck and Robert May, ‘Frege’s Contribution to Philosophy of Language’ in (eds) Barry Smith and Ernest Lepore, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24–25.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, if no person satisfies some of the descriptions associated with the name ‘Aristotle’, like ‘Plato’s most gifted student’, ‘teacher to Alexander the Great’, ‘author of *Metaphysics* or *On interpretation*’ and ‘married to Pythias and Herpyllis’ and so on, the name does not refer to anyone. Sophisticated descriptivism has much in common with what is better known as the ‘cluster theory’ but since I wish to develop sophisticated descriptivism in a certain direction, it seems better to introduce my own term for this position.

scriptivism, for an object to become the proper referent of a name it is sufficient that it fits some of the descriptions associated with it. One prominent defender of what I call sophisticated descriptivism is John Searle, who once articulated his version of descriptivism as follows:

Now what I am arguing is that the descriptive force of “This is Aristotle” is to assert that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true of this object. Therefore, referring uses of “Aristotle” presuppose the existence of an object of whom a sufficient but so far unspecified number of these statements are true.<sup>71</sup>

According to Searle’s proposal, we associate a set of descriptions with a name, and for an object to be the proper referent of this name it is enough that a sufficient but unspecified number of these descriptions are true of it.

A different feature of Searle’s version of descriptivism that is worth emphasizing, and which I will take to be part of sophisticated descriptivism, is that for an object to be the proper referent of a name it does not need to satisfy a certain *linguistic* description associated with it. As claimed by Searle, linguistic descriptions associated with a name are only referred to as a result of expressing a mental concept, which is what determines the referent. In expressing this view Searle writes for instance that ‘...linguistic reference is always dependent on or is a form of mental reference [...]...mental reference is always in virtue of Intentional content...’<sup>72</sup> and that ‘the speaker refers to the object because and only because the object satisfies the Intentional content associated with the name.’<sup>73</sup>

Compared to basic descriptivism, sophisticated descriptivism is commonly judged to constitute a more reasonable position. One reason for this assessment,

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<sup>71</sup> John Searle, ‘Proper Names’, *Mind*, vol. 67, no. 266, 1958, p. 171. See also Searle 1958, p. 168.

<sup>72</sup> Searle 1983, p. 232.

<sup>73</sup> Searle 1983, p. 234, see also p. 244. Although he emphasizes the priority of the mental over language in this sense, he also thinks that the mental content can be linguistically expressed.

which is relevant for my consideration, is that in comparison to basic descriptivism, the extent to which one can be mistaken about an object and still refer to it seems more extensive on the position of sophisticated descriptivism. For this reason, as I proceed I will only consider sophisticated descriptivism. We may exemplify this feature of sophisticated descriptivism by applying it to 'God', as it is commonly used within the Judaeo-Christian community, and the question to what extent the competent and ordinary user of it can be ignorant about to what, if to anything, it refers. Sophisticated descriptivism seems to make this possible to a certain extent in that what people within this community hold to be true of the intended referent, expressed through the descriptions associated with 'God', does not need to be completely true of an object for it to be considered the proper referent of 'God'. It is only required that some of the descriptions are true of an object for it to be considered the real referent. In contrast to basic descriptivism, one is not dependent on one single description.

To the degree that we hold the referent of 'God' to have a bearing on what certain people mean by 'God', sophisticated descriptivism entails that they can be partly ignorant of what they mean by this term.<sup>74</sup> And to the extent that what is true of 'God' in this sense is also true of different but similar terms of religious and existential importance, we would seem to have come across some general conclusion concerning how much the meaning of some terms of religious and existential importance can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them.

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<sup>74</sup> To what extent this is possible more precisely is difficult to say beforehand because according to sophisticated descriptivism, how many or which of the descriptions that need to be true of an object is not determined from the outset. Searle, who I have regarded as an advocate of sophisticated descriptivism, thinks that this is an open question until we make a decision about it: 'The question of what constitutes the criteria for "Aristotle" is generally left open, indeed it seldom in fact arises, and when it does arise it is we, the users of the name, who decide more or less arbitrarily what these criteria shall be.' Searle 1958, p. 171. He also writes that 'the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lie precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to agreement on what descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object. They function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions.' See Searle 1958, p. 172.



However, in almost just one decade, that of the 1970s, Saul Kripke, Keith Donnellan, Gareth Evans and Hilary Putnam among others seemed to offer us reason to question whether sophisticated descriptivism presents to us a correct account of to what degree the referent of a term can be recognition-transcendent to its competent and ordinary user.<sup>75</sup> They did so by criticizing the descriptivist theory and by presenting a different account of in virtue of what a person refers to a certain object. I will focus on Kripke's position and his criticism of descriptivism.

In questioning the descriptivist theory, Kripke does not think that all we need to do is to modify it somehow. This will not help because the core idea of the descriptivist theory is wrong; to speak metaphorically, Kripke does not regard the traditional descriptivist theory, in general or some specific version of it, as just a detour from the correct road to an accurate account of referring. To continue our road metaphor, he rather seems to think of the descriptive theory as a dead-end that we need to turn back from.<sup>76</sup> In criticizing descriptivism, Kripke offers a somewhat specific and detailed account of it, composed of a set of different theses.<sup>77</sup> For our purpose, it will be constructive and sufficient to consider some of them and Kripke's criticism of them.

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<sup>75</sup> See for instance Keith Donnellan, 'Speaking of Nothing', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, no. 1, 1974, p. 3–31; Hilary Putnam, 1996, (1975), p. 3–52; Saul Kripke, 1980; Gareth Evans, 'The Causal Theory of Names', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 47, 1973, p. 187–208.

<sup>76</sup> See Kripke 1980, p. 93–94; see also Michael Devitt, *Designation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 19 for a similar assessment.

<sup>77</sup> Kripke works with the following account of descriptivism: (1) To every name or designating expression 'X', there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties  $\phi$  such that *A* believes ' $\phi$ X'. (2) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by *A* to pick out some individual uniquely. (3) If most, or a weighted most, of the  $\phi$ 's are satisfied by one unique object *y*, then *y* is the referent of 'X'. (4) If the vote yields no unique object, 'X' does not refer. (5) The statement, 'If X exists, then X has most of the  $\phi$ 's', *Y* is known *a priori* by the speaker. (6) The statement, 'If X exists, then X has most of the  $\phi$ 's' expresses a necessary truth (in the idiolect of the speaker). (C) For any successful theory, the account must not be circular. The properties which are used in the vote must not themselves involve the notion of reference in such a way that it is ultimately impossible to eliminate. See Kripke 1980, p. 71. In criticizing the descriptivist theory of how a proper name refers, Kripke considers and objects to each thesis in turn.

Sophisticated descriptivism seems committed to the following thesis: ‘if most, or a weighted most, of the descriptions associated with a name are satisfied by one unique object  $y$ , then  $y$  is the referent of ‘ $X$ ’.’<sup>78</sup> In objecting to this thesis, Kripke offers fictive examples in which a certain person becomes the proper referent of a name according to this thesis, while we are supposed to share Kripke’s intuition that this person is not, in fact, the proper referent. This is supposed to show that any descriptivist theory committed to this thesis, by picking out the wrong object as the referent of a name, fails to do justice to how a proper name refers.<sup>79</sup> One of Kripke’s most famous examples of this is the following. Kurt Gödel is usually assumed to have invented the theorem of incompleteness. We thus often associate the following identifying description with the name ‘Gödel’: ‘The person who invented the theorem of incompleteness’. That is, if someone was to ask someone else who Gödel is, the latter person may very well respond: “Don’t you know, he is the one who invented the theorem of incompleteness.” In fact, it may as stated by Kripke be all that many of us know about the bearer of the name. It is however wrong to think that we commonly refer to Gödel via this description (or anyone else). To demonstrate this, Kripke asks us to assume that it actually was someone else that made this important discovery, a Mr Smith. Assuming this to be the case, would we then be prepared to accept that we refer to this second person, Mr Smith, when using the proper name ‘Gödel’, due to the fact that he fits the description commonly associated with ‘Gödel’? According to Kripke we do not, but according to the descriptivist theory, at least on Kripke’s reading of it, we should. This shows why the descriptivist theory is flawed; it picks out the wrong object as the proper referent.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See thesis (3), previous note.

<sup>79</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 82–83.

<sup>80</sup> As Kripke puts it: ‘Let’s suppose someone says that Gödel is the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, and this man is suitably well educated and is even able to give an independent account of the incompleteness theorem. He doesn’t just say, ‘Well, that’s Gödel’s theorem’, or whatever. He actually states a certain theorem, which he attributes to Gödel as the discoverer. Is it the case, then, that if most of the  $\phi$ ’s are satisfied by a unique object  $y$ , then  $y$  is the referent of the name ‘ $X$ ’ for  $A$  [...] Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named ‘Schmidt’, whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got

Let us consider a different aspect of descriptivism and how Kripke objects to it. It seems to follow from sophisticated descriptivism that if half of the descriptions associated with a name were true of one person and half of them were true of someone else (or if the majority of them were true of more than one single person), the name would lack a determinate referent.<sup>81</sup> Kripke however thinks that this conclusion does not seem true of our ordinary practice of referring. A person may know very little about Aristotle, perhaps only that he was a famous philosopher under the antique period, which obviously would be true of more than one person. Still, according to Kripke, we would regard such a person as referring to Aristotle by the name 'Aristotle'.<sup>82</sup> I will return to just how in a moment.

It would also seem to follow from sophisticated descriptivism that the identity of the referent of a name is strongly dependent on the descriptions associated with it. Searle writes for instance: 'Suppose most or even all of our present factual knowledge of Aristotle proved to be true of no one at all, or of several people living in scattered countries and in different centuries? Would we not say for this reason that Aristotle did not exist after all, and that the name, though it has a conventional sense, refers to no one at all?'<sup>83</sup> Searle might think that few will beg to differ with him but Kripke certainly does. In a direct and explicit response to Searle he claims, 'This is what is not so. It just is not, in any intuitive sense of necessity, a necessary truth that Aristotle had the properties commonly

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hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. On the view in question, then, when our ordinary man uses the name 'Gödel', he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, 'the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic'. See Kripke 1980, p. 83–84.

<sup>81</sup> Searle writes for instance: 'If, for example, of the characteristics agreed to be true of Aristotle, half should be discovered to be true of one man and half true of another, which would we say was Aristotle? Neither? The question is not decided for us in advance.' See Searle 1958, p. 171.

<sup>82</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 81.

<sup>83</sup> See Searle 1958, p. 168. See also Steven Boer 'Reference and Identifying Descriptions', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 81, no. 2, 1972, p. 210 for the same position.

attributed to him.<sup>84</sup> And, he continues, ‘It would seem that it’s a contingent fact that Aristotle ever did *any* of the things commonly attributed to him today, *any* of these great achievements that we so much admire.’<sup>85</sup> So according to Kripke, we can be radically mistaken about what or whom ‘Aristotle’ refers to. In some sense, Kripke does not think that the identity of ‘Aristotle’ is tied to any of the descriptions we may associate with the name.

If a proper name does not refer in virtue of the descriptive content usually associated with it, in virtue of what does it then refer? In answering this, Kripke does not wish to offer an alternative *theory*, but only a *picture*.<sup>86</sup> Although “only” a picture, it has become very influential. According to this picture, a proper name is initially attached to its bearer through a naming ceremony. People not attending this event can still refer to the individual given the name in virtue of intending, by the name, to refer to the same person as the one they got the name from or “everyone else” (if they have forgotten who they got the name from). The person they got it from, or “everyone else,” in turn, has the same intention towards someone else and so on, creating a connection from the present user of the name back to the people present at the naming ceremony. It is this link-to-link connection that, according to Kripke, usually lets us refer to a certain person by a name even though we may know very little about him or her. Here is how Kripke describes it:

A rough statement of a theory might be the following: An initial ‘baptism’ takes place. Here the object may be named by ostension, or the reference of the name may be fixed by a description. When the name is ‘passed from link to link’, the

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<sup>84</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 74.

<sup>85</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 75. Kripke also writes: ‘Not only is it true *of* the man Aristotle that he might not have gone into pedagogy; it is also true that we use the term ‘Aristotle’ in such a way that, in thinking of a counterfactual situation in which Aristotle didn’t go into any of the fields and do any of the achievements we commonly attribute to him, still we would say that was a situation in which *Aristotle* did not do these things’. See Kripke 1980, p. 62.

<sup>86</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 93.

receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it.<sup>87</sup>

Hence, as stated by Kripke, the ordinary and competent user of a name does not commonly refer to its bearer as a result of being in possession of some set of descriptions of which a sufficient number is true of the bearer; all he needs is an intention to use the name with the same referent as the person he got it from.<sup>88</sup>

We may also express Kripke's position on how a proper name refers, as he himself chooses to do, through the notion of a 'rigid designator'. According to Kripke, a rigid designator designates the same object in all possible worlds.<sup>89</sup> Applying this idea to the current context of how a proper name refers, he writes:

...I will argue, intuitively, that proper names are rigid designators, for although the man (Nixon) might not have been the President, it is not the case that he might not have been Nixon (though he might not have been *called* 'Nixon'). Those who have argued that to make sense of the notion of rigid designator, we must antecedently make sense of 'criteria of transworld identity' have precisely reversed the cart and the horse; it is *because* we can refer (rigidly) to Nixon, and stipulate that we are speaking of what might have happened to *him* (under

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<sup>87</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 96. He also writes: 'Someone, let's say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the market place or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can't remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman.' See Kripke 1980, p. 91.

<sup>88</sup> See also Devitt 1981, p. 25 for the advocacy of a similar suggestion. This may seem similar to social externalism, but it is different in that it does not presuppose that anyone presently a member of the community, in which the name is used, is in possession of such an identifying description.

<sup>89</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 48.

certain circumstances), that ‘transworld identifications’ are unproblematic in such cases.<sup>90</sup>

For Kripke, once a proper name is attached to a bearer in the actual world it then refers to the same bearer in all possible worlds in which it exists. One may think that it is hard to know to what, if to anything, a name refers to in all possible worlds without knowing from the outset what is essential for being that which the name picks out in our actual world. Kripke does not however think that this is required. According to him, ‘we can simply consider *Nixon* and ask what might have happened to *him* had various circumstances been different’.<sup>91</sup> That is, the descriptions we associate with the name ‘Nixon’ do not establish what the name refers to or what is essential for what it refers to.

### 3.3 William Alston’s Kripke-inspired analysis of how ‘God’ refers

Drawing much upon Kripke’s picture of how a proper name refers to a particular object as well as his criticism of descriptivism, William P. Alston has presented and defended a certain account of how religious people use ‘God’ to refer to God, assuming such an entity exists.<sup>92</sup> Alston argues that it is (i) possible for religious people to refer to God in virtue of something else than through the employment of an identifying description and (ii) that this non-descriptivist

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<sup>90</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 49.

<sup>91</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 47. Within the same context Kripke also writes: ‘Possible worlds’ are *stipulated*, not *discovered* by powerful telescopes. There is no reason why we cannot *stipulate* that, in talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to *him*.’ See Kripke 1980, p. 44; see also p. 40–47.

<sup>92</sup> William Alston, ‘Referring to God’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1988, p. 113–128.

mode of referring is not only a possibility sometimes actualized but is, in fact, more basic and common than the descriptivist mode of referring.<sup>93</sup>

Basically, Alston argues that religious people can refer to God by the term 'God,' either as a consequence of having had a direct experiential contact with God, which has given them the opportunity to baptize God 'God', or if they themselves have not had such direct contact with God, they can refer to God by intending to refer to the same object as people who have had such an experience. Alston thus considers it possible that certain people in the past were able to "pin down" the name 'God' to God as a result of having a religious experience of God. Since then, the name 'God' refers to this entity.<sup>94</sup> According to Alston, the entity once experienced does not need to fit most of the descriptions usually associated with the term 'God'. That is, in principle, most or even all of the descriptions associated with the term 'God' may not be true of this entity. The object experienced would nonetheless be what they refer to by 'God'.

Alston's account of what 'God' refers to seems more or less modelled on Kripke's picture presented in the previous section.<sup>95</sup> Also in arguing for his position, Alston proceeds in a manner very similar to that of Kripke. If we recall, the purpose of Kripke's thought-experiment with 'Gödel' was to construe and present a fictive scenario in which the causal theory picks out one person as the referent and the descriptivist theory picks out another one or no one, and we are expected to agree with Kripke that the former referent is the "real" referent. This is supposed to show that causal and historical contact between the use of a name

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<sup>93</sup> Alston does not deny that people may refer to God through a description. See Alston p. 113. This is also in line with Kripke's causal theory, which also does not deny that descriptivism sometimes may account for how people refer. See Kripke 1980, p. 94.

<sup>94</sup> Alston 1988, p. 118–122.

<sup>95</sup> See for instance Alston 1988, p. 119 where he writes: '...initially we learn to refer to God (in praying to God, praising God, etc.) by being exposed to the practice of worship, prayer, confession, reception of the sacraments, and so on; we were given instruction as to how to engage in them; we were encouraged to do so. As a result of all this we were "drawn into" these practices; we learned, by doing, what it was like to come into contact or communion with God. By being initiated into the practice we picked up the sub-practice of referring to God, of referring to the object of worship our predecessors in the community had been referring to. And, if things go right, we also attain some first hand experiential acquaintance with God to provide still another start for chains of transmission.'

and an object is of overriding importance compared to whatever extent certain descriptions associated with the name is true of an object.<sup>96</sup> In arguing for his conviction that the same is true in the case of ‘God’, Alston presents the following thought-experiment:

[S]uppose that an impostor – the devil, one’s internalized father figure, or whatever – represents himself as God. We are to imagine someone who, like the Old Testament prophets, takes himself to be addressed by God, to be given commissions by God, and so on. But, unlike the Old Testament’s prophets, as they have traditionally been regarded, our chap is really being addressed by Satan; or else some internalized father figure from his past is responsible for the “messages”. To make this the kind of case we want we must suppose that this impostor represents himself as the true God, creator of heaven and earth, righteous judge, merciful redeemer, and so on. Thus most of the operative descriptions (even if there are some Kripkean descriptions like ‘He who addressed me at t’ in the set) are uniquely true of God, while the direct referential contact is with, say, Satan. I think the right thing to say here is that our dupe is really speaking of Satan when he says ‘God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword’ [...] Moreover if a community grows up on the basis of these revelations and epiphanies, and the practice develops in that community of using ‘God’ to refer to the focus of worship of the community, we will have a Satan worshipping community in which the members use the name ‘God’ for Satan.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Kripke also argued that one can refer to a certain person even when what you know about the person is insufficient to single him or her out from everyone else. Alston does not however think that this latter kind of case is as important as the “Gödel case” because it is rarely the case that religious people lack detailed and precise beliefs about God. See Alston 1988, p. 120–121. He does however think that the former kind of case may be important for explaining how, for instance, children of a religious community, by the use of ‘God’, can be thought to refer to the same object as more well-informed and educated adults. See Alston 1988, p. 116.

<sup>97</sup> Alston 1988, p. 121.



According to Alston, the person in the scenario he describes refers to Satan rather than to God, when he says 'God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword' because Satan is what he has been in direct contact with. The same would be true for a religious community founded on and committed to this person's religious experience and his use of 'God'. That is, people belonging to such a community would also, when using the term 'God', unknowingly be referring to Satan; presupposing that they intend to refer to the same entity as the founding father of the religious tradition they belong to do by the term 'God'. According to Alston, they would be a 'Satan worshipping community in which the members use the name 'God' for Satan.'<sup>98</sup>

To strengthen his case for the position that causal and historical contact with an entity, in general, is what determines what 'God' refers to, Alston also offers a second thought-experiment:

Consider the possibility that all religions are initiated by some experiential contact with one true God but that in most religions (and perhaps in all to varying extents) God's nature, doings and purposes are misconstrued [...] in those cases in which the distortion is so great that most of the descriptions are not true of God it is likely that most of the descriptions are not true of anything, and so they would fail to pick out anything. But in a particular religion the descriptions might be mostly true of something other than God, some created supernatural being, let's say. In either case, assuming that the religion originated from some real contact with God and is sustained by continued experiential encounters with God, I think we would have to say that the people are referring to, addressing prayers to, worshipping, *God*, but, unfortunately, are radically misinformed about His nature and purposes.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Alston 1988, p. 122.

In this hypothetical scenario, people within all religions have been and are in 'experiential contact with one true God', but for some reason they have ended up with mistaken beliefs about God's true nature. Hence, most of the descriptions commonly associated with 'God' may not be true of anything. Even so, 'God' has a determinate referent according to Alston, namely the object experienced. And even if the descriptions associated with 'God' within one specific religion are actually true of 'some created supernatural being', with whom no one within that religion has had direct contact, people within that religion are also, according to Alston, referring to the 'one true God'.

By drawing considerably upon Kripke's account of how a name refers, Alston has thus offered us a proposal on how we can refer to God although our beliefs about God are very mistaken (because we do not refer to God in virtue of having a correct account of God). Since we are exploring to what extent and in what sense one can and commonly do use 'God' to refer to an object while possibly being mistaken about it, it is this outcome that is of special importance and interest to us in the current context. Compared to sophisticated descriptivism, Alston's position seems to suggest that religious people can be radically mistaken about what they mean by 'God', in the sense of what they refer to by this term.

In assessing the viability as well as developing my account of Alston's position, I will introduce the notion of a *referent-fixing factor*. A referent-fixing factor contributes to determining the referent of a term, negatively or positively. A positive factor is one that contributes to establishing that a certain object *is* the proper referent while a negative one contributes to the opposite, that this *is not* the proper referent. A referent-fixing factor can also be an *overriding* factor in relation to a different one in the sense that if two positive factors would ever come into conflict, one of them would be considered more important. By 'descriptive accuracy' I mean to what extent the descriptions associated with a term are being true of an entity; high 'descriptive accuracy' would for example mean that they are so to a very high extent. If I interpret Alston correctly, he thinks that with regard to 'God', as it is used within many religious contexts and especially within a traditional Judaeo-Christian context, experiential contact with an object is in general a positive referent-fixing factor and in comparison to descriptive accuracy an overriding one.

### 3.3.1 Assessing Alston's account

Recall once more the purpose of Kripke's thought-experiment with Gödel: to create a scenario in which the causal theory picks out one person as the referent and the descriptivist theory picks out another one (or no one), and we are expected to agree with Kripke that, intuitively speaking, the former referent is the "real" referent. The strength of the whole example is dependent on that we (1) agree with Kripke about what the referent is in this case and that (2) descriptivism cannot account for this assessment. And (3) for this conclusion to be important and relevant to our ordinary use of a name, we should also not feel that the main features of the example are such that they make it inapplicable to our ordinary use of a name. The same set of provisos seems to apply to Alston's thought experiments about how the referent of 'God' is determined: for them to work, that is to show that causal and historical contact is an overriding referent fixing factor in contrast to descriptive accuracy (with regard to the descriptions associated with 'God'), we must (1) agree with him about what the proper referent is (the object experienced) and (2) that his theory, but not the descriptivist theory, can do justice to this circumstance. Finally, (3) whatever conclusion we feel entitled to draw from them to apply to the use of 'God' within the Judaeo-Christian community, we should also not feel that the examples are somehow unrepresentative for the use of 'God' within this context or more generally. Relative to this set of provisos, I will argue that Alston's examples and his position fail to account for how the referent of 'God' is commonly picked out.<sup>100</sup> My assessment will have a direct bearing on the question to what extent one can and commonly do use 'God' to refer to a particular entity while possibly being ignorant or mistaken about it.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Concerning the former, I will mainly, for the sake of ease, confine myself to his initial thought experiment, but the key points I put forward are supposed to apply beyond this one to others.

<sup>101</sup> This assessment is not limited to Alston's application of the causal theory. Alston is also not the only one who has put forward this kind of theory. See for instance Richard Miller, 'Reference to God', *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1986, p. 3–15 for a similar approach. See also Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), chapters 7 and 8; Donald D. Hook and Alvin Kimel, 'Calling

In Alston's initial thought-experiment Satan makes himself the object of a person's religious experience by presenting himself as God, that is, as having extraordinary and God-like properties (being perfect, almighty and causally responsible for the universe etcetera). The person returns to his peers and states: 'God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword'. In this context, to what does 'God' refer? According to Alston the "devil in disguise". In contrast to Alston, I am not as confident as he is about this being the most plausible interpretation. That is, when the person states 'God told me...', I find it less obvious that this is what he refers to or is talking about. One reason for me having doubts about this is that it seems uncertain if the term 'God', within the thought-experiment, is supposed to have been in use before the incident or not. That is, it is not altogether apparent to what extent the religious experience in Alston's example should be taken to introduce and perhaps even fixate the referent of the name 'God' or if the person's use of 'God' is linked to a previously established use.<sup>102</sup> If the latter is the case, the person may, as a result of the incident, have the belief that the object commonly referred to by 'God' has just told him to cut down all unbelievers. In this case, the experience may be the reason for him believing and claiming that 'God has told me...' but it may not be what determines what 'God' refers to in this context.<sup>103</sup>

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God "Father": A Theolinguistic Analysis, *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1995, p. 210–216 for similar approaches, that is, ones that rely more or less on a Kripkean analysis of how proper names refer.

<sup>102</sup> I realize that Alston in his article cannot fill out all the details that seem to be required for a complete analysis of what 'God' refers to in this case. I appreciate this and do not want my assessment to rest on what may be absent rather than present in his presentation of the thought experiment. Nonetheless, as the case is presented, we may not know enough to draw any firm conclusion about this matter.

<sup>103</sup> This impression is perhaps strengthened by the fact that the person in the example is supposed to tell his peers that 'God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword'. This mode of expressing himself also seems to presuppose that the name 'God' has been in use before the incident occurs and that the audience has an idea about what 'God' refers to independently of this incident. If the name 'God' had not been in use before, would the person not rather be expected to have said something like: 'I met someone, some extra-ordinary being, who called himself/herself/it 'God' and described himself/herself/it as having many extra-ordinary properties and this entity told me to put....'. By rather just saying 'God told me...' one gets the impression that 'God' has an established use and meaning to the person and the crowd listening.

I do not however wish to deny that one may read the scenario differently and accept that 'God' refers to the object of experience. In support of such a reading one may propose that if the person states that 'God told me to put all unbelievers to the sword', one may be inclined to hold the referent to be whatever gave the person this instruction and since this is the object of his experience, one is also inclined to hold it to be what 'God' refers to in this statement. One may also assume that the person in communicating this instruction and much else surrounding the incident to others, he is thinking of the object of his experience, which may also support the present reading, that is, that he by 'God' refers to the "devil in disguise". Moreover, although the object experienced describes itself in God-like terms, and this has the consequence that the person begins to associate certain descriptions expressing the properties in question with the name 'God', they do not fixate the referent of 'God', nor are they what a subsequent user within this case relies on to pick out the referent 'of 'God'; assuming that such a person by 'God' only intends to refer to what our dupe is referring to by 'God'.

Assume that Alston's reading is the more plausible one, that is, that the person by 'God' is referring to the "devil in disguise" and that experiential contact with an object, in this case, is an overriding referent-fixing factor in comparison to descriptive accuracy. Even so, I still wonder to what extent the case and the use of 'God' within it has a strong bearing on the more general and ordinary use of 'God' within the Judaeo-Christian community. I am inclined to say, not much. This assessment also applies to Alston's position more generally. One reason for this is that when people of this community, and religious people more generally, use 'God' to refer to its intended bearer, they exercise a much more qualified use. What I mean is that it seems doubtful that a contemporary member of the Judaeo-Christian community would accept that the referent of 'God', as they use it, is determined through this course of action and incident alone. That is, would an ordinary member of this community, when referring to God, consider themselves to be referring to an object experienced by Abraham and others but which possibly may have none or very few of the properties associated with the name 'God'? As just stated, it seems doubtful, and I will argue that this entails that Alston's account of how 'God' refers fails to connect to how this term refers within its more ordinary context of usage. One may express this assessment by drawing upon the idea of a recognition-transcendent meaning. Recall, such a meaning must be external and objective enough in relation to the

user for him to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, the meaning must be internal and subjective enough for him to be committed to it. We may express a similar proviso with regard to the possibility of a recognition-transcendent referent of 'God': it must be external and objective enough in relation to the user of 'God' for him to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, it must be internal and subjective enough for him to be committed to it. My general impression is that Alston in (over)emphasizing experiential and historical contact with an object fails to do justice to the latter part of this proviso, assuming that we are considering how 'God' is used within the Judaeo-Christian community. As I proceed, I will elaborate on and defend the accuracy of my impression.

I have stated that Alston's position and initial example fail to take into account everything the ordinary and competent user of 'God' has in mind when using 'God' to refer to its bearer. Alston would seem to disagree with me. He seems to think that to accept that the person in his initial thought-experiment, and also a community of people committed to this person's usage of 'God', refers to "the devil in disguise", one does not need to accept anything beyond what is accepted in many ordinary uses of 'God'. If he is correct about this, his example and whatever conclusion we may draw from it, may of course have a bearing on the more common use of 'God'. In connection to his initial thought-experiment, he writes for instance:

If one is unconvinced by my reading of this case, I would commend to him the following reflections. In the Judaeo-Christian community we take ourselves to be worshipping, and otherwise referring to, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel", i.e. the being who appeared to such worthies of our tradition, revealed Himself to them, made covenants with them, and so on. If it should turn out that it was actually Satan, rather than the creator of the heavens and the earth, with whom they were in effective contact, would we not have to admit that our religion, including the referential practices involved, is built on sand, or worse

(muck, slime), and that we are a Satan-worshipping community, for all our bandying about of descriptions that fit the only true God?<sup>104</sup>

According to Alston, by 'God' people of the Judaeo-Christian community commonly take themselves to refer to the object of some specific authority figure's or figures' experience, like Abraham and Isaac. As previously remarked, if Alston is correct in what he claims, he would seem entitled to apply the conclusion from his thought experiment to the ordinary use of 'God'. More specifically, if the ordinary and competent user of 'God' only intended to use the name 'God' like everyone else before and around them, Alston may be entitled to his conclusion. However, as far as offering an account of how the ordinary and competent member of this community uses 'God', I deem it to be incomplete. In addition to what Alston suggests in the quotation, it seems that the typical member also believes that the object experienced by, let us say, Abraham, had certain properties and is, for instance, causally responsible for the creation of the universe. That is, and as previously stated, I have serious doubts about if the ordinary member of this community, when referring to God, consider themselves to be referring to an object experienced by Abraham and others but which possibly may have none or very few of the properties associated with the name 'God'? Hence, appealing to what people within the Judaeo-Christian community commonly intend to refer to does not seem to settle the question in favour of Alston's position in the sense he thinks; because these people do not only intend to refer to the object of someone's experience, whatever it was.

In fairness to Alston, one should take into account that he to some extent seems to recognize this circumstance, although he wishes to account for it differently. In expanding on his reasoning, he concedes that in some 'more detached, more theoretical contexts' the referent of 'God' may be what satisfies our descriptions associated with 'God'.<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, he continues, '...with respect to the more fundamental undergirding substance of religious activity, thought,

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<sup>104</sup> Alston 1988, p. 121, see also p. 122.

<sup>105</sup> See Alston 1988, p. 122.

talk, and feeling, the diagnosis stands as given.<sup>106</sup> If I interpret Alston correct, he means that in certain contexts, the referent of 'God' is picked out via the descriptions associated with it while in different contexts the referent is picked out in the manner described by his account. I wonder however if it is plausible to differ so strongly between what should be considered a positive referent fixing factor in the "theoretical context" compared to what should be considered one in the context of more concrete religious life and activity. As Andrew Jeffrey writes with regard to this: 'Theological reflection, originating in worship and prayer, in turns informs and otherwise affects the activities it reflects upon. Thus, if the reference of terms in theological discourse is sometimes fixed via definite descriptions...the same may be true of the reference of these terms when (re)employed in prayer and worship.'<sup>107</sup> I assume that people belonging to the Judaeo-Christian community find themselves in both contexts from time to time which, on Alston's position, would seem to mean that what determines the referent of 'God' for one and the same person may be a matter of conflict or simply be indeterminate; at any rate to the degree that the person intends to refer to the same entity all the time. Alston may think that in the case of such conflict, experiential and historical contact with an object is of overriding importance. But if he does, it is not obvious why this should be accepted.

In another attempt to give more weight to the importance commonly attributed by religious people to the descriptions associated with 'God', Alston claims that descriptive accuracy would be more important than experiential contact if this was explicitly acknowledged by the person or people using the term 'God'. That is, if someone had thought this matter over and concluded that they by 'God' intend to refer to the object fitting certain descriptions, Alston's conclusion would, according to him, have no bearing on them.<sup>108</sup> Howev-

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Jeffrey, 'Gale on Reference and Religious Experience', *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1996, p. 105.

<sup>108</sup> As Alston expresses this hypothetical objection to his own account: '...And what if your dupe had resolved to refer to what satisfies the description 'the creator of heaven and earth'? Then he would have been referring to God contrary to your diagnosis of the situation.' See Alston 1988, p. 123. In response to this, Alston writes: 'I can't deny this. If these people had gone through these maneuvers they would have been in touch



er, Alston thinks that most people do not engage in this kind of reflection and if not, the causal mode is the natural mode of referring.<sup>109</sup> Alston writes:

...I take it that direct reference is the natural, baseline mode of reference; it takes place “automatically” without the need for any deliberate intervention. Whereas descriptivist reference requires more active involvement on the part of the subject. It does not strictly require anything as explicit as a consciously formed resolution, but it at least requires some implicit version of that.<sup>110</sup>

According to Alston, for a name to refer in virtue of certain descriptions associated with it, some explicit or implicit decision on behalf of the user is needed. Without such a decision, the term refers in the manner described by the causal theory. And since people, as stated by Alston, usually make as little effort as possible, they will more frequently than not refer more directly. As he puts it: ‘Since most of us most of the time take the path of least resistance, most of us most of the time will be making direct reference to what we are talking about. It is only in rather unusual and special circumstances that the descriptive mode will win a contest for referent-determination.’<sup>111</sup> Alston seems to think that although the descriptions associated with ‘God’ can matter, they commonly do not. Of course, if Alston’s general account of in virtue of what people refer by ‘God’ is accurate, this qualification would make sense, I suppose. However, as previously stated, I do not deem the descriptivist mode of referring within the context of the Judaeo-Christian community to only be a possibility sometimes exercised.

with a referent other than what I have specified. But I was assuming that they hadn’t; I was assuming that these were normal cases...I am supposing that direct reference is fundamental in still a third way, viz., that where the direct reference mechanism are in place they will determine reference unless the subject makes special efforts to counteract this, e.g., resolutions of the sort just mentioned.’ See Alston 1988, p. 123.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Alston 1988, p. 124.

One may naturally wonder how this assessment is connected to Kripke's Gödel-case or his more general position concerning how an ordinary name refers, considering the fact that many thinkers seem to agree with Kripke. If Alston, more or less, is simply applying Kripke's position to 'God', why does this application according to me not appear plausible? Or would I also object to Kripke's conclusion about what 'Gödel' refers to in Kripke's well-known example? Not necessarily so. The reason for this is simply that the term 'God' is different than an ordinary name and that God, to put it mildly, is rather different than the entities we commonly baptize 'John' or 'Lisa'. For this reason, whatever we may accept in relation to Kripke's 'Gödel'-case, this may not apply straightforwardly to the use of 'God'.<sup>112</sup>

Let us consider some relevant differences between 'God' and 'Gödel'. When people accept that 'Gödel' refers to Gödel (the person once given the name and not Smith although the latter was the true inventor of the incompleteness theorem), they are, I suggest, taking into account our widespread and common practice of name-giving. More specifically, they accept that a person's name is not given to its bearer in virtue of anything the person has performed. For this reason, whatever descriptions of extraordinary performances one may associate with a name, they do not need to affect what the name refers to.<sup>113</sup> If all this was true in the case of God, it may be legitimate, and perhaps even recommended, to apply Kripke's causal theory to 'God' for the purpose of explaining how it refers. That is, if people would reason in a similar manner with regard to 'God' and for instance hold that this name is given to some entity regardless of any thoughts on what this entity has done or what properties it is supposed to

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<sup>112</sup> If this is what may stop the causal theory from being straightforwardly applied to 'God', it may also be what stops the causal theory from being commonly applied to similar singular terms of religious and existential importance.

<sup>113</sup> However, Searle may also be correct when he claims that we can think of contexts in which we by 'Gödel' actually intend to refer to the individual who discovered the theorem of incompleteness. Let's say that we are sitting at the pub discussing the theorem and I happen to wonder what Gödel intended by a certain statement made about it. In this case, it seems that I am referring to the intention of the person actually responsible for discovering the theorem of incompleteness, not the person baptized (Kurt) Gödel if he had nothing to do with it. See Searle 1983, p. 251-252.

possess, Alston's position and case for it would seem more plausible. However, this is not the case in that the properties described through the descriptions associated with 'God' are commonly thought to express essential properties of God, not features that God may or may not have while still being God. According to me, this is explicitly or implicitly acknowledged by the competent and ordinary user of 'God' and can be revealed by the fact that most or all people would acknowledge that a person can still be Gödel even if he did not invent the theorem of incompleteness, but less people would acknowledge that an entity can still be God even though it does not possess any of the properties commonly thought to be possessed by God. This indicates that the descriptions associated with 'God' have a stronger bearing on what 'God' refers to than the descriptions associated with 'Gödel' seem to have.

Moreover, it also seems natural to suppose that the entities commonly baptized by us humans in the sense Kripke pictures it is are rather easy to identify and re-identify. If 'God' was an entity that was rather easy to identify as God, this would also indicate a similarity between God and Gödel and perhaps rationalize the suggestion that what is true of 'Gödel', is true of 'God'.<sup>114</sup> However, what causes a person's religious experience or what is the real object of it is hard to establish and is, for this reason, frequently the object of controversy and discussion. Religious people are commonly mindful of this circumstance and to the extent they are, this circumstance naturally motivates them to qualify the referent of 'God' beyond "whatever was experienced by someone" because, taken as a referent fixing factor, this may naturally lead to that 'God' refers to much

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<sup>114</sup> Alston assumes that 'God can be presented to one's experience in such a way that one can make a name the name of God just by using that name to label an object of experience'. See Alston 1988, p. 118. For some criticism of this idea, see for instance Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 7. Alston admits that the initial baptism is a bit harder to account for in the case of God compared to how a cat or person is given a name and thinks that to get a more comprehensive account of this, more work needs to be done. Even though he does not offer it in this context, he is however convinced that it can be done; see Alston 1988, p. 119.

more than they would feel comfortable with.<sup>115</sup> Alston also seems to be open to the possibility of multiple groundings of the referent of 'God', that is, he seems to accept the idea that the referent of 'God' is being determined more than once and by more than one person.<sup>116</sup> This however seems to presuppose that one can make sure that the object experienced is the same one for different people, which seems difficult in the case of a religious experience. Hence, without any additional qualification beyond saying that 'God' refers to whatever causes people's religious experiences, it would seem difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between multiple groundings of one and the same referent and single groundings of multiple referents.

One may express the upshot of my reasoning so far in more than one way. One may for example hold that it suggests that 'God' has more descriptive meaning than an ordinary name. This seems to be what Richard Gale thinks when he writes that: 'At any time at which "God" is used, there will be some descriptive sense that it has by definition. For example, at the present time it is analytically true that God is a powerful, benevolent being that is eminently worthy of worship and obedience.'<sup>117</sup> Gale thinks that this constrains what the term can be held to refer to. Alternatively, if one does not wish to say that the name 'God' has a meaning, as for instance Searle might be inclined to deny, one may still maintain that what we mean to pick out by the name 'God' is determined by a sufficient number of the descriptions associated with this name.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>115</sup> See for instance Janet Martin Soskice who claims that 'attempts to fix the reference in this way may fail to be widely convincing, given the contested nature of religious experiences themselves'. See Soskice 1985 p. 138.

<sup>116</sup> As Alston writes: 'By being initiated into the practice we picked up the sub-practice of referring to God, of referring to the object of worship our predecessors in the community had been referring to. And, if things go right, we also attain some first hand experiential acquaintance with God to provide still another start for chains of transmission.' See Alston 1988, p. 119. The idea of multiple groundings is more associated with Michael Devitt's version of the causal theory than Kripke's. See Michael Devitt, *Designation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 56–57. Alston seems to accept this without much reflection on the fact that this may complicate his case and his appeal to Kripke's theory.

<sup>117</sup> See Gale 1991, p. 7.

<sup>118</sup> See for instance Searle 1958, p. 171–173.

Interestingly and insightfully, Alston addresses the worry I am raising towards the end of his article. Alston writes:

I suspect that the main resistance to the contentions of this paper will come from the recognition that 'God' involves more descriptive meaning than the usual proper name. Though this meaning will vary from group to group, and even from person to person, still for a given person or group there will be certain descriptive constraints on its use. [...]...one will not be prepared to refer to X by the use of 'God' unless one takes X to uniquely exemplify the properties listed above. Where that is the case won't reference to God inevitably be descriptivist? No. The points just brought out imply that one would not use 'God' to refer to X unless one firmly believed that X alone had certain characteristics. But that falls short of showing that it is the possession of those characteristics that makes X the referent. The arguments for the primacy of direct reference remain in full force. All of our above scenarios could be rewritten with the inclusion of the above points about the descriptive meaning of 'God'. Our dupes of Satan might have a firm resolution to use 'God' to refer only to a being that is absolutely perfect; but, mistakenly supposing the being whom they are in contact to be absolutely perfect, they are using 'God' to refer to an imperfect being nonetheless.<sup>119</sup>

According to Alston, it is perfectly consistent with his position to accept that the typical member of the Judaeo-Christian community would not intentionally call an entity 'God' if they did not believe it to have certain "God-like" properties. However, this does not according to Alston stop the person from using 'God' to mistakenly refer to an entity experienced with none of the properties in question. This is an important suggestion because to the extent it is viable it may seem to present to us a case in which a person wants to refer to whatever certain descriptions are true of while in fact referring to something else. If so, it would

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<sup>119</sup> Alston 1988, p. 124–125.

seem to account for the importance commonly attributed to the descriptions associated with 'God', without attributing them a referent-fixing role.

I do however have some problems with the setup of Alston's example and with what it is supposed to demonstrate. To begin, one may notice that it is not entirely evident what plays the role of a referent-fixing factor in this case. As stated by Alston, the people in question have a general intention to refer to a certain kind of being, a being described through particular descriptions associated with 'God' (perfect, all-good etcetera). However, according to Alston, they also have an intention to use 'God' to refer to a certain object experienced by someone (mistakenly believed to be the object picked out by the descriptions in question). Which intention, according to Alston, is the overriding one? If he thinks that it is the latter, the people in question do not mainly or only intend to refer to an object that fits certain descriptions. Alternatively, if they only wish to refer to whatever the descriptions are true of one may perhaps maintain that they would not, in fact, refer to "the devil in disguise". If Alston thinks that the people rather want to act on both intentions at the same time, it seems rather indeterminate what the real referent of 'God' is in this case.<sup>120</sup> One may also perhaps question the set-up of the example. If some people intend to use 'God' to refer only to a being that is absolutely perfect, why would they pick out the referent of 'God' in a manner that did not do much to respect this intention, like referring to 'whatever they experienced'.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, even if one would accept that the referent in this particular case is the "devil in disguise", this would not, I think, show that this is the proper referent of 'God' more generally. One may perhaps express this last alternative by saying that the *contextual referent* of 'God', the referent in this particular context, is the "devil in disguise", while still

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<sup>120</sup> This may simply be construed as a case in which some of the features believed to fix the referent are true of one object while some of them are true of a different object, an outcome that does not seem to pose a substantial problem for descriptivism. Compare to the following remarks from Searle: 'If, for example, of the characteristics agreed to be true of Aristotle, half should be discovered to be true of one man and half true of another, which would we say was Aristotle? Neither? The question is not decided for us in advance.' See Searle 1958, p. 171.

denying that the ordinary and more generally assumed referent of ‘God’ is the “devil in disguise”. In reflecting on this last possibility, we may notice that the kind of referring exemplified by Alston’s latter setup of his initial thought experiment may, in fact, be different from the one mainly associated with and defended by Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*.<sup>121</sup> In the beginning of that study, Kripke distinguishes between the *semantic referent* and the *speaker’s referent* of a name and explains that he only wishes to deal with the former kind of referent. In a different text on the same subject-matter, Kripke explains what a speaker’s referent amounts to as follows:

So, we may tentatively define the speaker’s referent of a designator to be that object which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of the designator. He uses the designator with the intention of making an assertion about the object in question (which may not really be the semantic referent, if the speaker’s belief that it fulfills the appropriate semantic conditions is in error). The speaker’s referent is the thing the speaker referred to by the designator, though it may not be the referent of the designator, in his idiolect.<sup>122</sup>

According to Kripke, we should differ between what a speaker refers to on a certain occasion by a name and what the name refers to more generally, what he calls the semantic referent.

Although Alston does not explicitly reason in terms of a speaker’s referent contra a semantic referent of ‘God’, it may seem natural to assume that the “devil in disguise” in his initial thought experiment, assuming his last construal of it, is the speaker’s referent of ‘God’.<sup>123</sup> However, if this is the case this may pose a

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<sup>121</sup> Kripke 1980, p. 25, note 3.

<sup>122</sup> Saul Kripke ‘Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1977, p. 264.

<sup>123</sup> See also Joe Houston, 2000, p. 52-53 for a similar suspicion.

problem for Alston's position. It would for instance seem to isolate and disconnect his position from Kripke's causal theory and also from Kripke's arguments for the causal theory because they are used to defend a certain position on what determines the semantic referent of a name. This may also strengthen my impression that the "devil in disguise" may be considered the contextual referent, and not the semantic and ordinary referent, of 'God'.

Notice that I do not suggest that one cannot use 'God' to refer to God independently of certain descriptions associated with the name 'God' or through a description that does not express some essential feature of God. One surely can. I can for instance state that 'God' refers to 'whatever made me lose my balance in the bathroom last Tuesday'. If it would turn out to be the case that what caused this incident was God, I would have succeeded in referring to 'God' via this description and hence, via a description that did not specify any essential properties of God'. However, which is important to stress, if you want to be sure to refer to what you mean by 'God', you have to be more careful with how you pick out the referent of 'God'. And it is my impression that the competent and ordinary user of 'God' within the Judaeo-Christian community recognizes this and that this is implicit in their use of 'God'.

One may perhaps respond that it is wrong to assess the reasonableness of Alston's position so strongly from the perspective of Kripke's position (or his distinction between the semantic referent and speaker referent). Although Alston himself refers very much to Kripke, perhaps suggestions presented by different thinkers would be of more service to him, and for anyone else that is interested in applying the causal theory, or something in the spirit of it, to account for how 'God' refers. In fact, Alston also backs up his reasoning by referring to Keith Donnellan's well-known distinction between a referential and attributive use of descriptions, although without giving it much attention.<sup>124</sup> Even if Alston does not elaborate on this possibility, let us see if Donnellan's distinction can be useful to Alston's case, or anyone else's idea, that the descriptions associated with 'God' may have no bearing on what 'God' refers to. The motive for doing so is

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<sup>124</sup> See Alston, 1988, p. 125.



not to try to vindicate Alston's position, but to make my investigation of the causal theory, or something similar to it, in the current context more thorough.

Donnellan famously distinguished between referential and attributive uses of a description.<sup>125</sup> In the case of an attributive use one intends to refer to anyone who fits the description without having a specific individual in mind. In the case of a referential use of a description, one rather has a certain individual in mind and uses the description to pick out this individual. To draw upon his own well-known example of the latter use, assume that Eric has perceived a person nearby and wants to make him the object of someone else's attention.<sup>126</sup> Believing that the person in question is drinking a martini, he says to his friend, 'the man at the bar drinking a martini is extremely rich'. Eric would of course not use the description: 'the man drinking a martini' to pick out the person nearby if he did not think that only one person nearby fits the description in question. However, even if this description was not true of the intended person (suppose he was in fact not drinking a martini), Eric can still, according to Donnellan, be thought to refer to that person by this description; the reason for this is that the context and Eric's intention determines who the referent is. (And many thinkers agree with him on this.) All in all this seems to demonstrate that an object can be considered the real referent of a description even when the description one believes to be true of it and which is used to refer to it is not in fact true of it. This may then be held to be supportive of Alston's case and his last construal of it because Donnellan's example seems similar in spirit to Alston's example when the latter writes: 'Our dupes of Satan might have a firm resolu-

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<sup>125</sup> Keith Donnellan, 'Reference and Definite Descriptions', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1966, p. 285f. In explaining this distinction he writes for instance: 'A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. In the first case the definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job—calling attention to a person or thing—and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well'. See Donnellan, 1966, p. 285.

<sup>126</sup> Donnellan 1966, p. 287.

tion to use 'God' to refer only to a being that is absolutely perfect; but mistakenly supposing that the being whom they are in contact with to be absolutely perfect, they are using 'God' to refer to an imperfect being nonetheless.<sup>127</sup> On the surface then, Alston's example seems to be similar enough to Donnellan's for Alston to be entitled to apply Donnellan's conclusion to his own case. The descriptions associated with 'God' would then be used referentially.

However, I think one may question to what extent Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions, and especially the former uses of descriptions, can be useful to back up Alston's or anyone else's idea that the referent of 'God' is determined independently of the descriptions associated with it by its user. My reason for thinking so is that I consider Donnellan's and Alston's examples to be rather different in a certain relevant respect. In Donnellan's example it seems obvious that one intends a certain person, the one perceived nearby, and that one has a mistaken belief about that person.<sup>128</sup> The description that turns out to be mistaken ('the man drinking a martini') is of no real importance, it is only of an instrumental use; it is only used to pick out a person. (If it was important, the example would not work, because then the description 'the man drinking a martini' would be used attributively and it would not exemplify the referential use of a description.) This is also demonstrated, I think, by the person's willingness to drop the description for a different one if it was brought to his attention that the person at the bar he was thinking of did not have any strong alcohol in his glass. In Alston's example and with regard to the descriptions associated with 'God' within it, I would say the case is rather the opposite. In this case one intends an entity with certain properties and wrongly identifies a certain object experienced as being that entity. This is thus a different kind of mistake than what is being exemplified through Donnellan's

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<sup>127</sup> As Alston writes about Donnellan's example: 'Here too it could well be the case that one would not use that description to refer to *x* unless one believed that *x* uniquely satisfies the description; but the referent is determined otherwise nonetheless.' See Alston 1988, p. 125.

<sup>128</sup> See also Donnellan 1966, p. 288–289.

example.<sup>129</sup> The descriptions associated with ‘God’ thus seem to be used attributively rather than referentially.<sup>130</sup> This is also demonstrated by people’s reluctance to drop or change the key properties associated with ‘God’ if someone told them about the mistake they have made.

Of course, it is open for religious people to put all the emphasis on the object experienced when using ‘God’ and for them to consider the descriptions associated with ‘God’ to be of a more hypothetical and secondary status. In this case, ‘God’ would refer to whatever the object of the experience was. However, this is not how Alston presents the case. If we recall his latest setup of his example, the religious people within it have a firm resolution to use ‘God’ to refer only to a being that is absolutely perfect, almighty, etcetera. And his reason for this concession was his ambition to take into account the fact that many religious people seem to consider the descriptions associated with ‘God’ to be important.

Even if this is not necessarily Alston’s suggestion, someone would perhaps like to argue that the causal theory, or something similar to it, would in fact, contrary to what I have argued, be especially suitable to account for how ‘God’ refers. One reason for thinking so which deserves some attention is that God by some believers is thought to be unknowable and impossible to describe accurately through the meaning of any terms used by us humans.<sup>131</sup> Hence, the descriptions associated with ‘God’ cannot simply be used to pick out its referent. My succinct and twofold response to this suggestion is as follows:

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<sup>129</sup> It is not as if Eric in the example is primarily looking for a martini-drinking person and thinks that he has finally spotted one in the bar.

<sup>130</sup> Not all descriptions need to be like this.

<sup>131</sup> As Victoria Harrison describes it: ‘However, there is, surely, a certain oddity about the claim that religious language, particularly language that purports to refer to a world-transcendent God, literally describes the way things are, and that the words used have the same literal meaning as they do when applied to things that are “of this world”. The oddity is caused by the fact that language, which purports to be about God, inevitably involves words whose meaning would seem to derive from the world of our experience; whereas a world-transcendent God is not within the range of what we can possibly experience.’ See Harrison 2007, p. 130.

(i) To the extent that the content of a description is used to pick out the referent, it does so in virtue of the meaning we, either explicitly or implicitly, assign the words composing it. Hence the meanings of the words do not need to apply to the object referred to in any absolute sense, whatever that would mean. Just to exemplify, suppose that someone states that 'God' refers to an all-good entity. Then whatever 'God' refers to must be all-good in a sense recognized by us and not in a radically different sense beyond our comprehension. That is, for any feature of God to be categorized as an instance of goodness, it cannot be all that different from what we humans more commonly identify as an instance of goodness. What follows from this observation is that to the extent any descriptions associated with 'God' are used to pick out the referent of 'God', they can, and need, only do this by virtue of the meaning we assign to the words that construct them. Of course, this does not in itself demonstrate that 'God' is being picked out by virtue of the descriptions people associate with 'God', but it does remove one reason for thinking that they cannot, the idea that God is radically or completely different than anything we know about.

This observation is consistent with the suggestion that some or much "God-talk" within the Judaeo-Christian community should be interpreted metaphorically or analogically rather than literally. Even if one accepts this suggestion, the metaphorical or analogical meaning expressed by the words cannot be all that different than what we consider the meaning to be. For instance, the meaning expressed by the metaphor 'God is my rock' seems to express the idea that God is trustworthy, firm and reliable (or something along this line).<sup>132</sup> And even if one would accept that the metaphorical meaning cannot be literally ex-

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<sup>132</sup> As Janet Soskice, who has argued that religious language can be conceived of as both metaphorical and reality depicting, writes: 'It is because senses are important but not fully definitive that metaphor becomes extremely useful in the project of reality depiction...' See Soskice 1986, p. 132. According to her position, when we for instance talk about 'neural programming', we partly draw upon the ordinary meaning of the notion 'programming', the meaning it has in the context of computers. The ordinary meaning is extended and developed beyond its original sense and can according to Soskice offer us access to an object we may know very little about, our brains. But this does not seem to mean that what is characteristic of neural programming is very different from computer programming. It seems that it is precisely because it is not that one may use terms commonly applied in the context of computers to talk about brains.

pressed in this manner, this does not change the fact that the metaphorical or analogical meaning expressed by the words is still recognizable to us; it is just that it cannot be expressed literally. And, one might add, this seems perfectly consistent with sophisticated descriptivism because that position does not presuppose that descriptions associated with a name only determines the referent of the name if taken literally.

(ii) One may also remark that the whole idea of something that exists but is completely or radically beyond our descriptions and categories is also not easy to grasp or make sense of. For instance, the referent of 'God' is commonly held to be real rather than fictitious. However, if God is impossible to describe through the use of our categories, the term or category 'real' cannot apply to God. That is, if whatever the referent of 'God' is "doing" is completely different than anything we call exists, why should we say that the entity referred to by this name exists?<sup>133</sup> This line of reasoning may show that the present argument for preferring a causal theory may be based on a somewhat questionable idea.

### 3.3.2 Is descriptivism out of the picture?

Recall, for Alston's thought experiments to be successful, that is, to show that causal contact is an overriding referent fixing factor in comparison to descriptive accuracy, we must (1) agree with him about what the proper referent is (the object experienced) and (2) that his theory, but not the descriptivist theory, can do justice to this fact. And (3) for the conclusion that follows to be relevant for the use of 'God' within the Judeo-Christian community, we should also sense that features and presuppositions within the examples are somehow representative for the use of 'God' within this community. So far I have been mostly concerned with proviso number (1) and (3). What about number (2)? That is, how

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<sup>133</sup> This is also reminiscent of what I take to be Donald Davidson's position concerning the possibility of conceptual schemes. See for instance Nancy Frankenberry, 'Religion as a "Mobile Army of Metaphors"' in Nancy Frankenberry (ed.) *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, p. 185–187 for the idea that Davidson's criticism of conceptual relativism applies to the idea of God as the "wholly other".

successful is Alston in ruling out descriptivism? Perhaps not very, because it seems possible to account for what according to Alston is the proper referent by appealing to sophisticated descriptivism, or so I will argue and try to exemplify in this section.

To the extent one wishes to accept the idea of an original fixation of the referent of 'God' in the manner Alston describes, one may think that the sophisticated descriptivist is committed to the idea that this must be done via a set of descriptions. This does not however seem to be true. In elaborating on why, it may be wise to initially recall that according to a sophisticated descriptivist like Searle, the referent-fixing factor is intentional; that is, although commonly expressed in words, it does not need to be.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, Searle also claims that the referent of a name, on his position, can be picked out by simply pointing at it. Alston seems to be under a different impression concerning this. In critically responding to the suggestion that descriptivist-minded thinkers can pick out a referent by for instance associating the description 'the object I am currently ostending' with a name, he writes: 'This only shows that a description could play a crucial role; it fails to show that a description must be employed. The subject can just attach the name to the object and form the intention to use the name for that; whereupon she has acquired what it takes to refer to the object with that name.'<sup>135</sup> I agree with Alston that the referent of a name can be picked out like this, without the aid of a description that is, but I disagree with him to the extent he thinks that the sophisticated descriptivist cannot accept this without giving up on their position.<sup>136</sup> Hence, even if we would accept that the person in Alston's initial example is referring to Satan, this can be accounted for from within the position of sophisticated descriptivism.

Moreover, assume just like Alston does, that people in the Judaeo-Christian community intend to refer to whatever object, if any, that was experi-

<sup>134</sup> Alston also intends to oppose Searle's version of descriptivism, see Alston 1988, p. 114.

<sup>135</sup> Alston 1988, p. 118.

<sup>136</sup> As for instance Searle, for the purpose of removing certain misconceptions of descriptivism, writes: 'On the descriptivist account, pointing is precisely an example that fits his thesis, since pointing succeeds only in virtue of the intentions of the pointer.' See Searle 1983, p. 233.

enced by a particular person a long time ago. Then it does not seem all that unlikely that some of the descriptions that these people would come to associate with 'God' would express this referential intention (rather than, or perhaps together with, a list of God-like properties such as being all-loving, being almighty). However, if this is the case, would it be terribly incorrect to say that what according to Alston constitutes the "real" referent of 'God' in his initial example is being picked out by some of the descriptions associated with God? It does not seem so. But if not, descriptivism cannot be accused of picking out the wrong referent.

What should be concluded from this reasoning is that we should be careful to distinguish between the doctrine that 'God' commonly or all the time picks out its referent independently of certain descriptions associated with 'God' and the doctrine that 'God' commonly or all the time picks out its referent independently of any or most of the descriptions or intentional content associated with 'God'. It seems to me that Alston intends to defend the latter doctrine. However, as we have just seen, his thought-experiment only seems to support the former. That is, even if one would accept his position on what the dupe and people following his lead in his initial thought experiment refer to by 'God', this may only show that the descriptions that pick out the referent of 'God', in this case, may not be the ones commonly assumed to do the work.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> See also Michael McKinsey, 'Kripke's Objections to Description Theories of Names', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1978, p. 487–490 for similar criticism of Kripke's Gödel case. He writes for instance: 'In the sort of case Kripke imagines, one in which the user of 'Gödel' believes he is referring to the man who discovered arithmetic's incompleteness, it is *natural* to assume that the user would also have various other beliefs about the referent, beliefs yielding further properties in the cluster associated with the use. Consider for instance the properties mentioned in the descriptions: (a) the man to whom the discovery of arithmetic's incompleteness is commonly attributed; (b) the man of whom I have heard (read) that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic; (c) the only man named 'Gödel' of whom I have heard; (d) the man named 'Gödel' of whom I have heard (read) that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic. Notice how extremely likely it is that a typical user of 'Gödel' would associate descriptions of this sort with his use of 'Gödel' when he also intends to refer with this name to the discoverer of incompleteness. But then the sinister possibility arises that when Kripke claims that in his case the speaker is referring with 'Gödel' to Gödel and not Schmidt, his claim seems intuitively correct only because we tacitly assume that the speaker

Moreover, even when a person has verbalized what he intends to refer to it may sometimes not be completely accurate to put too much weight on such verbalized descriptions. The reason for this is that some of these verbalized descriptions may be intended to make someone else appreciate who he is referring to and for this reason they may be more instructive and convenient (for this purpose) than actually revealing what according to themselves determines the referent.<sup>138</sup> A little bit along the same line one may also suggest, and hold it to be consistent with sophisticated descriptivism, that a person's reliance on a certain description or mentally constituted referent-fixing factor to pick out a referent is rather flexible and dependent on different beliefs being true. This flexibility I suggest is part of a person's intentional content, associated with his use of a name; hence, if certain beliefs about the referent would turn out to be untrue, others kick in and do the job. This is not to change one's idea about what or whom one refers to, but rather to do justice to the flexible nature of how we refer.<sup>139</sup> This may also suggest that in making up our mind about what a person refers to by 'God', we need to consider the "bigger picture", that is, what more

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has at least four *other* ways (represented by (a)-(d) of picking out the referent of his use.' See McKinsey 1978, p. 488.

<sup>138</sup> Just to exemplify what I am getting at, I may be referring to the person I am looking at, but if that person is standing far from my own location and together with many others, it will not help someone who is asking of whom I am thinking of to respond: 'the person I am looking at'. It will surely be more helpful to say something else, something that I think will help the person asking to identify who I have in mind, like the 'handsome well-dressed older man'. This might be quite useful even if I do not find the person I am looking at handsome, well-dressed or old; I just suspect my listener will. See also Fred Kroon, 'Names, Plans, and Descriptions', 2009, p. 140, 148 and Searle 1983, p. 251 for similar thoughts.

<sup>139</sup> As Searle 1983, p. 247-48 writes: 'Suppose [a] man says, "By 'Socrates' I mean the man who invented the method of dialogue", and suppose the author of the dialogues invented it himself and modestly attributed it to Socrates. Now if we then say, "All the same the man was really referring to the person referred to by the author as 'Socrates' and not the man who *in fact* invented the dialogue method", we are committed to the view that the speaker's Intentional content, "I am referring to the same man as the author of the dialogues referred to" takes precedence over his content, "I am referring to the inventor of the dialogue method". When he gave us the latter answer, he gave it to us on the assumption that one and the same man satisfied both.'



beliefs they have and draw upon and also how they react to different possible scenarios, although this is not explicitly thought of when they use 'God'.<sup>140</sup>

With regard to the fact that sophisticated descriptivism may seem more able to pick out the correct referent than commonly given credit for, one may also consider the question to what extent the causal theory differs from descriptivism? Alston himself attends to this matter. About the causal theory, Alston writes:

But is this mode of reference really an alternative to descriptivist reference, or is it just a particular form of that mode? One who takes the latter alternative may claim that Kripke has only pointed to the important role of descriptions that are different from those usually stressed by descriptivists.<sup>141</sup>

Developing his thoughts on this possibility, Alston considers the suggestion that whatever he claims fixes the referent of 'God', this can be captured by a description, although a rather complex and sophisticated one. If one then associates this description with 'God', it would be what determines what 'God' refers to in this case. Due to the fact that such a description is based directly on Alston's proposal, he cannot, according to himself, argue that this description picks out the wrong object as the real referent.<sup>142</sup> Alston concedes that he may not be able to refute this proposal taken as a pure possibility. He does however question it to the extent that it is presented as an explanation of how the ordinary and competent user of 'God' picks out the referent of this term. As he puts it: 'A descriptivist account will apply in these cases only where such a specially tailored descrip-

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<sup>140</sup> See Searle 1983, p. 250-252 for support of this line of reasoning.

<sup>141</sup> See Alston 1988, p. 117.

<sup>142</sup> Kripke also considers this version of the descriptivist theory but seems to think that this would not be very similar to the type of descriptivism he wishes to question. See Kripke 1980, p. 87-88 and footnote 38.

tion is employed by S to fix the reference. And surely it is obvious that in most cases no such description is operative.<sup>143</sup>

In considering one possible response to Alston's reasoning, we can reflect on Frank Jackson's more recent arguments for descriptivism. According to Jackson, Kripke and his followers may have shown us that certain descriptions associated with a term may not be what determine the referent of the term, but this fails to show that no description at all is fixing the referent. One reason for doubting the viability of such a conclusion according to Jackson is that to the degree that the causal theory offers a successful account of what determines the referent of a name, the content of this account can be held to be implicitly known by its ordinary and competent user, even if not explicitly so. The evidence for this being the case, according to Jackson, is that if a person is presented with a hypothetical scenario, like Kripke's Gödel example, she seems to have a firm idea about what the name 'Gödel' refers to in the scenario. That is, although people may not have this kind of referent-fixing account explicitly in mind when using 'Gödel' to refer to its bearer, they still know and depend on it. The latter is according to Jackson manifested in the fact that they have an intuition about what 'Gödel' refers to in this or that possible case.<sup>144</sup> In expressing this suggestion Jackson writes that:

[F]ailure to articulate the relevant property or properties in detail is no objection to the description theory *provided* that what is meant by the expression 'properties associated with a word or phrase' in statements of the description theory is understood in the right way [...] typically the association is implicit or tacit rather than explicit. It is something we can extract in principle from

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<sup>143</sup> Alston 1988, p. 118.

<sup>144</sup> See also Fred Kroon, 'Names, Plans, and Descriptions,' in (eds) David Braddon-Mitchell and Robert Nola, *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, (London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 143 for a similar assessment.

speakers' patterns of word usage, not something actually explicitly before their mind when they use the words.<sup>145</sup>

According to Jackson's proposal, the competent user of a name may tacitly have some idea about what would have a bearing on the matter of what a name refers to.<sup>146</sup> Given enough information about a possible scenario, like the Gödel example, they can draw upon this idea and account for to what or to whom the name refers, if to anything or anyone. Relative to this idea, it may turn out that it is a causal and historical connection between the use of 'Gödel' and its bearer, and not the description 'the inventor of the theorem of incompleteness', that determines what 'Gödel' refers to. Even so, this is only true according to Jackson because we implicitly associate this kind of referent-fixing account with 'Gödel'.

What I am presently implying is not so much that Alston's position on what determines the proper referent in his thought-experiments is incorrect, but that even if it is correct, it may still be in support of, or at any rate, consistent with some kind of descriptivism.<sup>147</sup> Hence, even if Alston would be correct in what determines the referent of 'God' and in thinking that religious people may not have a detailed account of how this works explicitly in mind, one may still,

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<sup>145</sup> Frank Jackson, 'Reference and Description Revisited', in *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 12, 1998b, p. 211; see also Frank Jackson, 'Reference and Description from the Descriptivist Corner', *Philosophical Books*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2007, p. 20; Jussi Haukioja, 'Intuitions, Externalism and Conceptual Analysis', *Studia Philosophica Estonica*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2009, p. 83–84; Christian Nitz, 'Philosophical Thought Experiments as Exercises in Conceptual Analysis', *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2010, p. 211 for somewhat similar positions.

<sup>146</sup> Jackson realizes that some will object to this: 'Some will want to say that if the association is in the mind, as the description theory says, it must be explicit. They think of appeal to the implicit or tacit in this context as a kind of cheat – a way of saying something and then taking it back. However, there is a way of being implicit and yet before the mind in the relevant sense that is no great mystery. Consider the situation good logic students find themselves in before they are given the recursive definition of a wff. They cannot specify what it is to be a wff, but they can reliably classify formulae into wffs and non-wffs.' See Jackson 1998b, p. 211.

<sup>147</sup> See also Finn Spicer, 'Kripke and the Neo-descriptivist' in *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2010, p. 222–223 for a concise but informative account of this matter.

drawing upon Jackson's reasoning, contend that this does not rule out that they more implicitly have such a referent-fixing account in mind.

Perhaps Alston or someone else wishes to oppose the idea that people implicitly possess such information on what would have a bearing on what 'God' or 'Gödel' refers to. I will come back to this matter more in detail in chapter 4 but for the moment we can offer the following response. It may be that Jackson and thinkers sharing his position do not need to rely on this any more than Alston and Kripke do, and this for the following reason: To accept Alston's position on what 'God' refers to in his thought-experiments, we must find his position intuitively correct, and that may be all that someone like Jackson needs, because he will then take that intuition to express what we implicitly know to have a bearing on the matter. And as we have seen, Alston and Kripke present a lot of fictive and real examples in the hope of finding us to be in agreement with them on what the real referent is in each example. As Jackson writes: 'The critics' writings are full of descriptions...of possible worlds and claims about what refers, or fails to refer, to what in these possible worlds. Indeed, their impact has derived precisely from the intuitive plausibility of many of their claims about what refers, or fails to refer, to what in various possible worlds.'<sup>148</sup> Hence, to the extent that anyone in favour of Alston's or Kripke's theories wants to appeal to what we intuitively consider to be the proper referent, this may be hard to cohere with a rejection of a certain kind of descriptivism.<sup>149</sup> As Jackson expresses this last thought more generally: 'There is ...no way that an appeal to intuitions about possible cases can refute the description theory; at most it can tell us that we, or someone, got the associated property or properties for some word wrong.'<sup>150</sup> If Jackson and others sharing his position are correct, this seems important with concern to the objective of my study because it points to an im-

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<sup>148</sup> See Jackson 1998b, p. 212.

<sup>149</sup> And if Alston or anyone else rather wishes to bite the bullet and hold that the ordinary and competent user of a name has no distinct intuition about what it refers to, this would not only seem to have a negative bearing on descriptivism but also the causal theory, because that seems to indicate that it is indeterminate what the referent is.

<sup>150</sup> Jackson 1998b, p. 213.

portant qualification about to what extent and in what sense the ordinary and competent user of a religious and existentially important term like 'God' can be ignorant of its meaning.

One may think that I, in virtue of defending sophisticated descriptivism, fail to appreciate the importance of a causal and historical connection between the use of a name and its proper referent. Apart from Kripke, many thinkers emphasize the significance of a causal or historical contact with the referent. Donnellan for instance thinks that in the case of an 'absence of historical connection between an individual and the use of a name by a speaker', that individual cannot be the referent, even if it would fit the descriptions associated with the name.<sup>151</sup> And Gareth Evans writes in a similar spirit:

There is something absurd in supposing that the intended referent of some perfectly ordinary use of a name by a speaker could be some item utterly isolated (causally) from the user's community and culture simply in virtue of the fact that it fits better than anything else the cluster of descriptions he associates with the name.<sup>152</sup>

According to Donnellan and Evans, even if an object would fit the description associated with a name, this object may not be what the name refers to. For the name to refer to a certain object, this object must be causally or historically connected to our use of the name. Evans, just quoted, thinks for instance that one can compare referring to seeing in this respect. In order to see an object it is not enough to have a visual image on one's retina that is similar to the appearance of the object in question, the object must also be what causes the image. To exemplify, think of a person who claims that he sees his father in a café nearby. If what the person sees is a doll or someone other than his father, he is not seeing

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<sup>151</sup> Donnellan 1974, p. 18; see also p. 16.

<sup>152</sup> Gareth Evans, 'The Causal Theory of Names', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 47, 1973, p. 197.

his father no matter how similar the image on his retina is to his father's appearance, and this reveals something important about our concept of seeing. For you to see X, X must be in causal connection to your eyes. Philosopher of religion Peter Byrne also wishes to emphasize the causal aspect of referring in this sense when he writes that:

[...] I might believe a set of descriptions to be true and these descriptions might be uniquely true of something in the real world without those descriptions thereby establishing cognitive contact between me and that object. It might just happen that I have come to have these beliefs which happen to be uniquely true of this thing. If they do not arise out of contact with the referent or lead to further contact with it, it is implausible to say that I refer to it. We are here supposing that there has to be a causal element in the notions of cognitive contact and reference.<sup>153</sup>

Byrne thinks that for certain descriptions to be about a certain item it is not enough that he believes them to be true and that they in fact are true of the item in question. If the descriptions are not the result of contact with the object, it cannot be what they are about and to the extent that they are associated with a term, they alone are not enough to establish what the term refers to.

I have some sympathy with this line of reasoning. In response to it I wish however to make a couple of critical points. If part of the descriptions associated with the name would be true of someone causally and historically unconnected to the use of the name in question, this may mean that that person should not be considered the proper referent. Speaking generally, I agree. However, to acknowledge this does not seem inconsistent with sophisticated descriptivism. According to it, we associate a number of descriptions to a name and the name then designates the person of whom some of these descriptions are true. One

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<sup>153</sup> Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), p. 43.

may reasonable assume that one of them express the idea that the proper referent of the name must or should be historically or causally connected to our use of the name. But if so, the descriptivist is not committed to thinking that a, in relation to us, historically and causally unconnected object can be referent of a name only in virtue of fitting a sufficient number of the descriptions associated with the name. He does not need to accept this because if the object is historically and causally unconnected to us, it does not, in fact, fit a sufficient number of the descriptions associated with it. As Searle writes for instance:

For example, I now believe that Benjamin Franklin was the inventor of bifocals. Suppose that it was discovered that 80 billion years before Benjamin Franklin's discovery, in a distant galaxy, populated by organisms somewhat like humans, some humanoid invented the functional equivalent of bifocals. Would I regard my view Benjamin Franklin had invented bifocals as false? I think not. When I say Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals there is a concealed indexical in the background: the functioning of the Background in such cases assigns an indexical interpretation to the sentence. Relative *our* Earth and *our* history, Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals...]<sup>154</sup>

According to Searle, even if an object fitted certain descriptions associated with a name, this may not be enough to secure this object as the proper referent.

However, it also seems to be the case that a causal and historical connection between a name and an entity alone may not be sufficient, nor may it be required all the time, to make the latter the proper referent of the former. One reason for doubting that it is of general importance is that we can refer to abstract or future objects and they do not seem to have any causal effect on us, or

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<sup>154</sup> Searle 1983, p. 221.

anything else.<sup>155</sup> One last but important observation is that even to the extent that causal connection is thought to contribute to picking out the referent, we may have reason to think that this is insufficient. As Evans himself observes, causal connection is not even sufficient in the case of seeing, because to see X it is not enough that X is what causes you to have a certain visual image of X. Your visual image must also to a certain degree be similar to the appearance of X. To return to our previous example, for a person to be deemed to see his father at a café nearby it is not sufficient that it is his father that causes him to have a certain perception; the perception must also to a certain extent resemble his father's appearance. If not, one would not say that the person *sees* his father. That is, it is part of our concept of seeing that one's perception has to be similar to the appearance of an object for it to be what is perceived. And to the degree one wants to draw upon a similarity between seeing and referring one must also acknowledge that just as causal contact is not enough in the former case, it is not enough in the latter.

How then may one more precisely implement the similarity requirement in the context of referring to someone? Well, one idea would be to suggest that one can disqualify an object from being considered the proper referent of a name if it does not fit the general category associated with the term. That is, to be able to refer to an object by a name one has to know to what general category it belongs.<sup>156</sup> To exemplify, suppose that the object at the historical beginning of the use of the name 'Aristotle' turned out to be an advanced computer or anything else not falling into the category of humans. Apart from being very surprised, people would probably think that this is not what they have referred to by 'Aris-

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<sup>155</sup> As John Searle for instance argues, we may have a system for assigning names to the roads in a city without any causal contact between the roads and a baptizer. So it seems wrong to say that causal contact is of general importance. See Searle 1983, p. 241.

<sup>156</sup> Peter Byrne also seems to be in agreement with this. He writes for example that: 'An initial *cognitive* contact between speaker and object is required to ground later uses, and that implies that there be some identification of the object by the speaker. This identification may not be wholly correct. It is certainly not tantamount to having a stock of true descriptions about the object. But it does imply that the speaker is able to locate the object in some rough category or kind.' See Byrne 1995, p. 44. Hence, although Byrne has much sympathy for the causal theory, he also thinks that one has to qualify and modify it.



tole' and I believe them to be correct in thinking so. More specifically, I would propose that for an object to be referent of a term it must fit the basic category associated with it. That is, when people use a name for the purpose of referring to something or someone, they normally have a certain kind of entity in mind; precisely how much weight this is to be given may vary somewhat from user to user and from context to context, but it must have some weight. For this reason I thus feel inclined to side with what seems to be Searle's position on this, that mistakes have to come to an end. Somewhere along the line, if people are too mistaken and ignorant about a person or object, they simply cannot be held to refer to it no matter how strongly they are causally or historically connected to it.<sup>157</sup>

To apply this to what people within the Judeo-Christian community refer to by 'God', we should propose that for an object to be considered God, it must fit some general category.<sup>158</sup> Let's call this category a 'God-sortal'. Also Byrne seems to have something similar in mind when he states that: 'The religious quest is for an object that will serve as a focus for the material practices of religion. Such a quest presumes a rough ontological classification of the referent while allowing that there is much to be learnt about its precise, detailed character'.<sup>159</sup> We may contrast this proposal with an idea put forward by Janet Soskice who writes that 'The mystics and those following them may be sadly misguided as to the cause of their experience and so, of course, may be the physicist who

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<sup>157</sup> Searle writes for instance: 'It is a little-noticed but absurd consequence of Kripke's view that it sets no constraints at all on what the name might turn out to refer to. Thus for example it might turn out that by "Aristotle" I am referring to a bar stool in Joe's Pizza Place in Hoboken in 1957 if that is what the causal chain happened to lead to. I want to say: by "Aristotle" I couldn't be referring to a bar stool because this is not what I mean by Aristotle'. See Searle 1983, p. 249-250. He also continues: 'And Kripke's remarks about essentialism are not enough to block this result for they are all *de re* necessities attaching to the objects themselves but not attaching any restrictive Intentional content to the use of the name.' Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> See also Gale 1991, p. 9 and Jerome Gellman, 'The Name of God', *Nous*, vol. 29, no. 4, 1995, p. 537, 541 for support of this requirement.

<sup>159</sup> Byrne 1995, p. 51. Even if Byrne has much sympathy for the idea of a *sortal*, he also sometimes seems to downplay its use when applied to 'God'. In the case of 'God', he occasionally seems to think that it may be hard to apply this notion. See Byrne 1995, chapter 6.

speaks of 'black holes in space'.<sup>160</sup> Relative to my position, in contrast, if the physicist was sadly mistaken about what a black hole is one may question if he has referred to anything.<sup>161</sup> And if the object of religious people's experience were very different compared to the kind of being they hold God to be, 'God' would not be referring to what causes it.

### 3.4 Religious and existentially important terms as natural kind terms

Is it only the referent of a proper name like 'Aristotle' or 'God' that one, according to some thinkers, can be radically mistaken about while still referring to it or can we extend this thought to different kind of terms? Kripke himself thought that it extends to natural kind terms and this idea has also been developed and argued for by Hilary Putnam.<sup>162</sup> This suggestion is important to consider in the current context, for more than one reason. So far in this chapter we have been occupied with the referent of the singular term 'God'. What specific entity it picks out seems to be of considerable religious and existential importance to many people. Sometimes however it is not a specific entity that is important to people, but rather a certain type of entity, which is exemplified by religious and existentially important terms like 'spirit', 'life', 'knowledge' and 'belief'. By in-

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<sup>160</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 152.

<sup>161</sup> Byrne seems to be of the same opinion when he contrasts the case of planet Vulcan with the case of Pluto. He writes: 'We have a good idea what caused the experiences said to be of the planet Vulcan, but the earlier astronomers just did not succeed in making a successful reference to that thing, so wrong were their ideas about the basic category of astronomical object to which it belonged. By contrast, though the 'planet' Pluto, known and investigated for decades, is now believed not to be a planet but a captured comet, we want to say that this discovery is a new fact about one and the same thing as was first discovered and identified as Pluto on 21 January 1930.' See Byrne 1995, p. 49.

<sup>162</sup> See for instance Kripke 1980, p. 127, 134–135; Hilary Putnam 1996. I will mainly consider Putnam's position since it is more explicitly about the meaning of natural kind terms. See Ian Hacking, 'Putnam's Theory of Natural Kinds and Their Names is not the Same as Kripke's', *Principia*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2007, p. 1–24 for an interesting discussion about the differences between Putnam's and Kripke's positions.

interpreting this latter kind of general terms as natural kind terms it may seem possible to apply the causal theory to them and, to the extent this makes sense, possibly offer an important account of how the meaning of these terms can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. To consider this possibility would make my investigation of to what extent and in what sense the causal theory can account for the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms more comprehensive and thus adequate.

Another circumstance that points to the importance of considering this possibility is that it is not an unconsidered one. Lately some thinkers have explicitly argued that terms not commonly conceived of as natural kind terms, like 'life' and knowledge', can be regarded as so. Therefore, in considering the possibility of interpreting certain general terms of existential and religious importance as natural kind terms, we are very much dealing with a live option. Before I turn to this option I will describe some basic, and for our concern relevant, features of Putnam's position on the meaning of natural kind terms.

If we recall from chapter 2, Putnam basically aims to question the fusion of the following two theses about the meaning of words: (1) That the meaning of a term (its intension) determines its extension and (2) that knowing the meaning of a term (its intension) is to be in a certain psychological state. Putnam sets out to show that they, contrary to common opinion, cannot be conjoined. In chapter 2, we saw how Putnam opposed the individualism expressed by this conjunction by arguing that although a person may not be able to identify the extension of a certain term on his own, he may still be held to use the term with this extension as long as someone else in his community knows how to identify the extension and our person has some partly correct account of what belongs to the extension. Putnam also, however, wishes to question what I have identified as an idealistic conception of the meaning of words by arguing that the meaning of a term can extend beyond what everyone, even what the most educated and competent people in a community, consider it to be. It is this latter idea that will be the object of our present concern.

Putnam argues for the latter idea by presenting and drawing upon several thought experiments. The most famous one is a fictive scenario, involving two people, Oscar and twin-Oscar, who are molecule-for-molecule identical. Oscar is living on Earth and twin-Oscar on twin-Earth, a planet located at some remote part of our galaxy. The worlds are exactly alike except for the peculiar fact that

the chemical composition of what pours from Oscar's kitchen tap and falls down on him from the sky is different from what pours from twin-Oscar's tap or falls down from his sky. On Earth water is  $H_2O$ , but on twin-Earth it is made up of XYZ.<sup>163</sup> Let us label the liquid on twin-Earth 'twin-water', just to distinguish it from what is called 'water' on Earth. Putnam asks us to imagine a period in the history of the two worlds, when neither Oscar nor twin-Oscar (and no one else) knows of the difference between the worlds and that this would not change even if Oscar came to twin-Oscar's world or vice versa since neither Oscar nor twin-Oscar at this time has the scientific technology to detect the hidden and different nature of the fluids. And on the surface, water and twin-water look and taste the same.

Within this time, when Oscar and twin-Oscar do not know anything about the chemical difference between the two worlds, do the words referring to the liquid on each planet have the same or different meaning? Putnam argues that the meaning is different because the extension of each word is different, being  $H_2O$  on Earth and XYZ on twin-Earth. However what Oscar has in mind when talking about the liquid on his planet is no different compared to what twin-Oscar has in mind when he talks about the liquid on his planet. Differently put, what they have in mind do not do justice to the different underlying nature of the fluids.<sup>164</sup>

To Putnam this is problematic for anyone who thinks that the intension of a word determines its extension and that the intension is linked to what is going on within the mind of a person, that is, what they comprehend. Both theses cannot be true at once. The reason for this, as stated by Putnam, is that the (type-) content of the mind of twin-Oscar and Oscar is the same while the extension is not. Hence, the intension, if limited to what is going on inside their minds, is thus not enough to distinguish between  $H_2O$  and XYZ. Due to this,

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<sup>163</sup> XYZ is according to Putnam an abbreviation of a more complex chemical formula; see Putnam 1996, p. 9.

<sup>164</sup> This is similar to Burge's arthritis example considered in chapter 2, but if we recall, in his example, what an individual user of a word "has in mind" may not do justice to the communal meaning they may be committed to and with which they use the word (while in Putnam's present example it does not do justice to the difference in the underlying nature of each liquid).

the intension is not, according to Putnam, what determines the extension of a term. As he puts it: '[T]he extension of a term is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head....'<sup>165</sup> Moreover, what, as claimed by Putnam, actually determines the extension of each term is the underlying nature of each liquid (H<sub>2</sub>O and XYZ), even if no user of the terms has yet recognized what it is composed of. As Putnam describes this idea more generally: 'The extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms, and this actual nature is not, in general, fully known to the speaker.'<sup>166</sup> And notice that when Putnam claims this, he does not only mean to suggest that not everyone needs to know what determines the extension, but rather that everyone within a community can be ignorant of this.<sup>167</sup> When we use a natural kind term, we also mean according to Putnam the underlying nature of objects in our near proximity; it is because of this that the underlying nature of a liquid on a remote planet has no bearing on the extension of our terms.<sup>168</sup> He also thinks that the question whether certain objects have a common nature or not 'may take an indeterminate amount of scientific investigation to determine'

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<sup>165</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 28.

<sup>166</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 28. As he also writes: '[I]f there is a hidden structure, then generally it determines what it is to be a member of the natural kind, not only in the actual world, but in all possible worlds.' See Putnam 1996, p. 25.

<sup>167</sup> As Keith Donnellan has commented on this: 'The revolutionary idea is that of a semantic rule that employs paradigms and their underlying nature, a nature that may not even be known to *any* users of the term. Nothing in the principle of the division of linguistic labor yields such a result.' See Donnellan 2003, p. 67–68.

<sup>168</sup> More specifically he conceives of natural kind terms as indexical: '...words like "water" have an unnoticed indexical component: "water" is stuff that bears a certain similarity relation to the water *around here*.' See Putnam 1996, p. 19. For some criticism of this aspect of Putnam's position, see Eddy Zemach, 'Putnam's Theory on the Reference of Substance Terms' in (eds) Andrew Pessin & Sanford Goldberg, *The Twin Earth Chronicles: Twenty Years of Reflection on Hilary Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'"*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 61–62 and D. H. Mellor, 'Natural Kinds', in (eds) Andrew Pessin & Sanford Goldberg, *The Twin Earth Chronicles: Twenty Years of Reflection on Hilary Putnam's "The Meaning of 'Meaning'"*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 71–72. Putnam also thinks that it is possible to express his idea through Kripke's notion of a rigid designator, see Putnam 1996, p. 15–19.

and whatever conclusion such an investigation may result in, this conclusion is defeasible.<sup>169</sup>

Let us consider more precisely how Putnam's position can be held to support the idea that the meaning of words can be recognition-transcendent to the competent and ordinary user of them. In an initial attempt to make this explicit, one may suggest that if the meaning of a term is what determines its extension and what determines the extension does not need to be known to anyone using the term, the meaning of the term may seem recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user.<sup>170</sup> Regarding this suggestion, one must however also take into account that, even if Putnam claims that what determines the extension of a term may not be in the head of even the most competent and educated people in use of it, the very idea of an "extension-determining" meaning in the form of an intension is not part of his own and concluding analysis of (the concept of) meaning. Relative to his analysis, the meaning of natural kind terms consists of several different components. The extension is one such component and a very important one; according to Putnam, it is the predominant sense of a natural kind term.<sup>171</sup> Drawing upon this, one may suggest that the meaning of a term can be considered recognition-transcendent to the degree that

<sup>169</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 11.

<sup>170</sup> This is what Putnam is getting at when he concludes that 'meaning ain't in the *head*'; that is, what determines the extension of a term is not limited to what people using the term have in mind, the psychological state they are in. See Putnam 1996, p. 13. This is also in conflict with Searle's position, previously considered, according to which the referent is determined as per the complete Intentional content of a person's mind. Searle has also in reply to Putnam's position explicitly stated that meaning is in the head. See Searle 1983, p. 199.

<sup>171</sup> Putnam writes: 'My proposal is that the normal form description of the meaning of a word should be a finite sequence, or "vector", whose components should certainly include the following (it might be desirable to have other types of components as well): (1) the syntactic markers that apply to the word, e.g., "noun"; (2) the semantic markers that apply to the word, e.g. "animal," "period of time"; (3) a description of the additional features of the stereotype, if any; (4) a description of the extension.' See Putnam 1996, p. 49. A stereotype for a term consists of the beliefs most people associate with, and take to be true of, the things included in the extension of the term. In the case of 'water' and 'twin-water' (on Earth and twin-Earth respectively) Oscar and twin-Oscar can be deemed to have the same stereotype for each word: the colourless liquid filling our seas and raining down on us sometimes. The stereotype is however, according to Putnam, not enough to differ between the fluids' underlying natures.

the extension is recognition-transcendent, because the latter is, according to Putnam, substantially constitutive of the former, the meaning that is. And the extension can be recognition-transcendent because what determines the extension, namely the underlying nature of some paradigmatic samples, may be unidentified.<sup>172</sup>

If we accept this analysis of meaning and, to exemplify it, thus assume that the extension of, for instance, 'gold' is determined by the underlying nature shared by most paradigmatic examples of gold objects, the meaning of 'gold' would seem to become external and objective enough for its user to possibly be ignorant of it. If one also conceives of this underlying nature as being essential for what 'gold' applies to, we also end up with the idea that the essential nature of 'gold' may be recognition-transcendent. That is, people may have a lot of beliefs about gold, but these beliefs do not establish what is essential for being gold; the underlying nature (which they may be ignorant of) does that. Lastly, what determines the extension of 'gold' on Putnam's account is not knowable a priori but only a posteriori; it is discovered through a scientific investigation, not through a conceptual analysis of the concept people possess and associate with it. In sum then, Putnam's position may seem to account for how the meaning of certain terms can be a posteriori recognition-transcendent to a whole community of people (and not just some people within the community).<sup>173</sup> Hence, to the extent that we accept his account of the meaning of certain terms we have reason to question soft contextualism, even if applied to a community as a whole.

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<sup>172</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 29. See also Katalin Farkas 'Semantic Externalism and Internalism' in (eds) Barry Smith and Ernest Lepore, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 327 for the thought that it is externalism about meaning that is the interesting thesis: 'Twin Earth arguments proceed by first pointing out that references are different for internally identical subjects, and then arguing further that difference in reference implies a difference in meaning.' See also Åsa-Maria Wikforss, 'Naming Natural Kinds', *Synthese*, vol. 145, no. 1, 2005, p. 68 for the same reading of Putnam's position.

<sup>173</sup> As Oswald Hanfling interprets Putnam's position it entails 'that what we mean by our words depends on the real nature of things, as revealed by scientific investigation, and is not to be established by a priori reflection 'on what we say'.' See Hanfling 2000, p. 222.

### 3.4.1 Religious and existentially important terms as natural kind terms – some examples

Although natural kind externalism originally was, and still commonly is, intended to account for the meaning of terms like ‘gold’ and ‘aluminium’ and what determines the essential nature of what these terms apply to, some have also proposed that it can be constructively applied to different kind of terms. Some of these latter terms belong to the kind of terms we are concerned with in this study. Although I am interested in the general possibility of applying this kind of externalism to religious and existentially important terms it may be constructive to consider some concrete examples.

For a long time, people have thought about the difference between knowing and just believing something to be the case. It does not seem hard to comprehend the reason for this in that we humans have a deep craving for making sure that our accounts of various parts of the universe are well grounded and warranted and not just accepted due to tradition or habit. For this reason it has seemed natural to analyse our concepts of knowing and believing because these have been assumed to partly or completely constitute the meaning of the words ‘knowing’ and ‘believing’. But to work out such analyses has proven to be rather difficult.<sup>174</sup> Due to this, some have concluded that these words (and many similar ones of religious and existential importance) do not express a determinate and stable meaning. Some have however argued that perhaps they do, it is just that our attempts to try to reveal it have been inadequate. For instance, in expressing his position on the notion of ‘belief’, William Lycan writes: ‘As in Putnam’s examples of “water”, “tiger”, and so on, I think the ordinary word “belief” (qua theoretical term of folk psychology) points dimly towards a natural kind that we have not fully grasped and that only mature psychology will reveal.’<sup>175</sup> So the fact that we have failed to account for what beliefs are by trying to analyse the concept connected to the term ‘belief’ is not to be seen as that big of a prob-

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<sup>174</sup> And Edmund Gettier (Edmund Gettier, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge, *Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 6, 1963, p. 121–123) did not do much to boost our confidence concerning this.

<sup>175</sup> William Lycan, *Judgement and Justification*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 32.



lem. On the contrary, it is rather what might be expected if belief is more like a natural kind because such a kind is determined independently of our concept of belief and, as a result of this, not accessible to us a priori. Consequently it is no wonder that we have failed to identify by conceptual analysis the essential nature of what beliefs are. Hilary Kornblith seems to be of a similar opinion with regard to the term 'knowing', in virtue of seeing '...the investigation of knowledge, and philosophical investigation generally, on the model of investigations of natural kinds'.<sup>176</sup> Kornblith explicitly advises us not to try to make explicit some hidden feature of people's concept of knowing, but rather to target the nature of what the term refers to independently of our concept of it. According to him, we should be interested in what he calls the 'extra-mental phenomenon' because our concept of knowledge will only tell us what we take or believe knowledge to be and not what it is. As Kornblith also writes: 'If we wish to understand a phenomenon accurately, we thus cannot merely seek to elucidate our current intuitive conception of it; we must examine the phenomenon itself. And this applies as much to understanding the nature of knowledge as it does to understanding the nature of gold.'<sup>177</sup>

To offer another example, let us consider the term 'life'. What we mean by this notion also seems to be of considerable existential and religious importance. It is for instance important with regard to ethical issues concerning abortion or research on stem cells. It also matters for the question of whether the universe

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<sup>176</sup> Kornblith, *Knowledge and its Place in Nature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 11. He also writes: 'When we appeal to our intuitions about knowledge, we make salient certain instances of the phenomenon that need to be accounted for, and that these are genuine instances of knowledge is simply obvious, at least if our examples are well chosen. What we are doing, as I see it, is much like the rock collector who gathers samples of some interesting kind of stone for the purpose of figuring out what it is that the examples have in common. We begin, often enough, with obvious cases, even if we do yet not understand what it is that provides the theoretical unity to the kind we wish to examine. Understanding what the theoretical unity is is the object of our study, and it is to be found by careful examination of the phenomenon, that is, something outside of us, not our concept of the phenomenon, something inside of us.' See Kornblith 2002, p. 10–11.

<sup>177</sup> See Kornblith, 2002, p. 18. Kornblith follows Richard Boyd and takes natural kinds to be 'homeostatically clustered properties, properties that are mutually supporting and reinforcing in the face of external change.' See Kornblith 2002, p. 61.

contains life on other planets and places than on Earth. To settle the latter matter, we naturally have to know what we are looking for, and what can be taken to confirm and disconfirm the hypothesis of extraterrestrial life.<sup>178</sup> Naturally then, much time and effort has been invested in trying to define 'life'. However, as in the case of 'knowing' and 'believing', this has not been a very successful endeavour.<sup>179</sup> According to Carol E. Cleland and Christopher F. Chyba, 'To this day, there remains no broadly accepted definition of 'life'.<sup>180</sup> But what if 'life' is more like a natural kind term? This fact may then account for why certain traditional attempts to define 'life', by trying to analyse our concept of life, have been unsuccessful, but also how the meaning of 'life' can still be recognition-transcendent to the competent user of it. In fact, something along this line has been proposed by Cleland and Chyba:

If (as seems likely, but not certain) life is natural kind, then attempts to define 'life' are fundamentally misguided. Definitions serve only to explain the concepts

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<sup>178</sup> Domains of research such as astrobiology, artificial life and the origin of life seem to have been responsible for the rather recent and increasing interest in questions about what life is; see Jean Gayon, 'Defining Life: Synthesis and Conclusions', *Origins of life and Evolution of Biospheres*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2010, p. 238. See also Edouard Machery, 'Why I Stopped Worrying About the Definition of Life... and Why You Should as Well', *Synthese*, vol. 185, no. 1, 2012, p. 147 for a similar explanation behind the current interest of trying to define life.

<sup>179</sup> As Edouard Machery writes, 'Consider some telling examples. Boden (1999, pp. 236–237) argues that life should not be identified with self-organization (Goodwin 1990; Kauffman 1995), because some chemical reactions, e.g., the Belousov-Zhabotinsky reaction, self-organize without being alive. When Bedau (1996, 1998) and Joyce (1994) argue (in different ways) that evolution is a necessary and maybe sufficient property of living creatures, Cleland and Chyba (2002, p. 388) notice that real (e.g., mules) and possible (e.g., creatures capable of metabolism, but not of replication) cases are inconsistent with this proposal (see also Goodwin 1990; Kauffman 1995; Luisi 1998; Boden 1999). Cleland and Chyba (2002, p. 388; see also Chyba and McDonald 1995) also note that "thermodynamic and metabolic definitions of life have difficulty avoiding counting crystals and fire, respectively, as alive." And so on... This should look familiar to readers of Plato! See Machery 2012, p. 146.

<sup>180</sup> Carol E. Cleland and Christopher F. Chyba, 'Does 'Life' Have a Definition?', in (eds) M. Bedau, and C. Cleland, *The Nature of Life, Classical and Contemporary Perspectives from Philosophy and Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 326.

that we currently associate with terms. As human mental entities, concepts cannot reveal the objective underlying nature (or lack thereof) of the categories designated by natural kind terms. Yet when we use a natural kind term, it is this underlying nature (not the concepts in our heads) that we are interested in. ‘Water’ means whatever the stuff in streams, lakes, oceans, and *everything* else that is water has in common.<sup>181</sup>

According to Cleland and Chyba, life may be a natural kind which would mean that: ‘Analogously to ‘water’, ‘life’ means whatever cyanobacteria, hyperthermophilic, archaeobacteria, amoebae, mushrooms, palm trees, sea turtles, elephants, humans and *everything* else that is alive (on Earth or elsewhere) has in common.’<sup>182</sup> For this reason they do not find it constructive to try to define ‘life’ because a definition only targets a concept, which has no direct connection to the underlying constitution of the natural kind the term may refer to.<sup>183</sup> As they also write: ‘Ideal definitions do not [...] supply good answers to questions about the identity of *natural kinds* – categories carved out by nature, as opposed to human interests, concerns, and conventions. This issue is particularly important for our purposes since it seems likely (but not certain) that ‘life’ is a natural kind term – that whether something is living or non-living represents an objective fact about the natural world.’<sup>184</sup>

We can also consider how one may perhaps draw upon natural kind externalism to question my previously introduced “sortal”-requirement, the idea that for an object to be the real referent of a singular term, like ‘God’, it has to fit a general category associated with the term. Independently of natural kind externalism, one may wish to object to the idea that any sortal associated with ‘God’

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<sup>181</sup> Cleland and Chyba, 2010, p. 332.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

<sup>183</sup> See Cleland and Chyba 2010, p. 326. They also write: ‘To answer the question “What is life?” we require not a definition but a general theory of the nature of living systems. In the absence of such a theory, we are in a position analogous to that of a sixteenth-century investigator trying to define ‘water’ before the advent of molecular theory.’ See Cleland and Chyba 2010, p. 326.

<sup>184</sup> See Cleland and Chyba 2010, p. 330.

constrains what it refers to on the grounds that even if one accepted that for an object to be God it must be a certain kind of object, we humans simply do not know what kind of object God is. God's nature is beyond our comprehension, hence we are in no position to come up with the adequate sortal. However, without some general backing, this response to the sortal requirement may come across as being all too much in the spirit of fideism. That is, it may seem that by proposing something like this one treats 'God' all too much as a special case. It is for the purpose of offering a rebuttal to this latter charge (that one is invoking a special plea for 'God') that natural kind externalism may be of service. It may be argued that in order to maintain that what kind of object God is is something beyond our recognition, one is not forced to handle 'God' as an exception to the general rule, rather the opposite if anything. Perhaps then, despite my previous contention to the contrary, one should not put too much emphasis on the sortal and claim that for an object to be the referent of 'God', it must fit the sortal commonly associated with it.

Of course, each one of the thinkers previously referred to would have more to say about exactly how they wish to apply natural kind externalism and the causal theory beyond its original domain. Still, I think what I have described is sufficient to discern and exemplify a certain proposal on how the meaning of some religious and existentially important terms can be thought to be recognition-transcendent. (If we recall, for the meaning of a term to be recognition-transcendent, it must be external and objective enough for us to possibly be mistaken or ignorant of it but internal and subjective enough for us to be committed to it, to be what we mean by it.) Applying the proposal that I have in mind to 'life', one may suggest that the underlying nature (a natural kind) shared by certain paradigmatic examples of living objects is external and objective enough in relation to people in competent use of 'life' for them to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, to the extent that 'life' is implicitly or explicitly used with the intention to refer to this underlying nature, and the extension determined by it, one may deem the user committed to it and, also hold it to have a constitutive bearing on what they mean by 'life'. Analogous analyses may then be given for many of terms of religious and existential importance. Hence, to interpret certain religious and existentially important terms like natural kind terms may thus seem to account for how the meaning of them may be recognition-transcendent to the competent and ordinary user of them.

Moreover, and worth calling attention to, by considering the viability of this proposal in the next section, we do not only examine if the meaning of religious and existentially important terms can be recognition-transcendent to every user of them within a community of people (the hypothesis of a community-transcendent meaning), but also if and to what extent the meaning can be a posteriori recognition-transcendent. I put emphasis on this aspect because to the extent that natural kind externalism is a viable theory and applicable to such terms, it would suggest that how we have traditionally gone about trying to find out the essential nature of what such terms express or apply to has been rather inappropriate. As Kornblith writes: ‘I do, however, believe that many of the questions that philosophers have traditionally addressed are indeed legitimate questions, and that the methods that have traditionally been used to answer these questions—various a priori methods—are not likely to bear fruit.’<sup>185</sup> (It may also be good to bear this in mind with regard to the fact that in the next chapter, I examine how the meaning of religious and existentially important words can be recognition-transcendent in a more a priori oriented sense.)

### **3.4.2 Some problems with treating religious and existentially important terms as natural kind terms**

Although very interesting and innovative, the general idea presented in the previous section also seems to face some problems. I consider some of these in what follows. Most fundamentally, one may question to what extent natural kind externalism is applicable to the kind of terms we are mainly interested in within this study. This is no easy question to settle and one should reasonably resist from trying to offer a universally applicable response to this question, that is, a verdict that holds for all general religious and existentially important terms. Still,

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<sup>185</sup> Kornblith 2002, p. 172. And he continues the passage by saying: ‘So, whatever philosophical questions may be, I believe that they deserve answers, and that empirical methods are the ones that are most likely to be successful in generating those answers.’ Ibid.

I think it is possible to offer some general remarks and observations concerning this matter.

For the purpose of opening up a discussion concerning this, we may initially recall that natural kind externalism is usually not thought to be applicable to all kind of terms: It is commonly thought to only apply to terms intended to pick out some natural and mind-independent properties that are what they are independently of the interest and concern of us humans. For the sake of making this qualification more precise we may distinguish between social kinds and natural kinds and say that a social kind is the result of an act of classification (of certain entities into one category) that substantially or completely depends on the interest and values of the people performing it. That is, what all objects of a social kind have in common is not determined independently of the beliefs and concern of humans. It is exactly in this sense that natural kinds are thought to be different.

The important question is whether terms like, for instance, 'knowledge', 'justification' and 'justice' should be taken to denote a natural kind or a social kind. Although each of these terms has an extension, one may find it doubtful if the extension of each term is determined by some underlying nature assumed to be referred to by each term, more or less in the same sense as 'gold' and 'aluminium'. Joel Pust and Alvin Goldman express doubts concerning this when writing that:

Presumably something qualifies as a natural kind only if it has a prior essence, nature, or character independent of anybody's thought or conception of it. It is questionable, however, whether such analysanda as knowledge, justification, and justice have essences or natures independent of our conception of them.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust, 'Philosophical Theory and Intuitional Evidence', in (eds) Michael R. DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition, The Psychology of Intuition and its Role in Philosophical Enquiry*, (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 186–187.

Pust and Goldman find the proposal that knowledge and justification constitute natural kinds doubtful and the reason for why they find this uncertain is that knowledge and justification, according to them, do not seem to have an essential nature independently of our beliefs and thoughts about them. Others have expressed similar misgivings about the idea presently considered. William Ramsey writes for instance that, 'It is not as though notions such as causation and knowledge have a microstructure or genetic makeup'.<sup>187</sup>

Hence, one initial critical response to the application of natural kind externalism to certain religious and existentially important terms, like knowledge and justice, is that it is questionable if what is true for 'gold' and 'lemon' can extend to these terms. However, one may wish to suggest that we should be careful to not categorically deny this possibility for all religious and existentially important terms. One may hold that certain terms of existential and religious importance do not seem as easy to categorize as either natural or social kinds and perhaps such terms belong to the former category. To exemplify this kind of terms we may once more consider 'life', which may seem closer to 'gold' than to for instance 'justice'. With regard to this, we need to examine more carefully how we can tell if a term is a natural kind term.

One suggestion is that if 'life', and similar terms of religious and existential importance, is a natural kind term or not depends on whether or not the term actually picks out a natural kind and this matter can only be resolved by a posteriori oriented research on paradigmatic examples of "living" entities; an investigation perhaps best executed by certain biologists. If they do not find such a natural kind at the end of the investigation, we should conclude that 'life' was not a natural kind term. For the moment, it may be argued, we do not know what the case is because the kind of technology and research needed to settle this matter is perhaps still ahead of us. It may be this uncertainty that causes Cleland and Chyba to be somewhat cautious and say that 'it seems likely (but not cer-

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<sup>187</sup> William Ramsey, 'Prototypes and Conceptual Analysis' in (eds) Michael R. DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition, The Psychology of Intuition and its Role in Philosophical Enquiry*, (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 174.

tain) that ‘life’ is a natural kind term”.<sup>188</sup> This a posteriori oriented approach to settle if a term is a natural kind term or not would also have an interesting outcome as a result of making the meaning of ‘life’ (and any similar term) doubly recognition-transcendent: not only may the meaning of ‘life’ be recognition-transcendent (in being tied to a presently unknown natural kind), but if ‘life’ is a natural kind term or not may also be a recognition-transcendent fact. That is, according to the present suggestion, part of the semantic category or function of a term (what kind of term it is) may also not be completely known to anyone in the community of people using the term.<sup>189</sup>

However, this account of what determines if a term is a natural kind term or not cannot be completely accurate. In general it seems rather peculiar to suggest that the semantic category or function of a term (recall, what kind of term it is) is something that we discover a posteriori rather than something we can be assumed to have a priori access to. One may back up the reliability of this impression by taking into consideration that such an account does not seem to be in line with how it originally was, and still commonly is, argued that for example ‘gold’ is a natural kind term. Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke for instance did so by the use of thought-experiments and by appealing to what would seem intuitively and rationally correct to say in response to them.<sup>190</sup> However, this procedure would only seem to make sense if the semantic category or function of ‘gold’ is manifested in our linguistic practice and possible to discover through intuitive and intellectual reflection on it. To the extent this is correct, it suggests that if a term is a natural kind term or not is not something we completely discover a posteriori but something that is partly figured out or decided a priori.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>188</sup> Chyba and Cleland 2010, p. 326.

<sup>189</sup> Of course, one may reason in the same manner with regard to some of the terms previously considered, like ‘justification’ and ‘knowledge’; perhaps we gave up on the idea of treating them as natural kind terms all too soon?

<sup>190</sup> Putnam 1996, Kripke 1980.

<sup>191</sup> See also Jackson 1998a, p. 38. Compare also to Daniel Cohnitz’s and Jussi Haukioja’s recent defence of what they call *meta-internalism* and the following statement about it: ‘...it is precisely *because* our dispositions to apply and interpret natural kind terms are different from our dispositions to apply and interpret terms like ‘bachelor’ that the former get an externalist semantics while the latter get an internalist



I do not mean to deny that the empirical discovery of what a term refers to has some bearing on the question of whether this term should be considered a natural kind term or not; it surely may. To exemplify how this may be possible, consider the following case. For quite some time, people thought that 'jade' was a natural kind term until it was discovered that the term referred to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite; due to this many concluded that the term did not pick out a natural kind. This case and similar ones seem to indicate that to what extent a term succeeds in picking out a natural kind, which obviously cannot be settled a priori, has some bearing on the question of whether the term is a natural kind term or not. It seems, however, possible to account for this without giving up the suggestion that the semantic function or category of a term is strongly dependent on features implicit within the linguistic practice of a community of people in use of it and for this reason best explored a priori, that is, through intuitive and intellectual reflection. One may for instance propose that a term is a natural kind term if (i) it is explicitly or implicitly used with that intention and (ii) actually picks out a natural kind. The proviso expressed by the former part of this specification does not seem to be settled a posteriori; at any rate not in the sense that the proviso expressed by its latter part is.<sup>192</sup>

Hence, for a term to be considered a natural kind term it is not enough that the term is in use and, as a matter of fact, all objects within its extension have some underlying nature in common: if the term is not used with the intention to pick this out, it is not a natural kind term. If I am correct about this, to what degree 'life' is a natural kind term or not cannot be settled completely by some future biological discovery. Chyba and Cleland may be correct in pointing out that it is not certain that 'life' is a natural kind term, but what may make this an unsettled matter, I would suggest, is not only or mainly the fact that we have not yet made the relevant empirical discovery. It may also be because we

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one.' See Daniel Cohnitz and Haukioja, 'Meta-Externalism vs Meta-Internalism in the Study of Reference', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2013, p. 489.

<sup>192</sup> It may perhaps be settled empirically in the sense that one may need to study people's use and interpretations of terms.

are perhaps unsure of how to analyse 'life' semantically, in the sense of knowing exactly how the term is used. And to the extent that we are presently uncertain and indecisive about this matter, this shows that the semantic category or function of this term is indeterminate or unsettled rather than a posteriori undiscovered. Recall, even if all objects belonging to the extension of a particular term were discovered to have some underlying nature in common, this fact alone does not make the term into a natural kind term.<sup>193</sup> And to the extent it is not, its meaning is unaffected by whatever underlying nature we may discover.

It is thus not part of the position I am advocating, that we cannot be mistaken or ignorant about the precise semantic function or category of our general terms; my position only offers a certain account of what such mistakes can amount to. Consider for example the following remark from Kornblith who, recall, thinks that knowledge is a natural kind: 'While a person introducing a term may well believe, at the time the term is introduced, that the referent of the term is a natural kind, subsequent investigation may reveal that this belief is false. By the same token, a term may be introduced for a property that is, in fact, a natural kind, without the person introducing the term recognizing that fact.'<sup>194</sup> If Kornblith wants to propose that a term can pick out a natural kind, and hence should be considered a natural kind term, even if the person introducing the term has no intention to use it like that and no features within his linguistic practice are supportive of this interpretation, I think he is mistaken. Empirical discoveries alone cannot have such a strong bearing on the semantics of our terms. In claiming this, I also distance myself from the idea that semantically

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<sup>193</sup> I thus agree with Daniel Cohnitz and Jussi Haukioja when they write: 'Even if it turned out, miraculously, that all and only bachelors actually have some empirically discoverable microstructure, that would not make bachelorhood into a natural kind: in other possible worlds 'bachelor' would apply on the basis of gender, age, and marital status, not microstructure.' See Cohnitz and Haukioja 2013, p. 493-494. Or as Katalin Farkas claims: 'The crucial point is that the twins must intend the term 'water' to refer to a natural kind in this sense, otherwise sameness of underlying structure will not be relevant to the sameness of kind. This is consonant with the internalist position: we can expect features of a kind to effect our concepts only insofar the presence of these features, in relation to the kind in question, enters the cognitive perspective of the experiencing subject.' See Katalin Farkas, 'Does Twin Earth Rest on a Mistake?' *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 3. no. 8, 2003, p. 165-166.

<sup>194</sup> Kornblith 2002, chapter 1, footnote 17.

important concepts like ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’ can and should be conceived of as natural kind terms; that is, I do not find it plausible to think that ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’ refer to some natural kinds.<sup>195</sup>

Before I continue, let me sum up a bit. I have argued that many general terms of religious and existential importance, like ‘justification’, does not seem to be used as natural kind terms; hence natural kind externalism does not seem to apply to them. I have also argued that when this is less certain and evident, like perhaps in the case of ‘life’, the reason for our uncertainty is not due to insufficient information about the universe, but because we are unsure of how to analyse ‘life’ semantically. That is, to the extent that we are presently uncertain and indecisive about this matter, this is because the semantic category or function of this term is indeterminate or unsettled, not a posteriori undiscovered. I do not presently possess any empirical data that would let me conclude if people use ‘life’ like a natural kind term or not. It nonetheless seems possible to present some general facts or thoughts that may support a negative response to this. (These facts and thoughts may also be applied to religious and existentially important terms beyond ‘life’.) In the process of doing this, I will also towards the end consider a possible problem with the very theory of natural kind externalism.

(1) To begin, it seems reasonable to assume that the semantic function or category of our terms are not only manifested in our linguistic practice, but also in how we usually go about investigating the nature of to what our terms apply. That is, one may assume a certain connection between our use of a term like for instance ‘justice’ and ‘justification’ and how we commonly investigate the nature of justice and justification. For example, we seem to approach and deal with the

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<sup>195</sup> This view has been defended by Herman Cappelen and Douglas Winblad. They write, ‘Kripke’s positive account of reference also appears to be applicable to “reference.” [...] one might introduce “reference” by pointing out a certain act of referring and saying “reference,” or something like “Let’s call the sort of act he just performed “reference.”’ The term would then refer to whatever sort of act that act happens to be.’ See Herman Cappelen and Douglas G. Winblad, “Reference” Externalized and the Role of Intuitions in Semantic Theory’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1999, p. 339–340. For some criticism of this idea, see for instance Daniel Cohnitz and Jussi Haukioja 2013, p. 494–495 and Henry Jackman, ‘Intuitions and Semantic Theory’, *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2005, p. 365–375.

question ‘what is gold?’ and ‘what is justice?’ differently. The former is commonly supposed to be best solved by an empirical investigation into the underlying nature of what we have referred to by ‘gold’. The question concerning the nature of justification is commonly and traditionally approached differently through some kind of conceptual analysis. If we assume that this difference in how we go about exploring certain features of our universe corresponds to a difference in kind between the terms thought to denote these features, a difference of the former kind may indicate a difference of the latter kind. That is, a difference of the former type, may indicate that the semantic category of the terms are different; one is used as a natural kind term and one as a social kind term. Hence, the manner in which we address certain questions about to what certain terms apply reveals the semantic category of these terms. And it seems that questions about what many terms of religious and existential importance express and denote are not approached in the same manner as questions about, for example, what gold is, which would suggest that the former type of terms are not used as natural kind terms.

(2) Moreover, whether a term is commonly intended to refer to an underlying nature or not is, I would suggest, connected to what additional beliefs the user and the community of people they belong to have about the universe. For instance, before we knew about the complex chemical composition of certain type of objects and about the possibility of relying on this to divide individuals into separate categories, one may wonder if people ever used terms with the intention to let this have a bearing on what they refer to. That is to say, perhaps it is bit anachronistic to ascribe such a use of terms to people living before this discovery became widely recognized. It may for instance be unreasonable to think that people within the antique period used ‘gold’ to refer to an underlying nature shared by all objects of gold, due to the fact that they did not know or even assume that such an underlying nature exists.<sup>196</sup> To apply the sentiment of this line of reasoning to the term ‘life’, one may suggest that before we knew

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<sup>196</sup> Oswald Hanfling is for instance sceptical of the idea that Archimedes attributed the same meaning to ‘gold’ as we do in our time; at least it seems rather difficult to settle this. See Hanfling 2000, p. 229-230. See also Zemach 1996, p. 63 for a similar concern regarding ‘water’.

about DNA and the complex genetic systems making up living organisms, one may wonder if the competent user of this term intended to refer to anything like this. Hence, even if the universe turns out to contain natural kinds that would coincide with the use of certain existentially important and religious terms, one may question if people living before this discovery was commonly accepted used these terms to refer to these natural kinds. One reason for such doubts is that many religious and existentially important terms predate our present and modern scientific discourse about natural kinds. And if we recall, if people do not use these terms with the explicit or implicit intention to refer to these kinds, these natural kinds are too external to have a bearing on the meaning of them.<sup>197</sup>

(3) To what extent a community of people use terms to refer to an underlying nature assumed to be common for certain objects, may also not only vary between different periods in the history of that community. It may also vary between different contexts within a community during the same period of time. For instance, within our own time, one may wonder if this use of terms is not restricted to a certain scientific context. As is suggested by Michael Esfeld concerning natural kind terms more generally: 'It is plausible to maintain that the sketched scenario applies to a scientific community, because it is an explicit aim of scientific research to discover the microstructure of physical things; but this is not an aim of our common sense talk about the physical things with which we deal in everyday life.'<sup>198</sup> Esfeld is thus doubtful about the plausibility of extend-

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<sup>197</sup> Some have also argued that even if the universe contains natural kinds, one may question if they are of concern to the meaning of our words and classificatory practice before we know of them. For this kind of criticism, see for instance Zemach 1996, p. 62. Mellor, 1996, p. 74. Crane 1996, p. 289–290. Zemach also thinks that Putnam is not true to his own position, in that what we commonly call water is not always composed of H<sub>2</sub>O, (but also T<sub>2</sub>O, HDO, DTO); see Zemach 1996, p. 62–63. And Tim Crane points out that heavy water has a different chemical structure to that of ordinary water, but that this fact has not prevented us from calling the former water. See Crane 1996, p. 290.

<sup>198</sup> Michael Esfeld, *Holism in Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of Physics*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 124. See also Hanfling 2000, p. 226 for similar criticism. Hanfling writes for instance: 'Putnam is mistaken in treating the issue as one of intension versus extension: it is really about rival *intensions*. If the visitors from Earth judge that the ordinary qualities constitute the intension of 'water', they will not report a difference of meaning, but if they judge chemical structure to be of overriding importance, then they will report as predicated by Putnam. The choice would probably depend on the

ing the intention to refer to an underlying nature shared by some paradigmatic examples of objects to the more common and ordinary contexts of usage; terms are only used with this intention in certain scientific contexts. Concerning a term like 'life' one may then perhaps propose that outside the context of biology (and various scientific contexts) the term is not used with the intention to pick out a natural kind.<sup>199</sup> Hence, even if a biologist would come up with a more precise proposal on what life is, perhaps by drawing upon the discovery of some hitherto unrecognized natural feature of the universe, this may be held to have little or no bearing on the meaning of 'life' as it is used outside this context.<sup>200</sup>

A similar problem may apply to Kornblith's case for knowledge being a natural kind. In arguing for this he is exclusively focusing on research data and examples from cognitive ethology. He thinks that knowledge is what we need to attribute to a species in order to make sense of its successful adaptation to its surrounding and natural habitat.<sup>201</sup> Even if we would accept that we need to invoke the notion of knowledge in that context of investigation, we may wonder if this is what we mean by knowing something more generally outside the scientific context of cognitive ethology. For instance, is it not reasonable to assume a difference between how animals and humans can be considered to know

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context in which the word 'water' was to be used. But either way, the issue is not about intension versus extension, but about ordinary versus scientific intensions. Putnam thinks that the latter will always prevail, but while they might do so in some contexts, there is no reason to think that it would be so in general'.

<sup>199</sup> Putnam however rejects the idea that the underlying nature is only important in a scientific context. See Putnam 1996, p. 23.

<sup>200</sup> Especially if the proposal would be very different compared to what is implicit in the non-scientific concept of life. As Mark Green writes: 'Expertise does not just supply the linguistic labour of adjusting and augmenting lay conceptions: it may also clash with cherished aspects of those prior conceptions, and when it does, the conceptual priorities of the laity can overrule the sober assessments of dispassionate expertise in specifying the extensions of ordinary usage.' See Mark Greene, 'Chocolate' and Other Kind Terms: Implications for Semantic Externalism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 243, 2011, p. 273.

<sup>201</sup> As he writes: 'It is the focus on this adaptation of these cognitive capacities to the environment that forces us to explain the possibility of successful behavior, and it is the explanation of successful behavior that requires the notion of knowledge rather than mere belief. Knowledge explains the possibility of successful behavior in an environment, which in turn explains fitness.' See Kornblith 2002, p. 57.

things.<sup>202</sup> With regard to the latter, it seems for example hard to remove the reflective aspect or nature of this kind of knowing which appears absent in the case of how most animals may be deemed to “know” things.<sup>203</sup>

A different problem concerns to what extent we are in agreement about what would constitute paradigmatic examples of what our religious and existentially important terms apply to. To exemplify, in the case of gold it seems to be commonly assumed that we are rather certain about what constitutes paradigmatic examples of what belongs to the extension of ‘gold’ and what does not. One may of course question the grounds for this assumption; some thinkers have for instance argued that it is indeterminate what we mean in the case described by Putnam. That is, when we discover that the fluids on Earth and twin-Earth are different, we can decide to say that only H<sub>2</sub>O is water or we can decide that we have two different kinds of water.<sup>204</sup> What I presently want to stress however is that this kind of agreement may be (even) less common concerning for example terms like ‘life’. In this case, the discussion is precisely about this, manifested in the fact that many still debate when life begins.<sup>205</sup>

So far I have considered certain problems and questions concerning to what extent natural kind externalism can account for how the meaning of certain religious and existentially important terms can be recognition-transcendent to the competent user of them. One factor that may jeopardize the application of natural kind externalism to the latter kind of terms is that they do not seem to pick out a natural kind in the same sense that ‘gold’ may be believed to do; nor do they seem to be used with this intention. However, with regard to some terms one may consider this to be difficult to resolve, and perhaps ‘life’ is an example of this. Due to this circumstance it may also in the current context be warranted to consider, to some extent, the viability of the general theory being

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<sup>202</sup> See for instance Jose Luis Bermudez, ‘Knowledge, Naturalism and Cognitive Ethology: Kornblith’s *Knowledge and its Place in Nature*’, *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 127, no. 2, 2006, p. 315 for agreement on this.

<sup>203</sup> Kornblith naturally disagrees; see Kornblith 2002, chapter 4, but I am not convinced by his reason for doing so.

<sup>204</sup> See for instance Searle 1983, p. 203; LaPorte 2010, p. 107.

<sup>205</sup> Assuming that the God of classic theism is real, is this entity alive?

applied, natural kind externalism that is. In what follows I will do so by addressing one possible problem with the position of natural kind externalism, a problem that is also connected to very subject-matter of this study, the balance of meaning. To introduce this problem, we can recall my previously made suggestion that a term is a natural kind term if (i) it is explicitly or implicitly used with that intention and (ii) actually picks out a natural kind. My critical comments so far have mainly been about the former part of this conjunction, but this does not mean that the latter part of it is unproblematic, even if the former proviso would have been satisfied.

For the sake of demonstrating this, we can assume that the former part of the conjunction is satisfied, that is, we can suppose that a term is being used with the intention to pick out the underlying nature assumed to be common for some paradigmatic examples of something. One may then wonder to what extent this intention is enough to single out one distinct nature. The reason behind this question is the fact that a set of objects may belong to and exemplify more than one type of object. Hence, in being able to pick out one distinct nature it seems insufficient to only intend to refer to the “underlying nature” of what certain objects have in common, because this notion may be too general to pick out just one common nature, that is, only one kind of object.

To handle this problem, it may be suggested, one would only have to be more precise in one’s account of what alleged shared nature one intends to refer to by the use of the term.<sup>206</sup> Although this may fix the problem to some degree, it may give rise to a different problem, because to the extent that a more detailed account is required to pick out the intended natural kind, the number of different people being able to pick it out may drastically decrease. To exemplify this latter predicament, we may consider Putnam’s suggestion that certain objects belong to the same kind if they have the ‘same important physical properties’.<sup>207</sup> Concerning this suggestion, one may wonder if people living some time ago and lacking our modern scientific outlook can be ascribed the intention to refer to “important physical properties” of some objects, and by this mean the same as

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<sup>206</sup> This consideration is also similar in spirit to the sortal requirement previously put forward in this chapter.

<sup>207</sup> Putnam 1996, p. 17.



people within our time do.<sup>208</sup> What might make this doubtful is that what are considered physically important properties may change and vary between different physicists or between physical theories at different periods in the history of physics.<sup>209</sup> One may try to escape this difficulty by using some less specific notion; sometimes Putnam seems to think that objects belong to the same kind if they are composed of the “same stuff”. Although this may take care of the present problem, it brings back the initial problem, because, if we recall, the less specific we make the account for the purpose of including more people, the less referential determinacy or precision can we expect from it.<sup>210</sup>

This whole dilemma arises because we want the notion of ‘underlying nature’ (or some functionally analogous term) to be both inclusive and exclusive: inclusive with regard to people using it and exclusive with regard to all possible kinds it may belong to except for one. And it may be hard to combine and realize these two requests through the introduction and use of one single notion.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, even if one would only consider the use of a term relative to a certain period in the history of a community, it may still be that the notion ‘underlying nature’ or ‘physically important property’ is not precise enough to only single out one distinct nature.

Before considering a possible response to the type of problem presently considered, we may notice that a similar problem can be raised with regard to the notion of a natural kind. Has this remained the same throughout history? This seems questionable in that only within the contemporary intellectual land-

<sup>208</sup> As for instance Joseph LaPorte writes: ‘But were the ancients’ names for substances really designators of our *chemical elements*, unbeknownst to them? It seems unlikely.’ See Joseph LaPorte, ‘Theoretical Identity Statements, Their Truth, and Their Discovery’ in (eds) Helen Beebe and Nigel Sabbarton-Leary, *The Semantics and Metaphysics of Natural Kinds*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 110.

<sup>209</sup> Putnam himself seems to have realized this in that he acknowledges that ‘important’ in the phrase ‘physically important properties’ is interest-relative. See Putnam 1996, p. 23.

<sup>210</sup> See also Katalin Farkas who writes: ‘If people had absolutely no idea about what the underlying structure was, it is doubtful that such intentions result in anything like determinate reference.’ See Farkas 2003, p. 166.

<sup>211</sup> I think the difficulty here is actually very similar to the one Putnam ascribes to the Fregean tradition. In the same manner as what we have in our mind is not enough to fix what we denote, the notion of an ‘underlying nature’ is also not enough.

scape, different thinkers disagree about what constitutes a natural kind.<sup>212</sup> But if not, how can people within different periods of our history by this term be deemed to refer to the same aspect or feature of certain things? To avoid this type of problems one may suggest that we need to objectify and externalize the meaning of expressions like 'physical properties' and 'natural kind' beyond the specific and different accounts of them possessed by different people throughout the history of the use of these expressions. And perhaps one wishes to do this by interpreting terms like 'physical properties' and 'natural kinds' as natural kind terms. That is, perhaps the term 'natural kind' itself is best conceived of as a natural kind term the meaning of which is best accounted for by whatever kind of property certain objects have in common. However, one difficulty with this solution to the problems currently addressed is that it only avoids them by postponing them, because the same type of problems can be raised with regard to the natural kind referred to by the term 'natural kind'. This may indicate that a notion of a natural kind and different key-terms figuring within the theory of natural kind externalism may thus best be regarded as social kinds. But to the extent this is the case, one cannot maintain that natural kinds are individuated completely apart from the interest and concern of the community of people in competent and ordinary use of them.

One may perhaps oppose this position by claiming that the basic taxonomy used to describe and identify foundational features of the world is itself usually

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<sup>212</sup> As Åsa Wikforss writes: 'Unfortunately, there are several competing theories (the microstructural theory, the causal homeostasis account, promiscuous realism, and so on) and depending on which theory one adopts one will draw the distinction between natural kind terms and other kind terms differently.' See Åsa Wikforss, 'Are Natural Kind terms Special?' in (eds) Helen Beebe and Nigel Sabbarton-Leary, *The Semantics and Metaphysics of Natural Kinds*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 68. For only some examples of such competing theories, see for instance Ian Hacking, 'A Tradition of Natural Kinds', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 61, no. 110, 1991, see also Ian Hacking, 'Natural Kinds: Rosy Dawn, Scholastic Twilight', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, vol. 82, no. 61, 2007, p. 203–239; John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things, Metaphysical Foundations of The Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), Joseph LaPorte, 'Theoretical Identity Statements, Their Truth, and Their Discovery' in (eds) Helen Beebe and Nigel Sabbarton-Leary, *The Semantics and Metaphysics of Natural Kinds*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 104–124.

the result of scientific research.<sup>213</sup> This line of reasoning seems to be in the spirit of natural kind externalism. However, to the extent it is correct, and appropriate taxonomic categories are needed to secure referential determinacy, this seems to bring back the dilemma previously considered because if what we need to know to be able to refer determinately to a particular kind is the end product of some future scientific research, then, before we have come that far in our research, we would seem to be too ignorant to describe and identify it. In the meantime we may of course rely on a less precise and adequate notion, like the ‘underlying nature’, but this may lead back to the problem previously discussed.

In sum, the whole idea of pointing determinately to something without knowing what it is, which seems to be at the core of natural kind externalism, is more complicated and difficult than often assumed by its defenders. This difficulty can and should also be connected to the balance of meaning. Recall, recognition-transcendent meaning of words presupposes a delicate balance in that the meaning must be external and objective enough in relation to their user for them to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, the meaning must be internal and subjective enough for them to be committed to it. It may be that people defending natural kind externalism and its strong emphasis on a mind-independent natural kind miscalculate what is needed to uphold the balance with respect to the latter part of this proviso.

My reasoning so far, if viable, does not disqualify the notion or category of a natural kind, but it offers an interesting and relevant qualification of it. It suggests that natural kinds are not self-identifying; what counts as a natural kind is relative to a certain theory about it and the universe, and not determined relative to some mind-independent fact. Moreover, if the category of a natural kind is not determined independently of us humans, the notion of a “divine kind”

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<sup>213</sup> This seems for instance to be what Laura Schroeter is getting at when she claims that: ‘There’s no reason to think I can have a priori insight into what kind of stuff gold is: scientific inquiry is no less relevant to discovering appropriate taxonomic categories than it is to determining the nature of particular objects and properties.’ See Laura Schroeter, ‘The Limits of Conceptual Analysis’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2004, p. 436. Schroeter claims this in opposition to the idea that we, through conceptual analysis, can reveal what *kind* of objects we intend to refer to by the use of a natural kind term, even if we through such an analysis would not be able to identify the underlying nature of what it refers to.

(what kind of entity God essentially is) does also not seem to be determined independently of us humans. That is, in proposing that we cannot know what kind of entity God is, we should acknowledge that the category of a “divine kind” is not determined independently of our use of it. That is, the notion does not pick out a certain kind of entity independently of how we define and construe this notion, which may vary between different religious believers and communities.

In closing, and with regard to my study as a whole we may also notice the possibility of a certain individualistic and idealistic type of response to both natural kind and social externalism, namely the suggestion that what determines the meaning of for instance ‘gold’, and possibly ‘life’, is still, in some sense, in the head of its user, because the underlying nature of a sample of gold or something alive, or the expert’s account of it can only be deemed to matter if this possibility is implicitly or explicitly being recognized and endorsed by the user. That is, individualist- and idealist-minded thinkers, with regard to the meaning of words, can say that Putnam has not shown that what determines the meaning is not in the head of speakers; he has just given us a different account of how this works.<sup>214</sup> This kind of response is similar to the one made by Frank Jackson to Kripke’s criticism of descriptivism; in fact Jackson and others have also expressed this kind of response in the context of Putnam’s position on natural kind terms.<sup>215</sup> In a similar spirit, Keith Donnellan argues that Putnam’s reasoning, even if accepted, does not show that meaning ‘ain’t in the head’. The rationale for this assessment of Putnam’s position is that the semantical rule, which states that what is important for a term’s extension is the underlying, and not manifest, properties of certain objects, is in the head of its user. Donnellan writes:

It seems that Putnam’s thought experiments depend on the commonality of meaning “in the heads” of Earthlings and Twin-Earthlings. The meaning of such

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<sup>214</sup> See also Zemach 1996, p. 68; Briscoe 2006, p. 96, 115; Searle 1983, p. 204, 207.

<sup>215</sup> See Jackson 1998a, p. 51–52.

common nouns is nothing like the classical view, of course; it is a rule that directs us to the nature of things, rather than giving us directly the properties to use when deciding whether a certain term does or does not apply. There is, however, no reason to think that new and novel as it might be, such a rule cannot be “in the head”. [...] If all of this is correct, Putnam thought experiments, it would appear, cannot be used for an anti-individualist point.<sup>216</sup>

To the extent Donnellan’s and others’ interpretation of Putnam’s position is reasonable, it will naturally have a bearing on the objective of my study because it seems to demonstrate that the meaning of certain terms may only be a posteriori recognition-transcendent to the competent and ordinary user of them if this possibility is either explicitly or implicitly recognized by the user.<sup>217</sup> I will also return more directly to this line of reasoning in the next chapter.

### 3.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored the possibility of a community-transcendent meaning of the religious and existentially important term ‘God’ as it is used within the Judaeo-Christian community and partly elsewhere. In doing so I investigated to what extent the meaning of ‘God’ can be tied to a mind-independent object, assumed to be the referent of ‘God’, so that to the degree that the competent user of ‘God’ is ignorant about the object referred to by this term, they should also be thought to be ignorant about the meaning of ‘God’. What I called sophisticated descriptivism, a position put forward under the in-

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<sup>216</sup> See Donnellan, 2003, p. 63. Similar to Jackson, Donnellan also thinks that this rule may be followed by people without them explicitly recognizing it. He writes: ‘In speaking of a semantical rule, I see no bar to viewing it as “in us” at least in the sense in which linguists think of the often complex rules of grammar as being in us (without the further view of Chomsky’s that they might be innately in us).’ See Donnellan 2003, p. 63.

<sup>217</sup> See also Farkas 2003, p. 165–166 for a similar idea.

fluence of John Searle's more developed position on this, seemed to make this possible to a certain extent, in that what religious people hold to be true of the intended referent, expressed through the descriptions associated with the term, does not need to be completely true of an object for it to be considered the proper referent of 'God'. On the face of it, Kripke's causal theory of reference seemed to make possible a more recognition-transcendent referent of 'God'. For this reason, I considered and explored William Alston's Kripke-influenced proposal on in virtue of what 'God' most commonly refers.

In objecting to Alston's position, I have argued that even if it would be possible for a religious person to use 'God' to refer to the object of one's own or someone else's religious experience, no matter if this object fits the descriptions and mental content associated with 'God', this may not be very common among religious people. I have also argued that Alston, in criticising descriptivism, may be more successful at showing that 'God' picks out its referent independently of certain descriptions associated with 'God' rather than independently of most of the descriptions or intentional content associated with 'God'; and that this may be true even in the thought experiments he construes. Along the same line, and by drawing upon Frank Jackson's neo-descriptivism, I have also argued that what as specified by the causal theory determines the referent for a name does not need to be principally inconsistent with what determines the referent according to a certain kind of descriptivism. The reason for this is that whatever type of fact that determines the referent of a term, this referent-fixing factor can be assumed to be either explicitly or implicitly associated with the term by its competent and ordinary user.

I have also put emphasis on the idea of a sortal in the current context; the idea that for an object to be considered the referent of 'God', it must fit the general category associated with the term. Hence, for an entity to be considered the real referent of 'God' it must be a certain kind of object and not just any kind of object; perhaps it must be spiritual rather than material. I argued that without a sortal, the causal theory, or any theory of reference, applied to 'God' runs the risk of becoming "unbalanced" in that it offers too little to make religious people committed to the referent of 'God'.

Towards the end of the chapter I explored the possibility of considering certain general terms of religious and existential importance as similar to natural kind terms. I argued that this option might be problematic. One problem is that general terms of religious and existential importance do not seem to pick out a

natural kind in the same sense that 'gold' may be believed to do; nor do they seem to be used with this intention. Concerning some terms this may however be more difficult to settle, and 'life' is perhaps an example of such a term.

## 4

## Intuition-driven conceptual analysis

## 4.1 Introduction

From the beginning of chapter 3 and onwards, I have been concerned with the possibility of a community-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms. That is, I have examined if the meaning of such terms can be recognition-transcendent to a whole community of people using them rather than to just some people within it. In the previous chapter I critically considered the attempt to make sense of this possibility by identifying the meaning of such a term with what it refers to, even when this is partly unknown to everyone using the term within the community. In doing so, I considered terms that seemed to pick out either a specific object, like ‘God’, or a certain kind of property, like ‘life’ or ‘knowledge’.

In this chapter I continue to examine the possibility of such a communal recognition-transcendent meaning of words by considering a different attempt to make sense of it. I will express this option through specification *S* which states that:

Religious and existentially important words can have a meaning beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them directly recognizes but which, in principle, can be accessible to them through appeal to intuition and intellect.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine in what way and to what extent one may make sense of *S* through an approach that I will identify as *intuition-driven conceptual analysis*.

Before I turn to this approach we should consider what reason we have for investigating the possibility of a community-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words beyond the investigation of it pursued in the



last chapter. More than one reason motivates this. To begin with, the intelligibility of tying the meaning of the word 'God' to a mind-independent and extraordinary object, assumed to be its referent, is dependent on a particular religious conviction that is not representative for every religion or every religious devotee. Hence, even if one were to find the approach to a recognition-transcendent meaning of words considered in that chapter important and viable with regard to a certain kind of religious orientation, it may nonetheless be thought to have a limited application in the overall context of religious beliefs and worship. Since I do not wish my study to be limited in this sense, I find it important to continue with my investigation of the possibility of a community-transcendent meaning.

The basic approach to community-transcendent meaning considered in chapter 3 also seems limited in another respect, namely that it does not seem to apply to all terms of existential importance. If we recall, towards the end of that chapter I considered the possibility of treating general terms of religious and existential importance – like 'life' or 'justice' – as natural kind terms with the purpose of identifying the meaning of them with the underlying nature assumed to be shared by every member of each term's extension. Although an interesting proposal, I argued that it was connected to some difficult questions and problems. One problem was simply that 'life' and 'knowledge' and similar terms of existential importance do not evidently fall into the category of natural kind terms. This suggested that these terms cannot have a recognition-transcendent meaning in the same sense that 'gold' may be thought to have.

The approach explored towards the end of chapter 3 may also not be able to make sense of how questions about the meaning of 'free will' and 'God' have traditionally been pursued. Throughout the history of Western intellectual thinking it has been rather common to address and investigate certain issues in a certain manner. Questions about the nature of mind, God, time, and free will have occupied the attention of more than one person, and more than one person has approached these questions by appealing to their intuition about how to apply the word or concept 'God', 'mind', 'time' or 'free will' in a hypothetical scenario or by drawing upon their intellectual capacities more generally. The main idea appears to have been, and still is, that certain features of the universe are only accessible through intellectual reflection and intuitive judgement, "from the armchair" as it is has come to be expressed more recently, rather than through scientific research on the fundamental physical or biological constitu-

tion of our universe. It is far from evident how this traditional method can help us gain access to the complete meaning of a term, currently recognition-transcendent to us, if the meaning is identified with a natural kind or something similar, which our mind does not seem to have any intuitive and a priori access to.<sup>218</sup>

Of course, it is precisely this traditional idea that some of the thinkers I considered towards the end of the previous chapter opposed, but due to the fact that we have found reason to question to what degree natural kind externalism extends to most terms of religious and existential importance, it seems warranted to consider and examine the viability of the traditional idea more thoroughly. Moreover, as also observed in that chapter, even if one would find it intelligible to apply natural kind externalism to some terms of religious and existential importance, this only seemed possible to the extent that this option is explicitly or implicitly recognized by the ordinary and competent user of these terms. In this chapter I develop my position on this possibility as I elaborate on to what degree and in what sense the meaning as well as the semantic status and category of religious and existentially important terms may be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them in a more a priori oriented fashion.

Taking into account the points and observations made so far, I consider myself to have sufficient reason for both continuing my investigation of a community-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words and especially for doing so by considering the approach to this possibility expressed by specification S: That religious and existentially important words can have a meaning independent of what the competent and ordinary user of them presently recognizes it to be, but which in principle can be accessible to the user through intuition and intellectual reflection rather than an a posteriori investigation. As previously remarked, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how it

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<sup>218</sup> To quote William Ramsey on this: ‘Since Plato, a recurring theme in philosophy has been that we possess “tacit” knowledge of some domain that may not be directly accessible to our consciousness, but nonetheless is manifested through intuitive judgment and can be accessed by probing these intuitions.’ See Ramsey 1998, p. 165. For the same thought, see also Alvin Goldman, ‘Philosophical Intuitions: Their target, Their source, and Their Epistemic Status’, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2007, p. 1.

may be possible to make sense of *S* by drawing upon intuition-driven conceptual analysis.

I proceed as follows. In the next section I describe some main features of intuition-driven conceptual analysis, relative to a common construal of this approach. In the section following that, I discuss in what way and to what extent intuition-driven conceptual analysis may apply to religious and existentially important terms. In section 4.4, I present some contemporary criticism of this approach. In section 4.5, I consider the viability of certain responses to this criticism and in connection to this I also reason about what sense one can make out of intuition-driven conceptual analysis in general. I will argue that one should take some of the current criticism seriously, but that this does not necessarily mean the end for this kind of analysis, or at any rate not a certain account of it, which is highlighted and argued for towards the end of the chapter.

## 4.2 Intuition-driven conceptual analysis

Through the publication of Edmund Gettier's 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' the term and concept of a "Gettier case" gained widespread prevalence. Basically, a "Gettier case" is an actual or possible scenario in which we seem to have accounted for all that is required for us to have knowledge, according to the traditional definition of 'knowledge' as justified true belief, but in which we intuitively still find it wrong to think that we know something; which suggests that the definition fails to do justice to what we mean by knowledge. Let us consider one of Gettier's own examples of such a case. Assume that Smith believes it to be true that the person who will get a certain job has ten coins in his pocket. The reason for Smith believing so is that the boss of the company has told him that another person, Jones, is the one who will get the position (that they have both applied for) and, as a matter of fact, Smith has discovered that Jones has ten coins in his pocket. Therefore, Smith believes that the person getting the job has ten coins in his pocket. As it turns out, Smith's belief is true in so far as the person who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket. However, it is Smith who in the end gets the job, not Jones, and Smith himself also has ten coins in his pocket although he is currently ignorant of this fact. Bringing all this together, one may say that Smith had good grounds for believing that a person with ten coins in his pocket will get the job and this belief, as it happens, turns

out to be true. However, we are supposed to share Gettier's intuition that Smith does not know that a person with ten coins in his pocket will get the job. This example is thus thought to demonstrate that the traditional definition of knowledge does not do justice to what we mean by knowing something.<sup>219</sup> That is, to know something it is not enough to be justified in believing something that is true.

Equipped with this basic idea of what a "Gettier case" is, we are in a better position to use the following quotation from Frank Jackson as an introduction to his and many others' account of conceptual analysis:

Many philosophers classified cases of true justified belief as cases of knowledge, convinced that they were so classifying them precisely because they were cases of true justified belief. Reflection on the Gettier cases showed them that they were wrong, for the cases did not typically evoke the response, 'Now you have told me about these interesting cases, I will reform my usage of the term "knowledge".' The typical response was that it had never been true justified belief that was the crucial factor, but it took the cases to make this obvious, to make explicit what had been implicit in our classificatory practice all along.<sup>220</sup>

Jackson thinks that when we are presented with a "Gettier case" and through this come to question our old and traditional definition of knowledge, we do not conclude that we have been misapplying the term 'knowledge' and that we need to modify our use of it, to bring it into harmony with our definition. According to Jackson, we rather hold ourselves committed and accountable to how we use the term rather than to how we define it. That is, once it is accepted that our definition of the term does not cohere with our use of it we believe our ex-

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<sup>219</sup> See Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis*, vol. 23, no. 6, 1963, p. 121–123. The example is his.

<sup>220</sup> Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998a), p. 36. For more on this, see also Jackson 1998a, p. 38.

planation and not our use of the term to be what is wrong out of the two. Hence, the latter rather than the former is thought to constitute the “proper” meaning of the term.<sup>221</sup> As I thus interpret Jackson, what we mean by a term can be identified with what is implicit in our use of it rather than what is being explicitly expressed through our common definition of the term. If we accept this reading of his position, we seem to have discovered one more proposal on how the meaning of a term can be recognition-transcendent to its own user: To the degree that the user of the term holds themselves committed to how they use the term even when they are mistaken or ignorant about it, the meaning of the term can be considered recognition-transcendent to them.<sup>222</sup> Although I have relied on Jackson to exemplify this line of thinking, the general thought is not unique for his position.

This kind of commitment to the use of a term is also commonly thought to extend to possible uses of it beyond its more ordinary context of usage. And this is deemed important because it is believed that it is especially by considering such possible uses of a term that we are able to make explicit what is implicit and presupposed in the context of the more ordinary use of the term; that is, by considering how the term is to be used in a certain fictive and specially tailored scenario, we may discover features concerning our use of the term that may go unnoticed in the ordinary case.<sup>223</sup> This use of thought-experiments may perhaps be compared to when a chemist is trying to reveal the so far unknown nature of some substance by observing and documenting its reaction to different fluids. In

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<sup>221</sup> See Jackson 1998a, p. 36, 38.

<sup>222</sup> Or as Christopher Peacocke, who defends the thesis that people can use a word according to a certain principle without explicitly recognizing the content of it, writes: ‘The attribution of a content to an implicit conception is fundamentally answerable to its role in explaining the thinker’s ordinary applications of the concept in question. Examples are primary in the attribution of content to the implicit conception. Thinkers can be good at classifying cases, and bad at articulating the principles guiding their classifications. Ordinary thinkers, who understand the predicate “chair” perfectly well, often give an incorrect definition when pressed for one.’ See Christopher Peacocke, ‘Implicit Conceptions, Understanding and Rationality,’ *Philosophical Issues* 9, 1998, p. 51–52. Although Peacocke and Jackson do not share precisely the same position, this idea seems to be common for them both.

<sup>223</sup> See Kirk Ludwig, ‘The Epistemology of Thought Experiments: First Person versus Third Person Approaches,’ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, p. 134.

a similar way, one may say that relative to the position currently considered, we are trying to get to know more and more about what we actually mean by a term by observing and documenting our mind's reaction to different possible uses of a term within various hypothetical settings.<sup>224</sup> And just like the chemist tries to set up the experiment so that it tests precisely what they want, the conceptual analyst commonly construes the thought-experiments with the intention to bring out certain features of, or to test certain hypotheses about, our use of terms.<sup>225</sup> We may recall, for instance, Putnam's twin-Earth thought-experiment considered in chapter 3. The scenario Putnam depicts may seem rather odd and out of the ordinary but if one accepts his conclusion from it, it can nonetheless be thought to highlight certain features implicit in our ordinary use of terms like 'gold'.<sup>226</sup> Hence, by considering extraordinary uses of a term, we may come to know more about its ordinary meaning and its semantic status.

The frequent use of thought-experiments in the context of conceptual analysis is also what explains many conceptual analysts' appeal to intuition. Possible uses of a term that seem intuitively correct to its user are thought to constitute authentic uses of it and thus taken to manifest its meaning, sometimes a meaning not recognized before. As Jackson puts it: 'The role of the intuitions about possible cases so distinctive of conceptual analysis is precisely to make explicit our implicit folk theory...'<sup>227</sup> Or as Alvin Goldman writes: 'Especially

<sup>224</sup> As Kirk Ludwig writes: 'The role of thought experiments in philosophy is to draw out the implicit knowledge we have of the application conditions of our concepts as it is embodied in our dispositions to deploy words expressing them.' See Kirk Ludwig 2007, p. 133.

<sup>225</sup> As Alvin Goldman writes: 'In a stipulated example, the crucial characteristics of the example are highlighted for the subject, to focus attention on what is relevant to the general account currently being tested.' See Goldman 2007, p. 15. See also Jackson 1998a, p. 31 for more on this.

<sup>226</sup> This is in fact also how Jackson appears to see it. See Jackson 1998a, p. 28–29, 38–39 and also note 12.

<sup>227</sup> Jackson 1998a, p. 38. On how to capture the ordinary conception of free will and determinism, he writes for instance: 'The only possible answer, I think, is by appeal to what seems to us most obvious and central about free action, determinism, belief or whatever, as revealed by our intuitions about possible cases. Intuitions about how various cases, including various merely possible cases, are correctly described in terms of free action, determinism, and belief are precisely what reveal our ordinary conceptions of free action, determinism, and belief, or, as it is often put nowadays, our folk theory of them. For what guides me in describing an action as free is revealed by my intuitions about whether various possible cases are or are not

when philosophers are engaged in philosophical “analysis”, they often get preoccupied with intuitions. To decide what is knowledge, reference, identity, causation (or what is the concept of knowledge, reference, identity, or causation), philosophers routinely consider actual and hypothetical examples and ask whether these examples provide instances of the target category or concept. People’s mental responses to these examples are often called “intuitions”, and these intuitions are treated as evidence for the correct answer.<sup>228</sup> Although intuitive judgements about possible uses of a term are thought to be able to reveal some so far unrecognized features of the word’s meaning, this does not mean that it is easy to access these features. Sometimes one has to think about the thought-experiments more than once and one’s initial intuitive judgement may be corrected and overridden by a second one. Still, the appeal to one’s intuition is in general thought to be useful and reliable.<sup>229</sup>

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cases of free action. Thus my intuitions about possible cases reveal my theory of free action...’ See Jackson 1998a, p. 31–32.

<sup>228</sup> See Goldman 2007, p. 1. Or as Harold Brown expresses the same idea: ‘According to a widely held view, when philosophers analyze a concept they are seeking an explicit account of the concept’s content – a content that they already know in some implicit manner. This implicit knowledge provides the intuitions that guide us in formulating proposed analyses, and allows us to recognize counterinstances to these proposals. Our inability simply to state the correct analysis is explained by this distinction between the implicit knowledge we already have and the explicit knowledge we seek.’ Harold Brown, ‘Why do Conceptual Analysts Disagree?’, *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 30, no. 1–2, 1999, p. 33. Or as Kirk Ludwig puts it: ‘How can one be expected to give a definition of a word unless one understands it, and if one understands it, must it not be that one already knows its definition? The form of the solution is to distinguish two different kinds of knowledge, explicit knowledge of the analysis and a kind of implicit knowledge. The implicit knowledge we have of the application conditions of concepts, however, is not propositional knowledge. It is rather expressed in a skill we have in deploying the concept appropriately.’ See Kirk Ludwig, 2007, p. 131.

<sup>229</sup> As Jackson writes: ‘...there is something essentially right about the idea that way to find out the cases someone uses a word “W” for, their concept of W, lies seeing how they classify putative examples. How else might we approach the question of which cases someone uses the term ‘dictator’ for, their concept of *dictator*, other than by seeing which cases they use the word for? It is their concept we are investigating after all.’ See Frank Jackson ‘Conceptual Analysis for Representationalists’, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2010, p. 173.

Although a person's intuition plays a large and important role in this context, the exact nature of intuition or the meaning of the notion 'intuition' is seldom made explicit (except for some recent attempts to specify the notion due to criticism of the appeal to one's intuition in the context of conceptual analysis).<sup>230</sup> The reason for this lack of specification is, I suspect, that many seem to be rather confident about what the term refers to. For this reason, the term 'intuition' may also not be that important; hence even if Plato or John Locke did not express themselves in terms of 'intuition' many hold them to be appealing to the same type of entity as what more modern thinkers appeal to when they support a certain analysis by appeal to intuition.<sup>231</sup> What makes this possible is that most thinkers seem to rely on a functional account of intuition in that they appear to identify intuitive judgements as those mental states of acceptance or recognition that arise spontaneously as one considers certain thought experiments (like Putnam's twin-Earth, Searle's Chinese Room, Burge's arthritis case and Gettier's case previously considered) and which moreover are believed to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses about what we mean by a certain notion.<sup>232</sup>

If a person feels intuitively attracted to a certain analysis of the meaning of a term, this may also, I take it, demonstrate their commitment to what the analysis makes explicit. So a person's intuition may not only help them to access an until now unrecognized part of its meaning, it may also function as a sign of that person being committed to this aspect of its meaning. This seems important with regard to how the present version of conceptual analysis can be supportive of the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words. If we recall, for the meaning of words to be recognition-transcendent to the competent and ordinary user of them it must be external and objective enough in relation to the user for them to possibly be ignorant of it but internal and subjective enough for them to be committed to it. To remember how this proviso works we may consider how it has been accounted for within some of the previously considered attempts to make sense of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words. Recol-

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<sup>230</sup> I will return to this matter when considering some responses to this criticism.

<sup>231</sup> See Goldman 2007, p. 2.

<sup>232</sup> See for instance Ludwig 2007, p. 135-136.



lect for instance the idea that the underlying nature of what I refer to by a natural kind term or that the opinion of some expert user within my community is constitutive of what I mean by the term. Either idea presupposes that I hold myself committed to the underlying nature of what is being referred to or the expert's opinion; only then can the underlying nature or the expert's verdict be taken to override what I presently recognize the proper meaning to be. In the current case, our intuition about possible and actual uses of the term is thought to have such an overriding status and function. Although a person has not explicitly considered the idea that their words are being used with a certain meaning, their intuitive attraction and commitment to this meaning, once it is revealed to them, is believed to show that it has been part of their use of the words all along. We may also give emphasis to the fact that on this account, the meaning can also be recognition-transcendent to a whole community of people because it does not presuppose that anyone else is an expert on the meaning.<sup>233</sup>

I have described intuition-driven conceptual analysis as directed towards making explicit what is implicit in our use of words. With regard to this, we should notice that different thinkers in favour of the general idea of conceptual analysis prefer different accounts about what conceptual analysis amounts to and presupposes more precisely. Traditionally, the object of conceptual analysis has been believed to be both a non-mental and non-linguistic entity, like for instance an abstract object or a platonic form. Some modern and contemporary conceptual analysts depart from this account. For instance, Paul Grice, a distinguished member of what is usually labelled the 'school of ordinary language

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<sup>233</sup> This does not however mean that one can be held to implicitly use a word with a certain meaning if one has no idea about how to apply it. In exemplifying this restriction, Jackson for instance says that: 'Someone who says that Sweden is a liberal society but has nothing to say about why, or who thinks that the key fact is that Sweden is cold in the Winter, hasn't mastered the pattern we pick out with the term 'liberal society'. They don't know what the word is used for.' See Jackson, 2010, p. 180. In analysing the meaning of a term some thinkers also find it legitimate to do *some* violence to it or to depart to *some* extent from what its ordinary user finds to be intuitively correct to say and what seems to be implicit in their use of it for the sake of being able to present a more coherent analysis than otherwise possible. However, many thinkers are also cautious about this due to the risk of being accused of presenting a new meaning of the word rather than an analysis of the term as it is actually used. See for instance Antti Kauppinen, 'The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy', *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, p. 96.

philosophy' and who refers to his own philosophical activity as conceptual analysis mainly wishes to do justice to our use of words.<sup>234</sup> Frank Jackson and Christian Nimtz, who are contemporary defenders of conceptual analysis, also deem themselves to be focusing on the meaning of words.<sup>235</sup> Some also think of the object of conceptual analysis as a non-linguistic and mental representation or cognitive capacity.<sup>236</sup> Relative to this latter account, an individual may be believed to have the concept of justice if they are able to differ between, for instance, just and unjust acts separate from any linguistic competence.

Since I am exploring in what sense religious and existentially important words can have a meaning which goes beyond what the competent user of them presently recognizes it to be (but which can be manifested to them through intuition) it may appear natural to confine my investigation to accounts of conceptual analysis that regard the proper target of it to be the meaning of words. In some sense, this is the approach I will adopt. One should however bear in mind that the differences between the accounts considered are not as distinct as they may seem. For instance, one who regards the target of conceptual analysis to be an abstract object may still concede that we only have access to it in virtue of having a mental representation of it. If so, a person's mental representations are

<sup>234</sup> See Paul Grice, 'Postwar Oxford Philosophy' (1956), in Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 173f. A more contemporary defender of this tradition along a Wittgensteinian line is Oswald Hanfling, see especially Oswald Hanfling, *Philosophy and Ordinary Language, The Bent and Genius of Our Tongue*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>235</sup> See Jackson 1998a, p. 33. See also Jackson 2010, p. 178 for more on the same matter. See Christian Nimtz, 'Conceptual Truth Defended' in (eds) Nikola Kompa, Christian Nimtz, Christian Suhm, *The A Priori and Its Role in Philosophy*, (Paderborn: Mentis 2009), 137-151. For some who are critical of this version of conceptual analysis, see Justine Kingsbury and Jonathan McKeown-Green, 'Jackson's Armchair: The Only Game in Town?' in (eds) David Braddon-Mitchell and Robert Nola, *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, (London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 176f.

<sup>236</sup> See Goldman, 2007, p. 15. In a different text written together with Joel Pust, he says that: 'Mentalism interprets philosophical analysis as trying to shed light on the *concepts* behind philosophically interesting predicates, where the term 'concept' refers to a psychological structure or state that underpins the cognizer's deployment of a natural-language predicate. Thus, Jones's concept of apple is the psychological structure that underlies her deployment of the predicate 'apple', and Jones's concept of knowledge is the psychological structure that underlies her deployment of the predicate 'knows' (or 'has knowledge').' See Goldman and Pust 1998, p. 187-188.

likely to be considered important, even on this conception of what the primary target is.<sup>237</sup> And thinkers who hold the target of conceptual analysis to be a mental representation may still accept that the content of this representation is usually manifested through that person's linguistic competence and behaviour. Hence, the word, or rather a person's use of it, can be deemed relevant to consider and target even relative to this account of conceptual analysis. In fact, if one thinks that a person's intuition can manifest some unrecognized features of the meaning of their words, one has to, it seems, assume some connection between a person's mental states, their linguistic competence and the meaning of their words.<sup>238</sup>

### 4.3 Intuition-driven conceptual analysis and religious and existentially important terms

The purpose of intuition-driven conceptual analysis is to make explicit what is implicit in our use of words. To do so, the conceptual analyst commonly construes detailed thought-experiments and appeals to our intuition about which uses of the terms that seem to make sense within them. Let us examine and exemplify to what extent this idea of conceptual analysis may be used to account for how the meaning of religious and existentially important words can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them.

Consider the religious term 'holy'. Many religious people frequently use this term; they may for instance think that God, a certain person or a particular ritual is holy. One may wonder though if people in serious and frequent use of this notion possess an exact account of its meaning. If, for example, they are asked about this, they will perhaps find it difficult to offer a detailed or precise

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<sup>237</sup> Recall, something along this line was for instance presupposed by Putnam when he argued that his conclusion, that meaning is not in the head, also affects a Fregean approach to mind and meaning.

<sup>238</sup> Many also seem to identify the source for intuitive judgments as people's linguistic or conceptual competence. See for instance Kirk Ludwig 2007, p. 131–133.

account of its meaning. This may be taken to indicate that they do not know what they mean by this term or perhaps that the term has no determinate meaning because if it did, would they not, who ordinarily use it, be able to account for it? Recall for instance the thesis of soft contextualism (and the idealistic and individualistic conception of linguistic meaning and competence motivating it) which states that to the extent a word has a certain meaning, this meaning is, in general, transparent to the competent and ordinary user of it. Hence, if the term 'holy' has a meaning within a certain religious community, one might expect the typical member of this community, namely, the ordinary and competent user of the word, to be able to account for it. And if they cannot, would this not strongly indicate, or even establish, that the term has no determinate meaning within this community and for the people using it? (And to the extent this is the case, the same reasoning would apply to other terms of religious and existential importance.)

Perhaps, but perhaps not. Could it rather be the case that some of these religious believers implicitly, rather than explicitly, know more about what they mean by this notion? Some evidence for this being the case can be revealed in how able they are, assuming that they are, at recognizing and categorizing objects as holy and unholy. If so, we may just need to approach the matter of finding out the proper meaning of this notion a bit differently than asking the people using it directly like: 'What do you mean by the term 'holy'?' Expressing our curiosity like that may be straightforward but perhaps not very constructive. Rather than approaching them with such an upfront question, we may present to them certain fictive scenarios and ask them to what, if to anything, the term 'holy' applies within these scenarios. How they respond may reveal to us, as well as to them, what appears to be the principle responsible for how they differ between holy and unholy entities. The more thought-experiments we present to them, the more we may be able to fine-tune our analysis of what 'holy' may mean to the people using it.<sup>239</sup> Something similar may be the case when some-

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<sup>239</sup> This does not mean that we cannot and should not engage in a critical discussion about how they respond. Perhaps, we think that they seem to handle various examples of one type of case differently and we want to

one is asking people for a definition of 'art'. They, like most people, would perhaps find it rather difficult to present an adequate and direct response to this question. However, if our enquirer puts forward ten different objects and then asks the people to pick out the ones they consider to be works of art, they would probably have something to say about this matter. This may thus illustrate how an intuition-driven conceptual analysis may help us to dig deeper into what people mean by the use of certain religious and existentially important words.

In this respect, the version of conceptual analysis under consideration may also be suggestive of an important elaboration of the thesis of soft contextualism. We have previously considered one such possible elaboration from the social externalist, namely the suggestion that soft contextualism makes more sense if applied to a community as a whole rather than to every member of it. What I am about to suggest however may in theory apply to each and every member of a community.<sup>240</sup> Concerning certain religious and existentially important terms, one should perhaps not assume that the ordinary user of these terms, in general, has an explicit account of the exact or complete meaning of them. That is, their initial attempt to say what certain religious terms mean may not do full justice to the meaning "packed into" these terms as they use them, that is, as the terms feature in their idiolect. To the extent we accept this, it may seem to be inconsistent with soft contextualism as it has been construed so far.<sup>241</sup> However, one can also try to make the present appeal to intuition-driven conceptual analysis compatible with the thesis of soft contextualism by adopting a certain account of

ask them about it more in detail; nothing about the idea under investigation seems to rule this out. See for instance Jackson 2010, p. 173 for more on this.

<sup>240</sup> If we recall, social externalism, on my construal of it, states that one member of a religious community can use a word with its conventional meaning while being partly ignorant of it as long as someone else within the same community is less ignorant of the meaning of the word.

<sup>241</sup> If we remember, soft contextualism states that people employing a word frequently and with serious intent cannot, as a general rule, fail to know the meaning of it. That is, as far as 'God', 'immortality', 'holy' or 'soul' has a certain meaning within a specific religious community, the thesis states that this meaning is transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them, that is, to the "typical" member of this religious community.

in what sense the religious and ordinary user of words is supposed to know the meaning of them. Even if people within a religious community can be thought to use words with a meaning beyond what they can account for directly, they can still be taken to know this meaning implicitly, and this may be enough to not violate the thesis of soft contextualism. Once the ordinary and competent user of these words is presented to certain thought-experiments and offered the opportunity to reflect intuitively on them, in the manner described in the previous paragraph with the terms 'holy' and 'art', they may also have a fair chance of making explicit what is implicit in their use of terms. To the degree that we find this possibility plausible, we may have reason for specifying or qualifying the thesis of soft contextualism in the following manner: As a general rule, the meaning of religious and existentially important terms is either directly or indirectly transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them; in the latter case it may be that the user implicitly possesses an account of the word's meaning, an account that is possible to make explicit through the process of intuitively contemplating actual and possible uses of the term.

We should also consider more precisely to what extent intuition-driven conceptual analysis may apply to the kind of terms I am concerned with. To begin, and as previously observed, to the extent our terms of religious and existential importance are conceived of as natural kind terms, and given the account of them offered by natural kind externalism, it would not apply to them. (However, and as I will return to towards the end of this section, some part of the meaning of even these terms, namely what can be considered the semantic status and category of them, may still be the proper object of intuition-driven conceptual analysis.) To continue, one may also propose that, as a general rule, intuition-driven conceptual analysis may be more applicable to terms that are rather basic and common for the ordinary and competent user of them. By this I mean terms that a person is commonly taught by being introduced to paradigmatic examples of to what the terms apply. This excludes for instance terms whose meaning is introduced and taught to others through an explicit definition.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Jackson also seems to think like this when claiming that: 'The hard cases are those where a term is not introduced via an explicit definition. We pick up terms like 'knowledge', 'free society', 'pain' and so on by

One reason for thinking that intuition-driven conceptual analysis may be less applicable to the latter kind of terms is that if our use of them would depart from our explicit definition of them, we may feel more committed to the definition than our actual use of the term, due to the fact that our initial cognitive contact with the meaning of these terms was through the definition.<sup>243</sup>

Intuition-driven conceptual analysis may also, to a certain degree, be less applicable to technical terms or terms of art. The reason for this is that if a person's intuition is going to be able to reveal some unrecognized feature of the meaning of his terms, this person must reasonably be a somewhat competent user of the terms in question. And for many technical terms this kind of competence is limited to only a few people. Concerning terms like 'gravity' or 'gene' many people may be sufficiently competent to defer to someone else and mean what they mean by it, but they may still not be competent enough to be able to produce relevant intuitive judgements concerning which possible uses of them make sense beyond the ordinary context of usage.

Hence, if one thinks that most terms of religious and existential importance are introduced and taught through a definition, these terms may not be suitable for intuition-driven conceptual analysis. I would however think that many terms of religious and existential importance, like 'God', 'love' or 'life', are not like this. One general fact that may offer some support for this thought is that not all terms can be introduced or taught in this way, because that would lead to an infinite regress.

One may of course consider the suggestion that all or most religious and existentially important terms are introduced in this sense, even if not all other

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being exposed to examples, or putative examples, and somehow latching onto the relevant commonality. We recognise the relevant patterns and thereby acquire mastery of the terms.' See Jackson 2010, p. 179. See also Jussi Haukioja 'A Middle Position Between Meaning Finitism and Meaning Platonism', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 36–37 for the idea that semantically basic terms are commonly taught through ostension rather than through definition.

<sup>243</sup> Of course, the very basis for this kind of limitation is not absolute; sometimes we may feel more committed to the use of a term than the definition of it, even if we originally were taught the meaning of the term through a definition.

terms are. Although, this is a real possibility, this seems rather unlikely. A similar response can be made to the idea that all terms of religious and existential importance are technical or for some other reason rather unusual ones. This idea may be objected to on the grounds that the introduction of many of our technical terms is preceded and only makes sense relative to some ordinary and non-technical terms. Moreover, to suggest that the category of religious and existentially important words in particular would all be technical terms does not appear plausible.

Let me also consider and respond to another reason for why intuition-driven conceptual analysis may be thought to not apply to most terms of religious and existential importance. To introduce this reason, remember that although I have proposed that the version of conceptual analysis under consideration may be more applicable to terms of a basic and common type, this does not mean that such terms are basic in virtue of having a meaning that is transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them; if we recall, the meaning should still be possible to be ignorant of.<sup>244</sup> About this one may wonder how one can tell if a certain term has, or seems to have, a meaning beyond what is currently recognized? As a possible and according to me plausible response to this question, one may suggest that a characteristic phenomenological feature of such terms is that they commonly give rise to confusion or wonder. To the extent one accepts this, it seems natural to consider terms of religious and existential importance as suitable terms for conceptual analysis, because they commonly give rise to much wonder and discussion.<sup>245</sup>

One may of however disagree with the last part of my suggestion and claim that religious and existentially important terms lack the phenomenological feature in question. That is, even though one may happen to agree with me that confusion or perplexity about the exact meaning of a term may indicate that it possesses more meaning than presently recognized by its ordinary and compe-

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<sup>244</sup> Compare to Grice 1989 (1956), p. 176.

<sup>245</sup> To offer some historical support for this latter proposal, we may recollect that what people have wondered about throughout our history are precisely such words like 'time', 'mind', 'love', 'courage', 'freedom' and 'God', just to mention a few.



tent user, one may think that religious terms do not constitute such terms. Hence, although people can be confused about what they mean by words like 'time' or 'mind', such confusion is not that common with regard to religious words. Alan Bailey for instance seems to think that 'God, as it is used within religious contexts, does not give rise to uncertainty or confusion. He writes:

We normally have no difficulty, for example, in telling other people what time it is or how much time a particular activity is likely to take. However when we stand back from such mundane activities and ask ourselves 'What is time?', we are suddenly plunged into confusion. In the case of religious discourse, though, this phenomenon is almost unknown. If someone who is at ease using the word 'God' in prayer and catechisms asks 'What is God?', that person rarely has any difficulty in arriving at an answer with which he or she is fairly comfortable.<sup>246</sup>

If Bailey thinks that the perplexity we may feel when someone asks us 'What is time?' is not that common with regard to religious notions, I disagree with him. Just like many people will have difficulty saying not what the time is but what time is, I think that religious people can initially find it easy to say what God is, but then also feel uncertain and confused about what they mean by 'God' if asked more questions about this or if they themselves begin to think more deeply about this matter. I do not mean that religious people seem uncertain about the meaning of all religious terms. I am rather saying that the distinction between confusing and non-confusing terms does not coincide with a distinction between religious and non-religious terms. Moreover, it also appears difficult, if not impossible, to separate religious and non-religious contexts and terms in this respect. For instance, if our concept of time is a confusing one (as Bailey appears to admit), so is the concept of God (as a being outside time).

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<sup>246</sup> Alan Bailey, 'Wittgenstein and the Interpretation of Religious Discourse' in (eds) Robert L. Arrington et al., *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 135.

On the subject on how intuition-driven conceptual-analysis may be applied within the context of religion and our theorizing about it, one may also notice that the approach may have an interesting connection to the thesis that our cognitive access to reality is mediated and not direct; that we cannot know or describe how reality is in itself but only how it is conceptualized relative to a conceptual scheme.<sup>247</sup> Even if this idea is frequently expressed in terms of ‘concepts’ and ‘conceptual schemes’, people advocating it, frequently seem to think that we conceptualize the universe or our experience of it through the meaning of the words we use to describe either of them. It seems that people positive to the idea of conceptual analysis and people in favour of the idea of conceptual schemes have something in common, namely the conviction that to the extent we wish to make sense of certain features of the universe we have to consider the role played by our concepts, commonly taken to be constitutive of the meaning of certain words. Furthermore, the concepts, according to some thinkers, that play an important role in how we conceptualize the universe may be the same basic type of concepts that I have assumed to be the proper target of conceptual analysis. It is for instance common for the conceptual analyst to target the use of

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<sup>247</sup> As Philip Clayton declares: ‘It is almost a truism in contemporary philosophy that we have no direct access to reality. Everything that we say, think or perceive is filtered through some conceptual scheme.’ See Philip Clayton, ‘Two Kinds of Conceptual-Scheme Ealism’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 29, no. 2, 1991, p. 167. Philosophically speaking, Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology have, of course, been important for the development and encouragement of this kind of thinking. Simply put, Kant differentiated between reality in itself and how we humans conceive or perceive of it. Our experiences of reality are made possible and shaped by the conceptual and cognitive constitution common to us all. For Kant, what we take to be how reality is in itself is deeply and inevitably the product of our mind working on reality in itself. The latter is inaccessible to us. Influenced and affected by the twentieth century’s fixation with language, many wish to update Kant’s theory without giving up on its core thesis. That is, they want to keep his distinction between how reality is in itself and how it is for us humans. However, what forms our conceptions of reality is not, they say, the stable constitution of our mind but rather conventional and contingent discourses that may, and are likely to, vary from context to context. John Hick and his talk about “the Real” within philosophy of religion is a rather good example of this neo-Kantian line of thinking. According to him, the transcendent “Real” is what all or most religions attempt to denote and describe. The real is however like Kant’s noumena forever beyond our concepts or categories and ineffable. All the things religions say about this divine reality is relative and shaped by the different linguistic practices they belong to and not how “the Real” really is, so to say. See John Hick, ‘Ineffability’, *Religious Studies*, 2000, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 41.

words which are thought to express our classificatory practices, that is, words that manifest how we categorize and individuate various objects.<sup>248</sup>

Moreover, the intuition-driven version of conceptual analysis under consideration would also, it seems, indicate that it may not be easy to make a neat and straightforward distinction between a ‘descriptive’ and ‘prescriptive’ analysis of a religious term or a whole religious discourse. Accounts not directly in line with the commonly accepted interpretation of a religious tradition are often considered prescriptive or revisionary ones. Drawing upon the current proposal, one may however suggest that what may appear to be a revisionary account of a religious term may actually not be one, only a more correct account of it than the one currently or traditionally accepted. Intuition-driven conceptual analysis may then also be used to explain how a religious community can keep its identity through periods of disagreement or uncertainty among its members about the precise meaning of some key terms used within that community. Drawing upon this approach it might be argued that religious believers within the community have implicitly used these terms with the same meaning without realizing and coming to an agreement on what it is. Hence, rather than proposing that certain people belong to the same religion by saying that they all refer to the same mind-independent and transcendent object or dimension, one may say that they belong to the same religion in virtue of implicitly using certain key-terms according to the same rule.

In closing this section we should also connect intuition-driven conceptual analysis to some of the theses and points put forward in chapter 3. We may for instance return to the position of neo-descriptivism. If we recall, according to Jackson and his version of neo-descriptivism, it may be accepted that Kripke and his followers have successfully shown us that a certain type of description associated with a name may not be what determines the referent of it. This however fails to show that no description or nothing that the ordinary and competent user “has in mind” determines the referent. Why is this so? Because what, according to Kripke’s causal theory, actually determines what a certain name refers

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<sup>248</sup> See for instance Goldman 2007, p. 4 for this view.

to can be assumed to be implicitly known by the competent user of the name. The evidence for this being the case, as stated by the neo-descriptivist, is that if this person is presented with a hypothetical scenario, such as for example Kripke's Gödel case, they seem to have a firm intuition about what the name 'Gödel' refers to.<sup>249</sup> According to the neo-descriptivist and the intuition-driven conceptual analyst, Kripke's thought-experiments and own responses to them should be seen as examples of conceptual analysis. That is, to the extent one accepts Kripke's position, he can be taken to have made explicit something about our use of words only implicitly recognised before.

Along the same line of reasoning, intuition-driven conceptual analysis may be used to back up the previously made individualistic and idealistic response to natural kind externalism put forward in chapter 3. The essence of this response was that some part of the meaning of, for instance, 'gold' is still in the head of its user because the underlying nature of a gold sample can only have a bearing on the meaning of 'gold' if its user, either explicitly or implicitly, accepts this. That is, individualist- and idealist-minded thinkers about the meaning of words can say that Putnam has not demonstrated that what determines the meaning of natural kind terms is not in the head of speakers, he has just given us a different account of how this works. To connect this more directly to the present context, one may suggest that what Putnam has done in presenting and arguing for natural kind externalism, can be described as an example of conceptual analysis; that is, he can be held to have made explicit what is implicit in our use of, for instance, 'gold' and thus what determines the meaning of this term. Due to this it is in an important sense not possible for anyone to coherently object to intuition-driven conceptual analysis by relying on some kind of natural kind externalism because the latter can only be supported through the former.<sup>250</sup> The gist of this kind of reasoning, which is similar in spirit to how the neo-descriptivist responds to Kripke's causal theory, is not to discredit natural kind externalism but to discredit the impression that this position would be incompatible with

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<sup>249</sup> And if the person does not have this intuition and no one else has it, one may wonder what evidence we have for thinking that Kripke's theory is correct.

<sup>250</sup> See Jackson 1998a, p. 38.

giving any or much weight to the descriptions and intuitive judgements we associate with our terms. Note that this reasoning does not show that natural kind externalism is correct, nor that intuition-driven conceptual analysis is, but rather that the arguments for the former position, in some important sense, seems to presuppose the viability of the latter position.

To exemplify the line of reasoning presently considered, we can attend to one of Jackson's responses to William Lycan's idea previously considered that belief should be conceived of as a natural kind. Even if Lycan would be correct in thinking that the term 'belief' points to some natural kind, which we presently may know little about, this does not according to Jackson mean that this object only has 'a few of the properties usually attributed to beliefs by common sense'. It rather highlights which of all the properties usually attributed to beliefs by common sense that actually matter. As Jackson writes:

But suppose that he is right, what would show that he is? Surely, just this. When presented with the hypothesis that some creature *C* belongs to the same informational natural kind as us exemplars of believers, even though, for whatever reason, *C* does not display the properties characteristic of the exemplars, we find it plausible to say that *C* has beliefs; conversely, when presented with some possible creature that manifests the properties we associate with the exemplars of belief but belongs to a different informational natural kind, we find it implausible to say that that creature has beliefs. But then what is being revealed by these responses is precisely that the property intuition associates with belief is belonging to the right informational natural kind. So it cannot be right to say, as Lycan does, that a state might be a belief without having the properties we usually associate with belief.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Jackson 1998a, p. 41. See also Kingsbury and McKeown-Green 2009, p. 173–175 for a similar response to Lycan.

Hence, to the extent Lycan turns out to be correct in thinking that belief is a natural kind, he is in Jackson's view incorrect in thinking that this shows that beliefs turned out to be radically different compared to our common account of them, that is, what we implicitly and intuitively take beliefs to be.

## 4.4 The contested status of intuition in the context of conceptual analysis

So far in this chapter I have presented a certain position on how to make sense of the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words and then applied it to the context of religious and existentially important terms. In this section I consider some contemporary criticism of this version of conceptual analysis.<sup>252</sup> Possible and actual responses to this criticism are considered and assessed in the next section. If we recall, the current version of conceptual analysis presupposes that people may operate with a term, the meaning of which they are partly ignorant or mistaken of. To make explicit what the user only knows implicitly, one is instructed to appeal to the user's or the analyst's intuition about what would be a sensible employment of the word in a possible scenario, because that is thought to manifest what rule they implicitly follow in employing the term in the more ordinary context of its use.

Lately, however, the common appeal to one's intuition about possible uses of a term when analysing its meaning has been queried. What is usually brought into question by some contemporary critics, belonging to a movement called *experimentalist philosophy*, is the universality and stability of what people find to be intuitively correct to say about certain issues.<sup>253</sup> The basis for this criticism is

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<sup>252</sup> One such criticism is that intuition-driven conceptual analysis is not in line with semantic externalism, and due to the fact that the latter is widely accepted, the former has to go. Since I considered this charge towards the end of the last section and also to some extent in chapter 3, it will be left out in this one.

<sup>253</sup> Not all experimental philosophers are equally critical to the appeal to intuitions. See for instance A. J. Vaidya, 'Philosophical Methodology: The current debate', *Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2010, p.

certain empirical data gathered through a number of sophisticatedly executed Gallup polls. For example, according to one recent empirical study, how a person intuitively judges the possible use of a term seems to depend on their cultural background. That is, when people within different cultural contexts are asked to respond intuitively to certain thought-experiments, they do not offer the same response. For instance, regarding the term ‘knowledge’, as previously discussed, “East Asian” and “Western” people were in one study found to have different intuitions about when a person knows something in contrast to just believing something.<sup>254</sup> In another study, empirical data indicating the same kind of differences with regard to the notion of ‘reference’ was gathered.<sup>255</sup> In this latter study, East Asian people were more inclined to accept the descriptivist theory in virtue of what a name or general term refers while Western people were leaning towards the causal theory.<sup>256</sup> Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols

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292–393 for a presentation and discussion about this. In the following I will mainly focus on what is called the *negative programme* of experimental philosophy (in contrast to the *positive programme*) and what is sometimes called *experimentalist restrictionism*, which is a version of the negative programme. In the current context, I mainly discuss this research in relation to certain versions of conceptual analysis. But of course the research is also intended to fry a bigger fish. As Vaidya explains: ‘One of the major claims of experimental philosophy has been that the traditional methodology of analytic philosophy that has been used in the 20th century to answer first order questions of philosophy must either be seriously rethought or abandoned in light of new empirical discoveries coming from experimental philosophy and empirical science.’ See Vaidya 2010, p. 391–392.

<sup>254</sup> See Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich, ‘Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions’, *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 29, no. 1-2, 2001, section 3. Essentially, the set-up was as follows: All participants in the study were undergraduates at Rutgers University and in classifying subjects as East Asian or Western they relied on an ethnic identification questionnaire. The participants were then asked to respond to certain thought-experiments modelled on ones that are common within the philosophical debate and literature. For more details, see Weinberg et al., 2001.

<sup>255</sup> Eduardo Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich, ‘Semantics, Cross-cultural Style’, *Cognition*, vol. 92, no. 3, 2004, p. 6. They tested 31 undergraduates at Rutgers University and 42 at the University of Hong Kong. In a classroom each participant was given four thought-experiments, two modelled on Kripke’s Gödel case and two on his Jonah case.

<sup>256</sup> Machery, Mallon, Nichols, Stich 2004, p. 7.

and Stephen Stich, who are responsible for this latter study, say the following about its outcome:

Thus, the evidence suggests that it is wrong for philosophers to assume a priori the universality of their own semantic intuitions. Indeed, the variation might be even more dramatic than we have suggested. While our focus has been on cultural differences, the data also reveal considerable intra-cultural variation. The high standard deviations in our experiment indicates that there is a great deal of variation in the semantic intuitions within both the Chinese and Western groups. This might reflect smaller intra-cultural groups that differ in their semantic intuitions. A more extreme but very live possibility is that the variability exists even at the individual level, so that a given individual might have causal-historical intuitions on some occasions and descriptivist intuitions on other occasions. If so, then the assumption of universality is just spectacularly misguided.<sup>257</sup>

So according to Stephen Stich and his colleagues, people's intuitively made responses to the question to what a name refers within a certain hypothetical scenario seem to vary with the culture surrounding the people asked about this, but also to some extent from person to person within one and the same culture. Different surveys also indicate that what a person finds intuitively correct to say is dependent on their socio-economic status, their personality or if the thought-experiment they are responding to was preceded by a different one (that is, people's reaction to a thought-experiment seems to depend on if they were, for instance, asked to consider a different thought-experiment just before).<sup>258</sup> This kind of surveys and the empirical data being gathered through them are believed

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<sup>257</sup> Machery, Mallon, Nichols, Stich 2004, p. 9.

<sup>258</sup> See for instance Weinberg, Nichols, Stich, 2001, section 3; Adam Feltz and Edward Cokely, 'The Philosophical Personality Argument', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 161, no. 2, 2012, p. 227-246; Stacey Swain, Joshua Alexander, and Jonathan Weinberg, 'The Instability of Philosophical Intuitions: Running Hot and Cold on Truetemp', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2008, p 143f.



to bring into question the alleged and commonly assumed universality and stability of a person's intuition. And to the extent that people's intuition about possible uses of terms are thought to reveal or be constitutive of what they implicitly mean by these terms, the same research appears to problematize the underlying assumption that different people implicitly use words according to some shared and stable principle.

In so far as the current research has discovered something substantial about people's intuitively made judgements, it would naturally affect the current proposal concerning to what extent certain words can be assumed to have a recognition-transcendent meaning, because the research seems to show that what people implicitly mean by 'free will' or 'God' may vary from one culture or person to the next, or even from one person at a certain time to a different time. One is of course free to question or qualify the assumption that a person's intuition provides reliable access to whatever implicit meaning their word may have and we shall consider some responses along this line in the next section (for instance, perhaps not the intuition of every user should be taken into consideration, but only the intuition of the educated and experienced analyst).

I will return to the viability of this criticism, but before that I also wish to consider a different criticism of the kind of conceptual analysis under consideration. To consider it, we may turn our attention to a proposal that may appear to escape some of the criticism just considered. For example, one response to the charge that people do not seem to share the same intuition about what would be a sensible use of a word is simply to accept that the target of our analysis is a mental and psychologically real entity, which need not be shared. This idea has been argued by Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust.<sup>259</sup> In Goldman's own words:

It's part of the nature of concepts (in the personal psychological sense) that possessing a concept tends to give rise to beliefs and intuitions that accord with the contents of the concept. If the content of someone's concept F implies that F

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<sup>259</sup> Goldman and Pust 1998, p. 187–188.

does (doesn't) apply to example *x*, then that person is disposed to intuit that *F* applies (doesn't apply) to *x* when the issue is raised in his mind.<sup>260</sup>

According to Goldman, a person's intuition should not be expected to account for anything beyond the concept possessed by that person. He explicitly declares that, 'there is no satisfactory way to promote a public or community-wide conception of concepts to the primary, or central, position in the project of conceptual analysis'.<sup>261</sup> He also thinks that a person's intuitive access to his own concepts may not be direct or straightforward.<sup>262</sup> Due to this, his position would be able to account for how a person can possess and operate with a concept although they would lack an explicit account of it. And to the degree we hold their concept to partly or completely constitute the meaning of some word they use, his position would still, it seems, be able to account for how the meaning of terms can be recognition-transcendent to the competent user of them. The person would also, according to Goldman, in principle, be able to work out a proper definition of the concept due to the causal connection that, as stated by Goldman, exists between having a concept and having certain intuitions about what the concept applies to.

Goldman's version of conceptual analysis would seem to be immune to some of the criticism previously discussed, especially the objection that people within different cultures, or even within the same one, may not have the same intuition about possible uses of a term and hence not perhaps assign words the same meaning. In so far as such differences are taken to be real, it would be consistent with Goldman's position. However, even if his position may escape some of the common criticism of conceptual analysis, it may still be the target of a different type of criticism. In 'Prototypes and Conceptual Analysis', William Ramsey argues that the traditional account of concepts presupposed within many theories on conceptual analysis is in conflict with some theses about con-

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<sup>260</sup> Goldman 2007, p. 15.

<sup>261</sup> Goldman 2007, p. 18–19.

<sup>262</sup> Goldman 2007, p. 15.

cept-possession supported by modern research in cognitive psychology.<sup>263</sup> Basically, this psychological research appears to show that to the degree people possess or operate with anything called concepts, the concepts do not seem to constitute a suitable target for conceptual analysis. The reason for this is that it does not appear possible to express or to do justice to the content of these concepts by a finite and precise definition.

We should notice that Ramsey's criticism of conceptual analysis rests on the assumption that the conceptual analyst would only consider an analysis successful if the definition it yields would consist of an elegant conjunction of properties. The conceptual analyst is looking for something "neat and tidy".<sup>264</sup> This assumption may seem to be unproblematic and in line with how the intension or extension of a concept and general term has commonly been conceived. For example, according to one traditional belief, membership in a concept's or general term's extension is not a matter of degree. On the contrary, whatever belongs to the extension belongs to it to the same extent. In so far as this comprehension of a concept is correct it would, in principle, seem possible to define the concept by expressing a neat conjunction of the properties shared by and unique for every member of the extension.

However, according to Ramsey, this conception does not seem to be supported by some recent psychological findings. Ramsey writes:

In a number of different studies, psychologists have demonstrated what is now regarded as a very robust cognitive phenomenon: in a wide range of categorization judgments -- including those for abstract concepts (Hampton 1981) -- class membership does not appear to be a straightforward all-or-nothing matter....In other words, our categorization intuitions appear to reflect a

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<sup>263</sup> William Ramsey 1998.

<sup>264</sup> In expressing this expectation, Ramsey writes: 'As with explanatory theories in science, a popular underlying assumption of conceptual analysis is that overly complex and unwieldy definitions are defective, or ad-hocish, even when no better definition is immediately available. If an analysis yields a definition that is highly disjunctive, heavily qualified, or involves a number of conditions, a common sentiment is that the philosopher has not gotten it right yet.' See Ramsey 1998, p. 163.

taxonomic system in which most categories have graded membership. This aspect of our categorization judgments, commonly referred to as "typicality" or "prototype effects," has been demonstrated in a number of experimental designs. When asked to judge how good an example of a given concept a particular item is, subjects tend to assign very different rankings to different items in a fairly consistent manner (Rips et al. 1973; Rosch 1973). Thus, for a given concept (e.g., BIRD) some instances will be ranked as much better examples (e.g., robin) than other instances (e.g., owl or ostrich).<sup>265</sup>

According to the so-called "typicality-effect", believed to be well documented by modern psychology, what is included in the extension of a concept is a matter of degree rather than a matter of all or nothing. People appear, for instance, to regard certain birds, like the robin, as more "birdlike" and "birdish" than other birds. The former category of birds is often called 'prototypes' and other animals are judged to be birds to the extent they are similar enough to the prototype. Membership in a category is thus based on degrees of similarity or grading and not the unique and equal distribution of some defining properties.

According to one version of this prototype theory, called a 'probabilistic' or 'feature-based' theory, the prototype for a concept consists of a group of properties. Any object that possesses a sufficient number of properties or some very important ones is deemed to be similar enough to the prototype to be judged to belong to the concept. One specific version of such a probabilistic theory suggests that the different properties may be given different "points" or weight. Going back to the concept of a 'bird', this may mean that we give, as Ramsey puts it, the 'weight of 30 for "feathered," 25 for "winged," 15 for "flies," and so on, and then assume that anything possessing enough relevant features to approach or surpass a sum of, say, 50 would be judged as an instance of the concept BIRD'.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ramsey 1998, p. 166–167.

<sup>266</sup> Ramsey 1998, p. 168.

To the extent that we assume that what is being held to be true for the concept of a bird applies to concepts in general, it seems that we cannot define a concept by offering a list of properties shared by all its members and only them. However, this kind of core properties, assumed to be common and unique for everything included in the extension of a concept, is exactly what the conceptual analyst, according to Ramsey, is usually looking for. This leads Ramsey to the following grim diagnosis regarding the viability of conceptual analysis: If the empirical data gathered and the psychological theories based on them are correct, then...

...our categorization judgments are subserved by a taxonomic scheme that generates categorization intuitions that are too variegated and diverse to be captured by simple and non-disjunctive definitions. If being an intuitive instance of X is simply a matter of having a cluster of properties that is sufficiently similar to some prototype representation, and if there are a number of different ways this can be done, some of which may vary over different contexts, then any crisp definition comprised of some subset of these properties and treating them as necessary and sufficient is never going to pass the test of intuition.<sup>267</sup>

Ramsey thus thinks that the complexity surrounding people's application of concepts would seem to make it rather difficult, if not impossible, to present a neat and elegant definition of the concepts we possess. As Ramsey sums up his criticism: '...the search for a simple, nondisjunctive definition of a given philosophical concept that accords with all of our intuitions and admits of no counterexamples is a hopeless enterprise, there simply is no such thing.'<sup>268</sup> Anyone

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<sup>267</sup> Ramsey 1998, p. 171. For a more extensive presentation of this psychological research, see for instance George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things, What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) part 1; Jesse Prinz, *Furnishing the Mind: Concepts and Their Perceptual Basis* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), chapter 3.

<sup>268</sup> Ramsey 1998, p. 171.

familiar with the notion of a family resemblance concept, initially proposed by Wittgenstein, may find the idea of a prototype very similar to this notion. In fact, Eleanor Rosch, whose pioneering research is thought to be responsible for the development of this kind of research in cognitive psychology, believed Wittgenstein to be the inventor of the hypothesis, which she sought empirical support for.<sup>269</sup>

Ramsey's criticism may also be connected to a different possible criticism of conceptual analysis, the objection that if terms like 'free will', 'knowledge' or 'mind' throughout history have been used according to some constant underlying principle, then given the amount of time and effort that have been put into revealing it, why have we not yet uncovered this principle? That is, we have been trying for some time, but still have not been able to present uncontested definitions of 'free will', 'knowledge' or 'mind', which may give rise to the thought that no such definitions are available.<sup>270</sup> Interestingly, Ramsey may be deemed to have given us an explanation for why no such definition and analysis is possible but yet is believed to be possible. That is, if we are looking for a theory of concepts that explains both (a) why we assume that what falls under the extension of a concept has some unique set of properties in common and (b) why this thought would be wrong, then the kind of theories of concepts found within modern cognitive psychology may be what we are in search of; because according to these theories, what belongs to the same concept may have enough in common to make us believe in and begin to search for some deeper set of unifying properties but too little in common to make the search worthwhile. One should emphasize that the psychological research considered so far does not suggest that we are using words and applying categories randomly and unsys-

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<sup>269</sup> Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn B. Mervis, 'Family Resemblances: Studies in the Internal Structure of Categories' in (eds) Michael R. DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition, the Psychology of Intuition and its Role in Philosophical Enquiry*, (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 18. Others, including both Ramsey (1998, p. 170) and Stephen Stich, 'Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity', in (eds) Michael R. DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition, The Psychology of Intuition and its Role in Philosophical Enquiry*, (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 104) regard Wittgenstein as an ally and a forerunner for the claims they make and argue for.

<sup>270</sup> See for instance Machery 2012, p. 153 for this kind of criticism.

tematically. What it suggests rather is that whatever patterns are possible to find within our uses of words and categories, they seem to be all too disjunctive and open to be considered suitable targets for conceptual analysis.<sup>271</sup>

So far I have considered the objection to conceptual analysis that a person's intuition may be relative to their cultural background and socioeconomic status. To the degree we assume a strong connection between a person's intuition and whatever implicit meaning their words may have, the meaning of their terms may also seem to be relative to their culture or socioeconomic status. I have then also attended to the objection that even if the target of conceptual analysis is regarded as concepts in the personal psychological sense, they appear to be too flexible and indeterminate for them to be appropriate for any analysis worth our time and effort. Both worries are, I believe, relevant to consider with regard to the viability of conceptual analysis and for our investigation into the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words. Could it be that whatever implicit meaning such words have, it is relative to different cultures? Could it also be that the idea of a stable and precise meaning of such terms, even when assumed to be relative to a culture or even just one person, is a chimera; by virtue of being very disjunctive and flexible? If true, this would also seem to affect the semantic properties of terms. That is, do the semantics for certain terms vary between different cultures or even between different people within the same culture? I turn to these and similar worries in the next section, in which I also consider some possible responses to the criticism

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<sup>271</sup> Ramsey is not alone in presenting this kind of criticism. Stephen Stich has offered a similar objection to conceptual analysis. Regarding the notion 'justification' and the prospect of presenting a conceptual analysis of it, Stich airs the same type of doubts as Ramsey. According to Stich, whatever we call 'justification' may not be traceable back to one coherent notion, it may rather turn out that we are employing different notions without realizing it. He writes: 'Perhaps, for example, our intuitive notion of justification is tied to a number of prototypical exemplars, and that in deciding new cases we focus in some context sensitive way on one or another of these exemplars, making our decision about justification on the basis of how similar the case at hand is to the exemplar on which we are focusing. This is hardly a fanciful idea, since recent work on psychological mechanisms underlying categorization suggests that in *lots* of cases our judgement works in just that way. If it turns out that our judgements about the justification of cognitive processes are prototype- or exemplar-based, then it will be a mistake to look for a property or characteristic that all justified cognitive processes have.' See Stich 1998, p 104.

presented in this section. But before that, for the purpose of making the picture of what some thinkers find problematic with the idea of conceptual analysis under investigation more complete, let me present a different objection to intuition-driven conceptual analysis.

Some have questioned to what extent a person's intuition can present to them some stable and informative insights about the use of a term in a hypothetical scenario, especially if this hypothetical scenario is rather different compared to the ones that surround the ordinary use of the term. To borrow Ludwig Wittgenstein's example: What if we have a chair that suddenly disappears and returns from time to time? Is this a chair? Wittgenstein himself confesses that he is not sure what to say.<sup>272</sup> In a more critical tone, Oswald Hanfling writes that: 'Sometimes, indeed, philosophers make claims about imaginary, farfetched situations that are unlikely ever to be enacted. Such claims go beyond existing linguistic practices and their security is diminished accordingly.'<sup>273</sup> In exemplifying this, he considers John Locke's example about personal identity, in which we are to imagine the mind of a prince...

... 'carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of cobbler' (Essay 2.27.15). What we would say in this case, according to Locke, is that the man in the cobbler's body is now 'the same person with the prince'. Is this really what we would say? Faced with such examples, one may be uncertain what one would say. The relevant language ('same person', etc.) is here extended to situations in which it is not at home (and in which *we* are not at home); and people who are competent in the use of this language in ordinary situations may not be so when they are presented with extraordinary imaginary ones.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 80.

<sup>273</sup> Hanfling 2000, p. 55.

<sup>274</sup> Hanfling 2000, p. 55.



Hanfling thus has some doubts about whether the ordinary and competent user of a term has a firm intuition about how to use the term beyond its ordinary context of usage. A similar criticism has been directed towards Jackson's position and his suggestion, that to the extent an ordinary user of a term has an intuition about what would be a sensible use of the word within a possible scenario, this supports the hypothesis that the person implicitly possesses some information about the word. Some have suggested that this kind of support for the hypothesis of our words having an implicit meaning is rather limited. It is argued that it is limited to possible scenarios that are not very different compared to the actual or typical scenario in which the word is most commonly used. However, the same thinkers continue, when one alters the scenario a little bit more, the more uncertain people tend to become about what to say. But this should not be the case, the critics claim, if people implicitly possessed some general and determinate rule for how the word is to be used.<sup>275</sup>

It is important that we appreciate the outcome of this possible objection to the version of conceptual analysis under consideration. It seems to be commonly assumed that a person's intuition is not only an instrument to be used to reveal what we implicitly mean by a term. The very fact that a person at all has a certain intuition about how to apply a term in a hypothetical and unusual scenario is taken to show that they implicitly possess some information about the use of the term. What else, it seems to be thought, would be the source for the person's intuition?<sup>276</sup> However, if we have reason to think that people often lack a certain intuition about the possible uses of a words or only have it when the ordinary and fictive case is rather similar, this circumstance would appear to support the opposite conclusion, that people do not implicitly possess this kind of information, at any rate not to the extent commonly assumed by the intuition-driven conceptual analyst.

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<sup>275</sup> See for instance Laura Schroeter and John Bigelow, 'Jackson's Classical Model of Meaning' in Ian Ravenscroft (ed.) *Minds, Ethics, and Conditionals: Themes from the Philosophy of Frank Jackson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 95–96.

<sup>276</sup> See for instance Finn Spicer 2010, p. 224–225 for a similar observation.

## 4.5 Possible responses to the current criticism of intuition

How may a believer in intuition-driven conceptual analysis respond to the criticism considered in the previous section? In what follows I consider some possible and actual responses. The purpose is not to try to neutralize the criticism brought forward in the previous section, nor to argue that the prospect of making sense of conceptual analysis is as doomed as some would like us to think. Drawing upon both the criticism in question and possible responses to it, I instead intend to engage in critical and constructive reflection about what to reasonably expect from intuition-driven conceptual analysis and what this entails for the nature and possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words.

Let us begin by considering one possible reply to the outcome of the polls considered in the previous section, especially the ones that indicate that people's intuitively made responses are unreliable or, if taken to be reliable, only manifest concepts relative to a particular culture. In response to this, Ernest Sosa has suggested that perhaps the differences detected between people's responses are mainly due to verbal differences; that is, perhaps they interpreted the written presentation of the thought-experiments differently? If so, the result of the polls may not be deemed to manifest deeper and substantial differences between what these people find to be intuitively correct to say in response to them.<sup>277</sup> In expressing this thought, Sosa writes for instance:

The bearing of these surveys on traditional philosophical issues is questionable, however, because the experimental results really concern in the first instance only people's responses to certain words. But verbal disagreement *need* not reveal any substantive, real disagreement, if ambiguity and context might account for the

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<sup>277</sup> See Ernest Sosa, 'Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Intuition', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 132, no. 1, 2007, p. 102–103.

verbal divergence. If today I say “Mary went to the bank yesterday” and tomorrow you say “Mary did not go to the bank yesterday” we need not disagree, given ambiguity and contextual variation. The experimentalists have not yet done enough to show that they have crossed the gaps created by such potential differences in meaning and context, so as to show that supposedly commonsense intuitive belief is really not as widely shared as philosophers have assumed it to be.<sup>278</sup>

The concern raised by Sosa is an important and relevant matter to sort out. That is, as a possible explanation for why people’s intuitively made responses to certain thought-experiments are different, the “verbal” hypothesis should be considered and explored. However, this seems to be exactly what many experimentalist philosophers are concerned with in that they naturally try to make sure that the test subjects have a sufficient mastery of the key notions targeted in the thought experiments.<sup>279</sup> This does not of course rule out that they sometimes may miss out on this and Sosa is also correct in claiming that until someone has been able to conclusively rule out that different people actually agree on what seems correct to say intuitively speaking (despite some empirical data indicating that this may not be the case), the possibility of substantial intuitive agreement still remains.<sup>280</sup> This is true, but this kind of response may also backfire, because if we begin to propose that people are in agreement even when they seem to disagree, we must also in the name of consistency be prepared to say that people actually disagree when they seem to be in agreement.<sup>281</sup> One may also wonder how often the possibility of verbal differences among people has been addressed and considered important to settle in all previous appeals to what seems intuitively correct concerning the possible uses of words and concepts. That is, in the

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<sup>278</sup> Sosa 2007, p. 102–103.

<sup>279</sup> See for instance Swain et al. 2008, p. 142.

<sup>280</sup> Sosa 2007, p. 103.

<sup>281</sup> Perhaps Sosa himself realizes this; one possible sign of this being the case is that he thinks of his line of reasoning as a defensive move and that the burden of proof is on the side of the experimentalist philosophers. See Sosa 2007, p. 102.

name of fairness, one should be careful not to assess the reliability of the data brought forward by the polls from a higher standard than seems to have been implicitly accepted when people in the past and in various contexts have relied on the outcome of other's intuitive reactions to certain thought-experiments.<sup>282</sup>

With regard to this, we should notice that not all conceptual analysts question the accuracy and importance of the recent empirical data pointing to cultural or individual differences between what people find intuitively correct to say in response to certain thought-experiments. Although his position is a common target among experimentalist philosophers, Jackson sometimes seems to occupy what I would describe as a more balanced position concerning this matter. In raising and responding to the question of what one should say 'if the long-held presumption of very substantial agreement in intuitions is a mistake, as is suggested by some philosophers in the experimental tradition', Jackson claims that we should not object to the empirical method being applied to demonstrate this disagreement.<sup>283</sup> Why is this the case? As stated by Jackson, it is because that method does not seem to be principally different from what has been used to defend intuition-driven conceptual analysis in the past. According to him, Gettier's original article can be seen as part of an attempt to empirically test people's intuitions about possible uses of the term 'knowledge'. About Gettier, Jackson writes:

He carried out a survey, courtesy of the editor of *Analysis*, and the evidence that came back strongly supported the view that the readers of *Analysis*, and those with whom they discussed Gettier's paper, do not use the word 'knowledge' for true, justified belief (though, as we noted in the preceding paragraph, a possibility is that reading his paper, and the same would go for discussing it,

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<sup>282</sup> Moreover, even if one were to have certain concerns about how some of these initial polls have been conducted and how the thought experiments were described and presented to the people taking part in them, or perhaps that they are too few in number to be able to support any general conclusion, one should take into account that these polls have been followed by many others with similar results.

<sup>283</sup> See Jackson 2010, p. 184.

made this the case rather than discovering it). But what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If we take Gettier's survey seriously, as we should, we must take seriously other surveys that suggest that different groups do or may use the word for true, justified belief.<sup>284</sup>

Jackson does not then, it seems, see any principal reason for treating the recent empirical data, indicating differences between how people respond to certain thought-experiments, differently than the data which once appeared to indicate a general agreement on what to say about Gettier's original thought-experiments. This is an important and, I believe, reasonable concession from Jackson's side. Unfortunately, this attitude does not seem to be shared by all conceptual analysts. One common attitude towards disagreement contra agreement in the context of conceptual analysis is that if people respond differently to a thought-experiment, and especially if this is the case among laypeople, this circumstance is more likely to give rise to the suspicion that something has gone wrong in conducting the survey (or that its result is not relevant or reliable) compared to if the responses offered by different people were more or less along the same line. Rather than accepting the outcome in the former type of case, many begin to search for an explanation for why these people responded differently, an explanation that would protect the assumption that the notion targeted in the thought-experiment has one common and stable underlying meaning. Sosa for example can be seen as offering one such response, that the polls did not go deep enough and for this reason just detected verbal differences and not substantial ones. In the next section I will consider some more responses along the same line.

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<sup>284</sup> Jackson 2010, p. 184–185.

### 4.5.1 The Qualified Appeal to Intuition

Some have argued that even if the present empirical research on intuitively made responses to certain thought experiments by “common folk” is reliable and accurate in actually detecting substantial differences between these people, the data it brings forward may still not have any direct bearing on intuition-driven conceptual analysis. One reason for thinking so is either the idea that (a) the research does not target the appropriate kind of intuition, the sort of intuition one appeals to when carrying out an intuition-driven conceptual analysis or (b) that the intuitively made responses in question do not belong to the people most suited for the task of doing this kind of analysis. Each response may be taken as an instance of what I will more generally call a *Qualified Appeal to Intuition* or the QAI-response. The basic idea of a QAI-response is that nothing is wrong with appealing to intuition in the context of conceptual analysis as long as we are sufficiently watchful when deciding whose and what intuition to consider. In what follows I will partly oppose this line of reasoning.

Let us begin with the (a) response, which we may also call the “proper intuition” response. Can it be that we are all too permissive in what we consider to be an instance of intuition? All that glimmers is not gold and maybe all that appears to be an intuition is not. Just as we have ‘fool’s gold’, we perhaps have ‘fool’s intuitions’. George Bealer seems to be leaning towards this position. He wishes to downplay the importance of the current criticism of conceptual analysis and intuition, especially when it is based on empirical research of what many laypeople find to be intuitively correct to say about various thought-experiments. One problem with this research, according to Bealer, is that the notion of intuition within it is not made precise enough and until it is, it is simply not possible to assess if its result can be used to question the type of intuition Bealer claims we rely on when we perform a conceptual analysis.<sup>285</sup> When

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<sup>285</sup> As Bealer writes: ‘As far as I have been able to determine, empirical investigators have not attempted to study intuitions in the relevant sense; for example, they have not been testing whether the subjects’ intellectual episodes satisfy the several criteria isolated above: intellectual (vs: sensory) seemings that present themselves as necessary; distinct from “physical intuitions,” thought experiments, beliefs, guesses,

involved in intuition-driven conceptual analysis one should, in his view, only appeal to what he calls a *rational intuition*. A rational intuition expresses what seems intellectually correct to its possessor, which is deemed to be different from for example a gut feeling, hunch or physical intuition.<sup>286</sup> Bealer also qualifies his preferred appeal to intuition by connecting it to a certain kind of concept-possession, what he calls ‘possessing a concept in the full sense’. He mainly distinguishes this kind of concept-possession from the kind he thinks Burge is thinking of when he claims that a person can possess the concept of arthritis without fully comprehending its content.<sup>287</sup> Possessing a concept in the full sense entails that the possessor’s intuition will reveal, under suitable epistemic conditions, how the concept should be applied in a certain case.

When performing a conceptual analysis it is of course important to try to isolate and only take into account intuitive judgements that manifest the user’s conceptual and linguistic competence rather than something else. If a gut feeling does not do that, one should naturally, to the extent possible, avoid basing one’s analysis on that. Moreover, in so far that we cannot be assured that the polls in question are only targeting intuitive judgements of the proper kind, one may feel entitled to dismiss the outcome of them until this has been confirmed. Bealer may also be correct in proposing that we cannot be certain that every intuition reported through the polls is the result of what he calls a fully possessed concept or that the polls are carried out under suitable epistemic conditions;

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judgements, common sense, and memory...’. See George Bealer, ‘Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy’ in (eds) Michael DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), p. 213.

<sup>286</sup> About this kind of intuition Bealer writes for instance: ‘By intuition, we do not mean a magical power or inner voice or a mysterious “faculty” or anything of the sort. For you to have an intuition that A is just for it to *seem* to you that A. Here ‘seems’ is understood, not as cautionary or “hedging” term, but in its use as a term for a genuine kind of conscious episode. For example, when you first consider one of de Morgan’s laws, often it neither seems to be true nor seems to be false; after a moment’s reflection, however, something new happens: suddenly it just *seems* true. Of course, this kind of seeming is *intellectual*, not sensory or introspective (or imaginative).’ See George Bealer, ‘A Theory of the A Priori’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>287</sup> See Bealer 1998, p. 221-222.

hence the result from the polls may not be relevant for making explicit what is implicit in a subject's use of words.

All this may be true. And although the possibility of all this being true may save the conceptual analyst from having to deal with the results from the polls, it may also stop them from continuing to defend intuition-driven conceptual analysis by appealing to how many philosophers respond to certain thought-experiments. Until it has been confirmed that these responses express what Bealer calls a rational intuition or that these responses have been made under suitable epistemic conditions, we cannot appeal to them for the purpose of defending intuition-driven conceptual analysis. And this may be a problematic consequence of Bealer's position because this is how intuition-driven conceptual analysis is commonly defended. For instance, many defend the usefulness and importance of appealing to intuition by thinking that this is what made many of us accept Putnam's twin-Earth example. But this cannot be taken as evidence for the reliability of intuition in Bealer's sense of the term until we have established that it was a rational intuition or an intuition manifesting a fully possessed concept of for example 'gold' or natural kind terms more generally that was in use when Putnam's reasoning was found to be intuitively appealing.<sup>288</sup> The gist of my present reasoning is not that it is wrong to try to be more exact about what we mean by intuition in the current context. I am instead implying that the charge that the critic has not specified his notion of intuition enough is a charge that can also be directed at many educated and experienced thinkers' appeal to intuition.<sup>289</sup> As for instance Timothy Williamson writes: "Intuition" plays a major role in contemporary analytic philosophy's self-understanding. Yet there is

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<sup>288</sup> In this respect Bealer's response is similar to Sosa's previously considered response in pointing to a possibility, in Sosa's case the possibility that the alleged intuitive disagreement may depend on verbal differences and in Bealer's case the possibility that the empirical data put forward may not target the relevant kind of intuition under epistemic suitable conditions.

<sup>289</sup> As I see it then, a possible problem with Bealer's approach is that no one or very few raised the question about what an intuition is more precisely when people made the same intuitive response to, for instance, Gettier's original thought-experiments. In the absence of this, can we be sure that all or most of these responses belong to the relevant kind of intuition? And how do we (ever) know whether they follow from a fully possessed concept or something less than that?



no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation of the hoped-for correlation between our having an intuition that P and its being true that P. Since analytic philosophy prides itself on its rigor, this blank space in its foundations looks like a methodological scandal.<sup>290</sup>

Perhaps Bealer is prepared to accept that possibly no one or few throughout our history have been able to produce an intuition of the relevant sort or targeted a fully possessed concept. And perhaps he has no ambition to defend intuition-driven conceptual analysis by appealing to how many ordinarily practise it. This may in fact be the case in that he sometimes only seems interested in defending the possibility of fully possessing a concept.<sup>291</sup> To adopt such a position may however come with a high cost, a cost I think few conceptual analysts are willing to pay. We should bear in mind that the common reason for at all believing in the idea that we implicitly possess some information about the concepts we use is that when we expose ourselves to certain thought-experiments, we are able to present intuitive responses to them. If we have no, or very little, reason for believing that these intuitively made responses manifest such implicitly possessed information, we would seem to lose one important reason for at all believing that it exists.

Let us consider proposal (b) then, which can be dubbed the “expert-response”. To introduce this proposal we may initially consider the suggestion that perhaps not all of us are equipped for this sort of work. Perhaps some people are better than others at intuitively considering and analysing the meaning of our terms. In objecting to the result put forward by experimental philosophers, Antti Kauppinen writes for instance:

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<sup>290</sup> See Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 215. Williamson thus seems to direct the same kind of criticism at philosophers that Bealer directs at experimental philosophers and cognitive psychologists.

<sup>291</sup> He writes for instance: ‘Now, intuitively, it is at least possible for most of the central concepts of philosophy to be possessed determinately – substance, mind, intelligence, consciousness, sensation, perception, knowledge, wisdom, truth, identity, divinity....It would be entirely ad hoc to deny this.’ Bealer 1998, p. 222.

To be sure, normal speakers are able to latch on to patterns of proper use and extrapolate correctly to new cases, as long as the similarities and differences between the cases are salient enough. For many practical purposes such ability suffices for competence. But some will be less and some more successful at grasping the rationale guiding application to new cases and thus discriminating between scenarios. Some concepts will be harder to grasp than others—perhaps most people with normal physiological capacities will be able to tell, when presented with a visual scenario, whether an object is white or not, but it is not as easy to tell whether an argument is compelling or whether a person in a counterfactual scenario should be described as morally responsible or not, if one is to accord with the correct pattern of applications of the concept.<sup>292</sup>

Kauppinen thinks that when analyzing a concept, not everyone's intuition should be seen as relevant. We should only consider the intuition of people that can be regarded as competent employers of the concept.<sup>293</sup> This seems reasonable, but the important and difficult question is how to identify those of us who are competent in making an accurate intuitive judgement about the possible uses of our terms.<sup>294</sup> Of course, it may be possible to rule out certain people with regard to this, like children and people that evidently seem to misuse the terms or concepts the meaning of which we are interested in. But beyond this, it may be more difficult to identify those among us that can be conceived of as a competent user and intuiter. Recall, we are tracking the implicit meaning of terms by relying on people's intuitively made responses to certain thought experi-

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<sup>292</sup> Antti Kauppinen, 'The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy', *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 10. no. 2, 2007, p. 102.

<sup>293</sup> As he also writes: 'It should be obvious that when philosophers appeal to 'us' in making their claims, the extension is limited to those who are competent with the concept in question. After all, what *incompetent* users of a concept say about a given case does not tell us anything about the concept we are interested in—someone who has no relevant pre-theoretical knowledge about the concept cannot manifest it.' See Kauppinen 2007, p. 101.

<sup>294</sup> As Kauppinen himself sometimes seems to realize; see for instance Kauppinen 2007, p. 103 where he writes: 'Given the potential gap between actual response and correct response, it will not be a simple task to determine which speakers are competent users'.

ments. To exemplify the relevant outcome of this circumstance in the current context, we can notice that it obviously would be much easier to identify a competent user and intuiter if we beforehand knew according to what implicit rule people use a word, because if we knew this, we could draw upon this information to assess the viability of each and everyone's intuition by seeing whose intuition that successfully captures the implicit rule. The problem is however that we do not possess this kind of data and that we rather seem to be in the position of using our intuition to extract it.

Moreover, and as previously stressed, we have to acknowledge the possibility of conceptual and linguistic diversity. That is, although we only want to take into account intuitively made responses from the competent user of terms, it will sometimes be difficult to know if a person's intuitively made response to a thought experiment is fallible because they do not agree with others' or just manifesting a different concept. This suggests that when doing conceptual analysis, one has to try to master the difficult act of balancing between a critical and open mind towards people's intuitively made responses: Not everyone's intuitively made responses must be accepted as relevant. At the same time, one cannot question every response in virtue of being different from all others'.

To introduce another reason for thinking that the activity of intuition-driven conceptual analysis involves a difficult act of balancing, let us continue with our elaboration of the expert response. Some have suggested that we might have a better chance of figuring out the implicit meaning of words, assuming that they have one, if we only or mainly consider the intuition of "professional thinkers" rather than asking the "man on the street". More precisely, it has been suggested that philosophically experienced and educated thinkers have a better eye for this kind of issues and for appreciating the problems and difficulties with each possible analysis. To respond like is to propose a kind of division of linguistic or conceptual labour, although a different one than the version originally presented by Hilary Putnam and considered in chapter 2 of this study. Namely, just as the biologist who relies on their expertise may be thought to tell us what we mean by 'gene' in informing us about the underlying nature of what 'gene' refers to, the philosophically experienced and educated person who relies on their expertise may be thought to inform us what all or most of us mean by 'free will' or 'God' by explaining to us the principle underlying and guiding our use of each term. Appealing only to the intuitive judgements of professional thinkers

would perhaps then lead to less instability and diversity with regard to this kind of judgements.

I do have some sympathy with this suggestion in that it seems unquestionably true that some people are better than others at accomplishing and executing certain things. Why not think that this would apply to the context of intuition-driven conceptual analysis as well? I wish however to make some critical, and hopefully constructive, points with regard to this suggestion. The concerns being raised are not supposed to show that the appeal to professional thinkers in the current context is entirely misguided but rather to show that it may not be as unproblematic as commonly assumed by its defenders.

To begin with, one may remark that even philosophically educated and experienced thinkers disagree upon how to intuitively respond to certain thought-experiments, so to appeal to them does not seem to remove all disagreement or diversity. This is important to take into consideration because to the degree this is true, it also demonstrates that the disagreement and diversity concerning intuitively made responses to certain thought-experiments are not confined to non-philosophers.<sup>295</sup> A defender of conceptual analysis may of course maintain that philosophers do not disagree to the extent sometimes assumed or to the same degree as philosophically uneducated people. As Timothy Williamson puts it: 'Levels of disagreement over thought experiments seem to be significantly lower among fully trained philosophers than among novices.'<sup>296</sup> And Kirk Ludwig thinks that we should be careful not to exaggerate the degree to what philosophers disagree. According to him 'there is an enormous amount of consensus on

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<sup>295</sup> One reason for why this is important to acknowledge is that one may have worries about how the initial polls have been conducted. Perhaps the description of the thought-experiments within them can be questioned or the instruction to the people taking part of the polls was misleading or ambiguous. Even if this turned out to be the case, one still has to take into account the fact that even philosophically educated and experienced thinkers respond differently to many well-known thought-experiments. In fact, one may think that experimental philosophers have not discovered anything new, but rather, if one accepts what they assert, more systematic explanations for how and why people's intuitive responses may vary.

<sup>296</sup> See Williamson 2007, p. 191. Kirk Ludwig expresses basically the same idea: 'What is called for is the development of a discipline in which general expertise in the conduct of thought experiments is inculcated and in which expertise in different fields of conceptual inquiry is developed and refined. There is such a discipline. It is called philosophy.'

conceptual matters among philosophers'.<sup>297</sup> He thinks that this is easily missed out on 'because (a) like the conceptual consensus of everyday life, it is so routine, and (b) it is part of our job to examine things we are still not clear about'.<sup>298</sup> As stated by Ludwig, the fact that philosophical thinkers are most often occupied with unsolved issues should not make us forget the many issues they agree upon.

I think that this response and positive assessment of to what extent philosophical thinkers agree may be all too optimistic. True, we are in agreement concerning many questions. What is commonly the case however is that many thinkers find themselves in some sort of *general* agreement. For instance, many thinkers hold linguistic meaning to be social in nature, but many then surely disagree about the details of this idea.<sup>299</sup> Furthermore, we do also appear to have substantial disagreement and diversity about a lot of issues. It may also be as Goldman thinks, that 'intuitive disagreement is probably underreported in the literature, because when philosophers publish their work they typically avoid examples they know have elicited conflicting intuitions among their colleagues. So the extent of disputed intuitions may be greater than philosophers officially acknowledge...'.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Kirk Ludwig, 'Intuitions and Relativity', *Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2010, p. 439. See also Bealer 1998, p. 213–214 for a similar assessment.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. Compare to Williamson 2007, p. 191 who writes: 'Naturally, philosophical debates focus on points of disagreement, not on points of agreement.'

<sup>299</sup> Also recall my reflection in connection to William Ramsey's criticism of conceptual analysis in the previous section. In that context, I remarked that all objects belonging to the extension of one and the same concept may have enough in common to make us search for some unifying and unique properties among them, but still too little in common to make the search worthwhile. Something similar may be the case concerning the content of concepts possessed by different people in the same community, laypeople as well as "professional" thinkers. The individually possessed concepts of different people may have enough in common to make them think that they have some common and unique content, but still too little to make this assumption true. In this case, they would not possess and employ precisely the same concept; it just seems so due to the similarity between the individually possessed concepts. For more on this possibility, see also Brown, 1999, p. 40f.

<sup>300</sup> See Goldman 2007, p. 17.

But what if philosophically educated and experienced thinkers in a community are more in agreement than the rest of the population concerning how to apply a certain term in a fictive scenario? Would this indicate that philosophical education and experience have a positive effect on the accuracy of one's intuition? Not necessarily so. We should be careful to not accept what certain alleged expert thinkers (in contrast to laypeople) find to be intuitively correct to say about possible uses of a term just because they seem to be more in agreement; at any rate not before we have considered and explored more thoroughly why they may be in agreement.<sup>301</sup> Consensus among thinkers may arise for more than one reason and we want to make sure that it is based on legitimate ones.<sup>302</sup>

Just to exemplify this, it may be that students entering into the philosophical context tend to take over the theories and arguments accepted by more experienced and established thinkers. For example, if most of the teaching staff at the department of philosophy where some people are receiving their education are leaning towards natural kind externalism, it is perhaps more likely that these students will end up favouring this philosophical position. As some of the students become more educated and experienced thinkers they may thus come to agree with the senior and more experienced thinkers, but the important question is if this is because they have become better at discovering what is implicit in the common use of certain terms, like 'gold' for instance, or because they have unconsciously adapted themselves to the prevailing intellectual climate?

The possibility of the latter sometimes being the case may bring forward an important reason for why one should assign some weight to the lay user's intuition.

<sup>301</sup> That is, to the same extent that it may seem warranted to examine more thoroughly why people within different cultures respond differently to certain thoughts-experiments it may be equally warranted to examine more thoroughly why philosophically experienced and educated thinkers are in agreement, if they indeed are. As Robert Cummins points out, we should be careful not to gain agreement and stability as a 'selection effect'. See Robert Cummins, 'Reflecting on Reflective Equilibrium' in (eds) Michael R. DePaul and William Ramsey, *Rethinking Intuition, The Psychology of Intuition and its Role in Philosophical Enquiry*, (Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 116.

<sup>302</sup> As history has taught us more than once, consensus among different thinkers does not necessarily make them correct. See also Jonathan Weinberg, Chad Gonnerman, Cameron Buckner and Joshua Alexander, 'Are Philosophers Expert Intuiters?' *Philosophical Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2010, p. 339 for the idea that consensus and stability in itself is not a sign for correctness.

tion about possible uses of terms. To better appreciate this reason we may consider Plato's dialogue *Meno*. According to one reading of the dialogue, likely to be the one intended as far as its author is concerned, one of Meno's slaves has recollected insights that have been buried deep down in his eternal soul due to its previous and disembodied location.<sup>303</sup> It is no accident that it is an uneducated slave that is being used to demonstrate the possibility of recollection, because if anyone more educated was put to the test and judged equally successful, this may make us wonder whether the person's achievement is due to some implicitly possessed information or rather due to the education the person has received in this life. To rule out the latter possibility, Plato focuses on the responses of the uneducated slave. Most contemporary intuition-driven conceptual analysts do not accept Platonism as a presupposition or motivation for what they do; they are not trying to target some Platonic form. However, if they want to rule out or reduce the risk that the intuitively made responses they draw upon in presenting a conceptual analysis are being affected by something else than people's linguistic and conceptual competence, they may follow Plato's lead and give weight to philosophically inexperienced and uneducated subjects' intuitively made responses.<sup>304</sup> In not doing this for a living, not having any philosophical interest and ambition, no previous position to act in accordance to and not knowing anything about what is currently philosophically fashionable, these people may be deemed to present unprejudiced responses. This does of course not mean that the responses they offer automatically manifest their linguistic and conceptual competence, only that one reason for thinking that these responses may not, can be put aside. That is, we do not need to worry about the risk of their responses being theory-contaminated.

One may of course ask philosophically educated and experienced thinkers to simply set aside the theories and arguments they know about through the

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<sup>303</sup> See Plato, 'Meno', in (ed.) John M. Cooper, *Plato - Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), p. 885–886 (85b–86b).

<sup>304</sup> See for instance Kirk Ludwig who writes: 'When a subject of a thought experiment responds to a question about a scenario, it is important that he or she understand that the response is to be based on his or her competence in deploying the concepts expressed in the question.' See Kirk Ludwig, 2007, p. 135.

education and training they have received and simply consider what seems intuitively correct. However, this may sometimes be difficult to do. That is, for someone with an experienced eye for this kind of questions, it may not be easy to distinguish precisely between their intuition about possible uses of a term and their philosophical theories and arguments relating to it. As Alvin Goldman and Joel Pust state: 'If the person experiencing the intuition is a philosophical analyst who holds an explicit theory about the nature of F, this theory might warp her intuitions about specific cases. So, at any rate, it is widely assumed [...] For this reason, philosophers rightly prefer informants who can provide *pre-theoretical* intuitions about the targets of philosophical analysis, rather than informants who have a theoretical "stake" or "axe to grind."' <sup>305</sup> I agree with Goldman and Pust about the importance of consulting people who can be thought to offer pre-theoretical intuitions. In doing so, I am not suggesting that every intuitively made response from philosophically educated and experienced people is affected by their preferred philosophical theories. I am rather pointing to the risk of this sometimes being the case, and suggesting that this risk can and should be balanced out by taking into account the responses from competent but philosophically inexperienced and uneducated people. That is, intuition-driven conceptual analysis would according to me be a more reliable and successful method relative to what can be called a *balanced*, in contrast to a *qualified*, appeal to intuition; not because it is entirely wrong to give praise to philosophical experience and education, but because it would be unhelpful to only do so. <sup>306</sup> One may also express the present worry by drawing upon the balance presupposed by recognition-transcendent meaning of a word. Recall that such meaning must be internal enough to its ordinary and competent user for it to be considered to be what they mean by a term. It may be that philosophically experienced and edu-

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<sup>305</sup> Goldman and Pust 1998, p. 183. See also Jonathan Weinberg, 'How to Challenge Intuitions Empirically Without Risking Scepticism', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2007, p. 338 for similar concerns.

<sup>306</sup> As Fred Kroon writes, 'The thought experiments are not philosophical per se, and if they didn't deliver insights that ordinary speakers would assent to, we should scarcely take them seriously [...] Why be interested in what a philosophical expert thinks if this is at odds with what ordinary speakers would say?' See Kroon 2009, p. 143.



cated thinkers sometimes unintentionally present analyses that fail to do justice to how a term is actually used; the analysis may rather describe a more coherent and intelligible use of the term. To the extent they do, they would violate the balance presupposed by recognition-transcendent meaning in disrespecting the latter proviso of it.

One may think that the balanced appeal to intuition downplays the importance of philosophical competence in the current context all too much. With regard to this, let me exemplify how philosophical experience and education according to me is important in the context of intuition-driven conceptual analysis. One may for instance stress that philosophers are rather good at formulating ingenious thought experiments that aid us in trying to make implicit what is explicit in the use of words. Once the data consisting of intuitively made responses to such thought experiments from themselves and others are collected, they are also rather good at construing theories and analyses that do justice to the responses in question. Apart from this, philosophically experienced and educated people are, in general, also in a privileged position to address and examine many other questions and issues about the meaning of words and concepts. I do not dispute this; nor do for instance Jackson. If we recall, Jackson did not see any principal problem with using a survey to bring forward empirical data about how people intuitively respond to certain thought experiments. And he did not seem to think that only the responses from philosophically experienced and educated people were important. This does not however mean that he considers the layperson's response to other questions about the meaning of words and concepts to be, in general, equally good as the ones presented by philosophically educated and experienced thinkers. Jackson writes for instance:

Surveys, be they through the pages of a journal, mail outs to addresses selected at random, internet polls, or handouts in lectures, bear on what people use words for, the concepts they in fact have. They don't bear on: what concepts are good for one or another theoretical purpose (is true, justified belief the gold coin of epistemology, or can we do better?); what concepts are coherent (is the libertarians' concept of free action coherent?); how various concepts interconnect (is giving causation a central role in justification consistent with a regularity account of causation?); and what concepts are instantiated (is objective, single case probability a feature of the world?)...philosophers are often, though

not always, best placed to address questions like those just listed—that's part of a philosopher's job description.'<sup>307</sup>

Philosophically experienced and educated thinkers may thus have a more developed sense for identifying inconsistent arguments, devising helpful thought experiments or for being able to spot important details.

One may also acknowledge that the educated and experienced analyst is more competent than the layperson with regard to certain terms. Concerning expressions like 'fuzzy logic' and 'the correspondence theory of truth', the intuition of professional thinkers may be more important than that of a layperson. But the reason for this is that, relating to such expressions, we rarely have an ordinary or competent user of them outside the philosophical context. And if we recall, we are exploring to what degree the meaning of religious and existentially important terms can be recognition-transcendent to their ordinary and competent user. Terms like 'free will' and 'knowledge' seem to be used a lot more in non-philosophical contexts compared to for instance 'fuzzy logic'.

Let me also consider another constructive response to the criticism of conceptual analysis, a response that has more to do with changing our idea about the nature of whatever implicit meaning our words may have. We have seen one such manoeuvre from Goldman, who thinks that we should only account for concepts in the personal and psychologically real sense when carrying out a conceptual analysis. We also however connected this to William Ramsey's criticism of conceptual analysis, which basically amounts to the suggestion that to the degree that we target such concepts, the content of them may be too indeterminate and disjunctive to be captured in a neat and tidy definition. Rather than questioning Ramsey's account of concepts, one should perhaps question the conclusion he wishes to draw from this, that this would make intuition-driven conceptual analysis difficult or even impossible. If we recollect, Ramsey's criticism of this kind of conceptual analysis is based on the assumption that the con-

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<sup>307</sup> See Jackson 2010, p. 185.

ceptual analyst would only consider an analysis successful if the definition it yields consists of an elegant conjunction of properties. Expressing this expectation, Ramsey writes:

As with explanatory theories in science, a popular underlying assumption of conceptual analysis is that overly complex and unwieldy definitions are defective, or ad-hocish, even when no better definition is immediately available. If an analysis yields a definition that is highly disjunctive, heavily qualified, or involves a number of conditions, a common sentiment is that the philosopher has not gotten it right yet.<sup>308</sup>

According to Ramsey, the conceptual analyst is thus looking for something “neat and tidy”.<sup>309</sup> But what if this does not need to be the case? What if we instead accepted that the rule we implicitly follow in using a term or a concept is rather complex and open? If so, we should naturally not expect it to be possible to do justice to it through a neat and compressed definition, as it may instead take a highly complex and disjunctive one.<sup>310</sup> This suggestion was in fact made by Paul Grice some time ago but a more recent articulation of the same idea has been put forward by Christian Nimtz. He writes that:

there is no doubt that the conditions implicitly guiding the application of our terms typically aren’t *Socratic* – i.e., they cannot well be captured by a tidy

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<sup>308</sup> Ramsey 1998, p. 163.

<sup>309</sup> Ramsey is of course not wrong in thinking that this assumption does justice to how many conceptual analysts have conceived of the object of conceptual analysis.

<sup>310</sup> We should also take into account that conceptual analysts have not attempted to try to express our definitions in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions just because they preferred this kind of definitions, but because they had assumed that this does justice to our concepts. To the extent we have reason to change our idea of the concepts possessed by us, what would be more natural and fitting than to also change our conception of how a suitable analysis of the concepts might look like.

conjunction of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. But nothing commits a Gricean analysis to Socratic analysanda. It aims for an illuminating general characterisation of a term's application conditions, however complex and untidy those might turn out to be. Arguing that conceptual analysis is an ill-fated enterprise since it seeks Socratic analysanda which aren't to be had, as Kornblith (2007, 41ff) and Ramsey (1998, 165) do, amounts to failing to engage with Gricean analysis in the first place.<sup>311</sup>

Nimtz emphasizes that we should not expect that what is implicit in our use of words and which may be revealed through the appeal to intuition must be a neat and tidy entity. This is an important suggestion because it points to the possibility and rationality of separating intuition-driven conceptual analysis from a common picture of what its target is supposed to be like. This picture of how the target must be for the project of conceptual analysis to be worthwhile is, as Ramsey points out, rather common, so common that once we find ourselves with reason for questioning this picture of what we are analysing – something precise, stable or shared among different people – some of us almost automatically seem to have found good reason for questioning the very idea of conceptual analysis. This inclination should, I think, be resisted. Rather than giving up on the whole idea of something implicit in our uses of words and the common appeal to intuitive judgements to make this explicit, we should only drop the generally held picture usually associated with it.

For this reason we should not expect that every analysis results in a neat and tidy definition of the term analysed; in fact, the opposite may be more common. As Justine Kingsbury and Jonathan McKeown-Green state: 'It would be marvelous if the quest for a conceptual analysis often terminated in a more or less pithy statement of necessary and sufficient conditions...'<sup>312</sup> This does not

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<sup>311</sup> Christian Nimtz, 'Conceptual Truth Defended, in (eds) Nikola Kompa, Christian Nimtz, Christian Suhm, *The A Priori and Its Role in Philosophy*, (Paderborn: Mentis, 2009), p. 139. In fact, Alvin Goldman also seems to accept something similar, see Goldman 2007, p. 23.

<sup>312</sup> See Kingsbury and McKeown-Green 2009, p. 165.

indicate that one has to accept that the meaning of all words is flexible and open in this manner, only that to the extent the meaning of some word is flexible and open, this may not pose a problem for conceptual analysis. To accept this modification of what intuition-driven conceptual analysis is supposed to target would also naturally make it more along the line of the current research and theories in cognitive psychology. The modification would for example mean that when the linguistic behaviour of a person or their responses to certain thought-experiments do not come across as coherent or systematic, this may illustrate the complex and disjunctive nature of the rule they implicitly follow in applying the word or concept.<sup>313</sup> For the same reason, I also do not think that intuition-driven conceptual analysis must or should be committed to the thesis that the ordinary and competent user of a word has a firm intuition about its application in every possible case they may be asked to consider. The user may sometimes be quite uncertain about this. Rather than view such intuitive uncertainty as a serious problem for intuition-driven conceptual analysis, it may be seen as consistent with it, because the uncertainty mirrors a real and substantial indeterminacy with regard to how the term is to be used.<sup>314</sup>

In response to this, one may of course complain that if all we get in the end is some incomplete or disjunctive analysis of what our religious and existentially important words may implicitly mean, what good is it for? That is, if the object and end of a conceptual analysis is something else than a neat and tidy concept, why bother trying to make it explicit? In response to this question I would claim that even such an analysis can offer us important information. To think differently is to be committed to an all too narrow account of when a conceptual

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<sup>313</sup> This does not mean that no hard questions remain. One may for instance be worried that the distinction between following and not following a rule seems to disappear or be less distinct. That is, how complex can a rule be without ceasing to be a determinate rule? But perhaps this can be regarded as a less serious problem if we accept that our notion of a rule or following one is also flexible and disjunctive.

<sup>314</sup> See for instance Jackson 1998a, p. 54–55. Or as Kingsbury and McKeown-Green acknowledge: ‘We should also not be surprised if a complete analysis is noncommittal on certain matters. There are plenty of ordinary users of ‘water’ who genuinely have no view about whether XYZ counts as water on Twin Earth, and maybe a correct analysis of *water* (as the concept is used by those speakers or by the whole community) should reflect this.’ See Kingsbury and McKeown-Green 2009, p. 165.

analysis is worthwhile, more specifically one seems to assume that an analysis is only of interest to us if it reveals one shared and perfectly coherent notion. I would however say that it would be equally interesting and important (sometimes even more so) to find out that what guides people's uses of terms is complex and different and even perhaps inconsistent.

One last observation, one does also not need to think that experimental philosophers have shown the appeal to intuition to be inadequate, only that it may be fallible (and the latter is commonly accepted by almost every conceptual analyst). Moreover, recall that some experimental philosophers have gathered data that seems to suggest that a person's intuitive response to a thought-experiment depends on if they also were asked to respond to a different experiment before the one in question.<sup>315</sup> To the extent this is true, I would consider this and similar research-result to comprise rather valuable information for everyone involved in the business of intuition-driven conceptual analysis. If we want to avoid mistakes it will obviously be good to be informed about what may commonly cloud our judgement.

## 4.6 Chapter summary

*S* expressed a certain idea about how the meaning of religious and existentially important terms can be recognition-transcendent to their ordinary user, the idea that the meaning can go beyond what the competent and ordinary user presently and immediately recognizes, but which, in principle, can be accessed through intuition and intellectual reflection. In this chapter I have explored to what extent and in what sense intuition-driven conceptual analysis can help us make sense of this possibility. Considering the criticism of the latter approach from experimental philosophers and thinkers drawing upon research within cognitive psychology, which to some extent should be taken seriously, I have argued that a

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<sup>315</sup> See Swain, Alexander, Weinberg 2008, p 143f.

balanced appeal to intuition together with a certain conception of what the supposed target can be seems to have the best chance of making sense of *S*.

## 5

# The community-thesis and the social aspect of recognition-transcendent meaning

## 5.1 Introduction

The objective of my study is to examine in what sense and to what extent the meaning expressed by religious and existentially important words can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. The purpose of the present chapter is to consider this matter from the perspective of a somewhat different idea than the ones considered so far in this study. To introduce this idea and one reason for considering it in the current study, we may once more recall the kind of balance the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of a term seems to presuppose: The meaning must be external and objective enough for us to possibly be ignorant of it but internal and subjective enough for us to be committed to it; to be what we mean by the term. This account of recognition-transcendent meaning suggests that anything too external in relation to our use of words will not have any bearing on them as far as their meaning is concerned.<sup>316</sup> However, some thinkers would insist that the meaning, to qualify as our meaning, must also be balanced from the opposite end; that is, it cannot be too internal or too subjective. More specifically, they

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<sup>316</sup> Indeed, this is the problem that we have mainly been occupied with so far in this study; recollect for instance my concerns about to what extent natural kind externalism may account for how the meaning of certain terms can be recognition-transcendent.



maintain that even if the meaning of our words cannot go beyond what everyone in the community recognizes it to be, it would not be enough that the meaning is only recognized by one of its members. This line of reasoning can be deemed to express or be committed to an idealist and collectivist (in contrast to an individualist) conception of meaning.

One version of this idea, commonly referred to as the *community-thesis*, is based on the assumption that the meaning of a word is its use and, furthermore, concerning this use it must be possible to differ between correct and incorrect usage. That is, if one can use a word however one wants, the very idea of this word having any stable meaning would seem to be lost; pretty much in the same sense as a rule would stop being a rule as soon as it is accepted that any possible action would be in accordance with it. In addition to this, according to the same position, it is also assumed that any distinction made between correct and incorrect uses of a word must be recognized by someone else apart from the person using the word in question. If not, it is argued, the distinction made is all too subjective to measure up to a substantial and objective enough distinction between correct and incorrect uses of the word. Consequently, if we want to make sense of the idea of an objective standard in the context of using a word, the standard cannot only belong to the user itself.

It seems relevant to consider the community-thesis within the context of my study for more than one reason. For instance, in exploring to what degree the meaning of words can go beyond the competent and ordinary user of them, I have assumed that linguistic competence can be assigned to and be possessed by one person. However, according to the community-thesis, a person can only be considered linguistically competent in the company of others. If true, this would of course suggest an important qualification of my objective. The community-thesis also appears to jeopardize or qualify the proposal considered in the previous chapter, the suggestion that a person's intuition can inform them of how a word should be used in a fictive scenario and reveal some so far unrecognized meaning of the word. The community-thesis seems to imply that if a person's intuition is going to have this function, it must be possible to differ between correct and incorrect intuitive judgements; which, in turn, presupposes a social context. This, in turn, would seem to entail that the project of performing a conceptual analysis only makes sense within a social context; not because others in my community may be better at performing the analysis (remember the

qualified appeal to intuition), but because without the company of others, the distinction between a correct and incorrect intuitively made response is lost.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the next section, I attend to Saul Kripke's well-known reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's position on rule following and linguistic meaning; a reading supposed to introduce a kind of rule-scepticism. In 5.3, I also consider a similar idea, a position called 'meaning finitism' argued for by Martin Kusch and David Bloor. Section 5.4 explains how the problem of rule-scepticism should be approached by those who argue in favour of the community-thesis, which basically amounts to the idea that a proper use of words, or any kind of rule-following activity, presupposes a social setting. In this section, we thus come across the key idea of this chapter. In 5.5, I also exemplify how the community-thesis may be especially important to consider with regard to certain religious beliefs. In sections 5.6 and 5.7, I assess the viability of the community-thesis. In doing so I will object to this thesis, mainly by arguing that in so far as the use of words requires an "independent standard", the difference between making up such a standard on my own and making it up together with someone else is not as distinct or important as assumed by advocates of the community-thesis. I end the chapter with a summary in which I bring together the main points of the chapter and show how they bear on the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words.

## 5.2 The modern source of rule-scepticism – Kripke's Wittgenstein

In a well-known study, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982), Saul Kripke presents a certain reading of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein's position on rule following and linguistic meaning.<sup>317</sup> This reading credits Wittgenstein for

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<sup>317</sup> Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the discovery of a serious problem for our traditional account of rule following, which, if true, is taken to have a negative outcome for the possibility of our words having a determinate and stable meaning.<sup>318</sup> As an example of this traditional explanation of rule following and how it can account for the meaning of words, we can recollect the rule-oriented account of linguistic meaning and competence presented in chapter 2. If we recall, according to that account, I know the meaning of a word in virtue of knowing how to use it as stated by a certain rule. I may for instance be thought to know the meaning of 'red' as a result of knowing how to categorize certain objects as red, that is, as belonging to the extension of this term. If the rule had been different, the word 'red' would have a different meaning.

The problem with this account of what it is for people to know the meaning of a word, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, is that no fact about a person seems to establish exactly what rule they are following in using a word. Wittgenstein's reason for thinking this, according to Kripke, is that whatever fact about the individual we appeal to – including ones about their mental states, their past experience or behaviour, or their present disposition to certain behaviour – none of them can establish beyond doubt what rule they are following because each fact is consistent with the following of more than one distinct rule.<sup>319</sup> To unpack

<sup>318</sup> With a few exceptions Kripke's reading does not present his own position on the matter he discusses. Regarding to what extent his reading accurately reflects Wittgenstein's own position, Kripke writes that 'the present paper should be thought of as expounding neither 'Wittgenstein's' argument nor 'Kripke's'; rather Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him'. See Kripke 1982, p. 5. Since the publication of Kripke's reading, much discussion about it has centred on the question of whether it contains a reasonable or correct account of Wittgenstein's position. Some common sceptics are John McDowell, 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule', *Synthese*, 1984, vol. 58, no. 3, p. 325–363; Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). However, as Baker and Hacker comment, even if one is convinced that Kripke's interpretation is wrong, the very problem of meaning-scepticism still deserves our attention. See Baker and Hacker 1984, p. viii–ix.

<sup>319</sup> The reason for this is as follows: To establish according to what rule a person uses a word, we would need a fact about the person that would only be compatible with the person following one distinct rule. Any fact that on closer inspection turns out to also be compatible with their following a different rule would not help us to settle what rule they actually follow. In other words, only one unique rule should be able to account for what the person has been doing so far when using the word. If we manage to find such a fact about the

and appreciate this reasoning more in detail, imagine a person called Eve who has done some addition exercises successfully. That is, she is thought to know the rule for addition and also the meaning of the word ‘addition’. As a matter of fact, she has never added up figures larger than 50, but this is about to change as she at this very moment adds up 56 and 67 and writes down 123 on her chalkboard. She is about to continue with the next assignment, when a sceptically-minded person approaches her with a proposal that, on the surface, appears anything but easy to refuse. The sceptic claims that Eve should have responded with 10, and not 123, to the mathematical problem she has just completed. Eve is rather surprised to hear about this and wonders how the sceptic ever came to this conclusion. The reason offered by the sceptic is that the rule Eve has been following all along is this one: ‘For numbers less than 50, add up as “usual”, for figures higher than 50, answer 10.’ Let us say that the sceptic calls the rule ‘quaddition’.<sup>320</sup> Since 56 and 67 are both over 50, the correct answer would be 10. Eve, of course, objects to this account of what rule she has been following, but the sceptic is not prepared to give in so easily. If Eve is so confident about the fact that she has been following the rule for addition and not quaddition it would seem quite easy for her to present some fact that proves this to be the case. If she can do just that, the sceptic will let her be.<sup>321</sup> However, whatever Eve refers to – her intention, her experience or her disposition – it will not be accepted by the sceptic as being enough to settle the matter.

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person, we have succeeded in responding to the sceptic. However, according to Kripke’s Wittgenstein, no fact seems to be able to fulfil this task: every fact about the person may be accounted for by more than one rule.

<sup>320</sup> Kripke presents the rule like this:  $x (+) y = x + y$ , if  $x, y < 57$ ,  $= 5$  otherwise, see Kripke 1982, p. 8–9. The details are however not important.

<sup>321</sup> It is not all that evident what kind of fact Kripke’s Wittgenstein claims to be non-existent. Some hold that he declares that no facts *about the person* can settle what rule they follow while some hold that the sceptic instead declares that no fact *about anything* can establish what rule the person is following. I will return to this aspect when discussing the social nature of rule following. See for instance David Bloor, *Wittgenstein, Rules and Institutions* (London: Routledge Publishing, 1997), p. 63–64 for some interesting comments on this. See also Kripke 1982, p. 68–69 for a phrasing of the problem that supports the idea that no fact about the individual, rather than no fact whatsoever, can establish what rule that is being followed.

However, Eve is not about to give up so easily, so let us work through some of the proposals that are likely to come to her and our mind more in detail. What about Eve's past behaviour and her past calculations? Do they not in fact show, contrary to the sceptic's opinion, what she has been up to all along? Well, one problem with this is that the sums she has added up and presented on her chalkboard for numbers less than 50 are equally compatible with the fact that she has been, in fact, quadding up. If we remember, up to 50, both functions yield the same result. As Michael Esfeld comments on this aspect of Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein: 'Kripke shows that any finite sequence of examples satisfies infinitely many logically possible rules.'<sup>322</sup> But what then about, perhaps, the most natural idea, that Eve simply has grasped and comprehended the rule for addition? Does she not have a mental representation of the rule she has been following and which, once taken into consideration, would establish precisely what rule she is acting in accordance with? In explaining this possible response to the sceptic, Kripke writes:

Rather I learned – and internalized instructions for – a *rule* which determines how addition is to be continued. What was the rule? Well, say, to take it in its most primitive form: suppose we wish to add  $x$  and  $y$ . Take a huge bunch of marbles. First count out  $x$  marbles in one heap. Then count out  $y$  marbles in another. Put the two heaps together and count out the number of marbles in the union thus formed. The result is  $x + y$ . This set of directions, I may suppose, I explicitly gave myself at some earlier time. It is engraved on my mind as on a slate. It is incompatible with the hypothesis that I meant quus. [...] I proceed according to an *algorithm* for addition that I previously learned. The algorithm is more sophisticated and practically applicable than the primitive one just described, but there is no difference in principle.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Michael Esfeld, *Holism in Philosophy of Mind and Philosophy of Physics*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), p. 72.

<sup>323</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 15–16.

In reply to this proposal, the sceptic will, however, according to Kripke, wonder about what this act of grasping and comprehending the rule for addition consists in. Is the idea perhaps that Eve is following some mental instruction? If this is the case, the sceptic will wonder how Eve is sure that this instruction can only be followed in one manner. Could not this instruction too, like the rule, be consistent with more than one interpretation? In describing this kind of response, Kripke writes:

Despite the initial plausibility of this objection, the sceptic's response is all too obvious. True, if 'count' as I used the word in the past, referred to the act of counting (and my other past words are correctly interpreted in the standard way), then 'plus' must have stood for addition. But I applied 'count', like 'plus', to only finitely many past cases. Thus the sceptic can question my present interpretation of my past usage of 'count' as he did with 'plus'.<sup>324</sup>

According to the sceptic, it will thus not work to appeal to a different and more fundamental rule and activity than adding up, like 'counting' for instance. The sceptic then simply repeats the sceptical problem for this rule and activity: How do we for instance know that 'counting' in the past was not actually 'scouting'? If yet another and even more fundamental rule and activity is introduced to back up the idea that one was counting, and not scouting, the sceptic will target that rule and activity, and so on.<sup>325</sup> An infinite regress of responses would be the result. A similar response from the sceptic would be expected if one put for-

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<sup>324</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 16.

<sup>325</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 17. See also Meredith Williams 'Blind Obedience: Rules, Community and the Individual' in (eds) Klaus Puhl, *Meaning Scepticism*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991) p. 96–97 for more on this.

ward the suggestion that Eve has some mental image or object in mind each time she adds up, which offers her guidance.<sup>326</sup>

Trying to avoid rule-scepticism by claiming that some mental entity can settle what rule a person is following does not then appear to work. Some people agree with Kripke's Wittgenstein on this matter, but suggest a different response to rule-scepticism, that we, when following a rule, have a certain disposition to behaviour. So perhaps by appealing to what Eve is disposed to do in each case will reveal what rule she is following. This proposal is usually called 'dispositionalism' and due to its general popularity, Kripke deals with it at some length. In the end, however, he remains unconvinced that it is enough to put a stop to rule-scepticism. According to Kripke's Wittgenstein, the problem with dispositionalism is basically twofold. To begin with, it does not target the sceptical problem because a person's disposition establishes only what they will do and thus not necessarily what they should do in every case they wish to follow a rule. What a person will do and what they are supposed to do to follow the rule may thus be separate. More generally put, I can for instance be disposed to mistake a cow for a moose under unfavourable circumstances – when it is dark and I have some distance between me and the cow – but that does not make it the case that I am looking at a moose rather than a cow. To account for this kind of mistake we can differ between what a person is disposed to do and what is the correct

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<sup>326</sup> That is, although a picture is commonly held to express more than a thousand words, sometimes it seems that one would need a thousand words to unpack and specify the content of a picture. The sceptic would make use of the latter circumstance and argue that we would need a manual for how to interpret the picture, but, of course, if a rule or instruction may be the object of different readings, the same would seem to be true for a manual. In general, the problem with appealing to any kind of mental entity is that it in itself is not enough; it requires a manual or interpretation to follow it. John McDowell brings out the core idea of the current response like this: 'Whatever piece of mental furniture I cite, acquired by me as a result of my training in arithmetic, it is open to the sceptic to point out that my present performance keeps faith with only one interpretation of it, and other interpretations are possible. So it cannot constitute my understanding of "plus" in such a way as to dictate the answer I give. Such a state of understanding would require not just the original item but also my having put the right interpretation on it. But what could constitute my having put the right interpretation on some mental item? And now the argument can evidently be repeated.' See John McDowell, 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule', in (eds) Alexander Miller and Crispin Wright, *Rule-following and Meaning*, (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2002), p. 50.

thing to do, but once this distinction is made in the context of rule following it seems difficult to analyse rule following in terms of a person's disposition to certain behaviour. Moreover, our disposition to act is not unlimited. With regard, for instance, to big numbers we are not sure of how to add them up – we simply do not have the brains for it – and when we come across such a case we thus lack a disposition to a certain action. However, the rule for addition still yields, it seems, a sum for the addition of such large numbers. If so, then the rule for addition appears to extend beyond whatever disposition we have in relation to it and thus cannot be equated with or analysed in terms of the latter.<sup>327</sup> So Kripke's Wittgenstein concludes that this possible response to the sceptic also does not work.

The sceptic does not so much insist that Eve has been quadding up all along as he insists that it is impossible for her to rule this out; and if she cannot, she cannot know for certain that she is following the rule for addition rather than the rule for quaddition.<sup>328</sup> The sceptic is also however not claiming that

<sup>327</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 22-23, 26-27. Of all the (straight) solutions that Kripke's Wittgenstein refuses to accept, the one that has caused most discussion and controversy is dispositionalism. See for instance Simon Blackburn, 'The Individual Strikes Back', *Synthese*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1984, p. 289-290; David Pears, *The False Prison*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 480 for critical comments on Kripke's criticism of this proposal. Since I, in what follows, will question the community-thesis rather than the intelligibility of rule-scepticism, I will not elaborate on these responses to Kripke. For the same reason, I will not elaborate on all the details and additional responses to rule-scepticism that Kripke considers. The reason for this is that leaving them aside will not affect my impending investigation or criticism of the community-thesis.

<sup>328</sup> On Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, this is what Wittgenstein means when he writes in *Philosophical Investigations*: 'This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule.' See Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 201. That is, relative to a certain interpretation of the rule, a certain action or in our case, a certain sum can be held to accord with the rule but relative to a different interpretation, the same action, or sum, is not in accordance to the rule. And the problem is that no fact can tell us which of the two interpretations that is the correct one. Paradoxically, the second part of the same paragraph is also commonly appealed to by people who question the accuracy of Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, because the second half of the paragraph contains the following remark by Wittgenstein: 'It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases. Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the



Eve does not know what she should know to be deemed to follow the rule for addition. That is, the sceptic is not just claiming that Eve is ignorant of some fact that she might have looked for before she began to add up and if she had done that, the sceptic would have no quarrel with her. The sceptic is thus not criticizing Eve for being careless; the sceptic is rather arguing that no fact whatsoever may establish that she was adding up.<sup>329</sup> According to Kripke's Wittgenstein, the problem is also not the familiar problem of vagueness, that some words or categories have an imprecise meaning or use.<sup>330</sup>

If the current criticism of rule following is accurate, it would seem to entail that relative to the past and present mind and experience of a person, rule fol-

rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term "interpretation" to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another.' This may seem to express the idea that rule-scepticism only follows if one falls prey to a certain misconception; realize and avoid this conception and the problem does not arise. However, it is also evidently the case that the importance and interest of the general idea brought forward by Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein is not limited to how one judges the accuracy of his reading. Many seem to regard the idea of rule-scepticism in itself important to consider. (See for instance Baker and Hacker 1984, p. viii-ix.) One should also remember Kripke's own admission in the preface to his study: 'the present paper should be thought of as expounding neither 'Wittgenstein's' argument nor 'Kripke's'; rather Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him'. See Kripke 1982, p. 5.

<sup>329</sup> Rule-scepticism, in this context, points to the absence of a metaphysical ground for why we should be committed to following a rule in a certain manner rather than in a different manner. James Conant describes this by invoking a distinction between Cartesian and Kantian scepticism and argues that Kripke's Wittgenstein is closer to advocating the latter kind of scepticism. See James Conant, 'Varieties of Scepticism' in Denis McManus (ed.), *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 122. What may lead us into still thinking that rule-scepticism is an epistemological problem is that the kind of fact that we need in order to get rid of the sceptic is a fact that should be knowable to the person, because it must function as a reason for why they follow the rule like this rather than that. If not, the person would at best be judged to 'act in accordance to a certain rule' but not literally 'following the rule'. Kripke thinks for instance that the sceptical problem is compatible with the possibility that we in the future may discover a neurophysiological fact that explains why we do as we do; see Kripke 1982, p. 97. See also Kripke 1982, p. 11. See also Martin Kusch, *A Sceptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 14 for clarifying comments on this.

<sup>330</sup> Kripke writes for instance: 'Nevertheless, surely the real point of Wittgenstein's paradox is not that the rule of addition is somewhat *vague*, or leaves some cases of its application undetermined. On the contrary, the word 'plus' denotes a function whose determination is *completely* precise...' See Kripke 1982, p. 82.

lowing is essentially indeterminate. No wonder that Kripke was ‘inclined to regard it as the most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date...’.<sup>331</sup> If we also assume that knowing the meaning of a word is to know a rule for its use, we also end up with a sort of linguistic meaning-scepticism: No fact can reveal what I mean by a given word because nothing can establish how it is to be used, hence not how it has been used or how it is currently used. Perhaps the very notion of linguistic meaning itself is lost, because what is left of meaning it if cannot be determinate? Or as Kripke expresses it: ‘It seems that the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air’.<sup>332</sup>

### 5.3 Meaning finitism

Kripke’s Wittgenstein is not the only one who states that rule following is indeterminate. Martin Kusch in a similar fashion rejects any fine line between the *stipulation* and *application* of a rule. According to him, no matter how careful we are when we try to work out the exact content of a rule, we cannot from the outset nor in our continued use of it determine how the rule is to be followed in each and every case.<sup>333</sup> Rather than try to construe or discover one perfect and complete rule, we should realize that we need to interpret and make up the rule as we go along applying it. Stipulation of a rule and the application of it are thus not distinct and separate phases within our rule following practice but integrated and never-ending features of it. To exemplify this thought, Kusch writes:

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<sup>331</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 60.

<sup>332</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 22. In some respect the position Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein is similar to Putnam’s account considered in chapters 2 and 3 in this study in that they both believe that what we have in our mind is insufficient to settle what we mean. According to Kripke’s Wittgenstein it is insufficient for settling what rule we follow and according to Putnam’s it is insufficient for establishing what our terms refer to. However, Putnam is no friend of meaning-scepticism; he thinks that what we mean in the sense of what determines the extension of a term is determinate, due to the fact that the world partly determines what we mean. His position can then in some sense be seen as a straight solution to Kripke’s sceptical paradox.

<sup>333</sup> Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement, the Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 178, 195.

Assume my wife and I introduce the rule that we go running in the morning. Surely, when first introducing the rule, we have not yet foreseen all the varied circumstances that might lead us to modify the rule: visits of relatives, illnesses, sports broadcasts from the Olympics in Australia, lack of time due to early morning appointments, hangovers etc. And yet it seems natural to say that it is only in the process of our facing these varying circumstances of application that the rule itself acquires more and more content. Paradoxical as it might sound, it is only by applying the rule that we stipulate its content.<sup>334</sup>

According to Kusch, we thus fine-tune the rule as we go along applying it.

Like Kripke's Wittgenstein, Kusch also extends this kind of reasoning about rule following to linguistic meaning. He accepts a theory called 'meaning finitism', a general theory about meaning developed by David Bloor among others, but which he explains mainly through considering the use of a general term.<sup>335</sup> According to this theory, learning a general term initially involves being presented to a set of examples of what belongs to the extension of the term. Some of the examples are considered paradigmatic and constitute a standard one has to consider and respect in using the term accurately. In applying the term beyond but in accordance to the initial examples, the guiding principle is similarity. That is, for an object to be judged to belong to the extension of a general term, it must be judged to be similar enough to the ones presently part of the extension. However, as stated by Kusch and thinkers that accept meaning finitism, what is considered similar may vary from case to case, and as we keep on using the term we also change what is to be considered paradigmatic examples; therefore the initial paradigmatic examples can be replaced by different ones. And whatever rule we abstract from any such examples, it is only of a momentary and limited guidance. As David Bloor puts it: 'When we are confronted

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<sup>334</sup> Kusch 2002, p. 178–179.

<sup>335</sup> Kusch 2002, p. 201–205.

with a finite set of examples we do not extract from them any general idea, rather, we instinctively pass on to what strikes us as the next step or the next case.<sup>336</sup> The original extension of a term does not then, according to Bloor, establish only one possible future use of the term.<sup>337</sup> In expressing this thought, Bloor also writes:

For a finitist there is no such thing as the ‘extension’ of a term or concept, or, if the word ‘extension’ is used, it radically changes its significance.<sup>338</sup>

From a finitist perspective it makes sense to say our beliefs are never determinate or fully specifiable, at least, not in the way many philosophical theories have previously assumed.<sup>339</sup>

What is needed in order to use words and to possess a concept is thus a creative mind because we cannot rely on a determinate and universally applicable code; we rather make up the code as we go along applying it. That is, according to meaning finitism, we are not just makers of meaning, in contrast to finders of meaning, but also forever unfinished makers of meaning. This rejection of a determinate and stable extension of general terms, which Kusch adopts, seems analogous to his rejection of a robust distinction between the stipulation and application of a rule. That is, the finitist picture of the meaning of words has much in common with Kusch’s account of rule following.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 13–14.

<sup>337</sup> Kusch 2002, p. 203.

<sup>338</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 24.

<sup>339</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 25.

<sup>340</sup> The idea of rule-scepticism, meaning-finitism and the rejection of a fine line between stipulation and application of a rule may also of course resemble many postmodern accounts of mind and language. Ruth Sonderegger, for instance, compares Wittgenstein’s criticism of some traditional theories of linguistic meaning to that of Derrida’s criticism. According to Sonderegger, they both object to the idea of an objectified meaning. See Ruth Sonderegger, ‘A Critique of Pure Meaning: Wittgenstein and Derrida’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2002, vol. 5, no. 2, 2002, p. 183–209.

## 5.4 The sceptical solution to rule-scepticism

So far I have presented a fundamental criticism of the very possibility of our words having a determinate and stable meaning. One may wonder how all this is supposed to have a bearing on the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words because we have just been told that the idea of determinate meaning is lost. What kind of meaning is then left to be ignorant of? To appreciate how all this leads up to one specific and influential idea about how the meaning of words must be recognition-transcendent but also a possible criticism of the previous accounts of recognition-transcendent meaning of words, we need to consider the sceptical solution to the problem of rule-scepticism, and especially one part of it – the idea that our use of words only makes sense relative to a social context.

According to Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein is not leaving us hanging; he does offer us some comfort and damage control. This may seem wise because to give up on the idea of rule following altogether may have dramatic consequences.<sup>341</sup> In giving us a remedy against rule-scepticism, one might expect Kripke to present to us some type of fact or circumstance about ourselves that we had not thought about and which can establish beyond all doubt what rule we follow and hence what we mean when using a word. Have we not overlooked some fact that once it is brought to our attention can silence the sceptic? According to Kripke, to do so would be to present a *straight* solution to the sceptical problem. However, the *sceptical* solution presented by Kripke's Wittgenstein offers no such thing. Rather than pointing out such a fact to us, the sceptical solution consists in the claim that no such fact is, or was ever, needed in making sense of rule following.<sup>342</sup> Hence, the solution to rule-scepticism lies not within one's capacity to beat the sceptic at his own game, but rather to see

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<sup>341</sup> Or as Philip Pettit says about this matter: 'Deny that there are such things as rules, deny that there is anything that counts strictly as rule-following, and you put in jeopardy some of our most central notions about ourselves.' See Philip Pettit, 'The Reality of Rule-following', *Mind*, vol. 99, no. 393, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>342</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 66.

through the illusion that one has to do this to make sense of rule following. In expressing this thought Kripke writes:

[Wittgenstein's] solution to his own sceptical problem begins by agreeing with the sceptics that there is no 'superlative fact' about my mind that constitutes my meaning addition by 'plus' [...] the appearance that our ordinary concept of meaning demands such a fact is based on a philosophical misconstrual – albeit a natural one – of such ordinary expressions as 'he meant such-and-such', 'the steps are determined by the formula', and the like.<sup>343</sup>

What is needed to overcome the threat of rule-scepticism is thus not the introduction of and appeal to some exceptional fact, but the introduction of another perspective on how to think about rule following and what knowing the meaning of a word requires. Two thoughts in particular are deemed to be essential for this innovative perspective. One important part of the sceptical solution is the idea that we should stop searching for a fact about what people mean by the words they use and what rule they follow in doing so, if taken in some absolute sense. One should instead try to target and identify under what kind of circumstance we usually hold ourselves or someone else to know the meaning of a word.<sup>344</sup>

A second important part of the sceptical solution is introduced for the purpose of making sense of the difference between following a rule and failing to do so. One may think that rule-scepticism would exclude the meaningfulness of drawing any such distinction. However, Kripke's Wittgenstein is trying to respect it because, according to him, the possibility of being wrong is essential for

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<sup>343</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 65–66.

<sup>344</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 86–87. Kripke talks about going from truth-conditions to justification-conditions. He also emphasizes the *utility* of a rule or using a word in a certain manner. Kripke says more about these features than I will presently go into; I basically neglect his additional thoughts on this because I want to focus on the social aspect and it seems possible to do this without elaborating on these thoughts.

our rule following practice; therefore, we should be able to account for it even if rule-scepticism is true. As stated by Kripke's Wittgenstein, we cannot however do this as long as we only consider a socially isolated person trying to follow a rule. Although such a person can feel perfectly confident and certain about how they should employ a certain term, this is simply not good enough to do justice to our ordinary conception of the distinction between following a rule and just thinking one is. Kripke writes:

All we can say, if we consider a single person in isolation, is that our ordinary practice licenses him to apply the rule in the way it strikes him.[...] But of course this is *not* our usual concept of following a rule. It is by no means the case that, just because someone thinks he is following a rule, there is no room for a judgement that he is really not doing so.<sup>345</sup>

Hence, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, in the case of a person following a rule all on their own it is difficult to account for the distinction between being correct and incorrect. Even if that person acts according to their best judgement, they can only, as stated by Kripke's Wittgenstein, do what they *think* is correct. With regard to a single person the distinction in question cannot then be upheld. As Kripke writes: '...if one person is considered in isolation, the notion of a rule as guiding the person who adopts it can have *no* substantive content.'<sup>346</sup>

This does not mean that all hope for acquiring such a distinction is lost. According to Kripke's Wittgenstein, we can account for such a distinction once we relate what one person is doing to what other people following the same rule are doing. Kripke writes:

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<sup>345</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 88.

<sup>346</sup> Kripke 1982, p. 89.

The situation is very different if we widen our gaze from consideration of the rule follower alone and allow ourselves to consider him as interacting with a wider community. Others will then have justification conditions for attributing correct or incorrect rule following to the subject, and these will *not* be simply that the subject's own authority is unconditionally to be accepted.<sup>347</sup>

Kripke's Wittgenstein thus thinks that the idea of being correct can only be made sense of within a social context.<sup>348</sup>

Kusch, whose position we have attended to previously, offers a similar solution to rule- and meaning-scepticism as Kripke's Wittgenstein. Although we should reject a precise distinction between stipulation and application of a rule, we must also do justice to the distinction between being correct and thinking one is correct with regard to the following of a rule. Without some kind of standard for how to follow a rule, our practice of rule following would be destroyed. And according to Kusch, we only gain a substantial enough standard of correctness by considering a community of people following the same rule. In the following quotation, Kusch explains why a person in social isolation is unable to produce a sufficiently objective standard:

In deciding how to apply my rule 'go running in the morning' I decide which rule it is I am actually following. Clearly, as long as I do so on my own, I am not encountering any friction; however I choose to apply it my rule is correct, since it is only my decision regarding application that fixes (momentarily) the rule's content. In other words, whatever seems right to me is right. And this means that the distinction between 'seems right' and 'is right' does not have a foot-hold in

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Of course, the question whether language use is essentially social or not had been discussed before Kripke's reading set off a big debate about this in the 1980s. In some sense his reading only rekindled the old debate from the 1950s and 1960s concerning this matter. See for instance Keld Stehr Nielsen, *The Evolution of the Private Language Argument*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), chapters 5 and 6 for a fine overview of the discussion concerning the viability of 'the private language argument' within this earlier period.



my practice. It can apply to me only if a gap can open up between what I decide to allow as correct and what others are willing to accept as correct with *respect to my rule of going running*.<sup>349</sup>

In following a rule all on my own, I act according to my own best judgement. According to Kusch this entails that the distinction between what seems correct and is correct does not apply to what I do and the reason for this is that from my perspective ‘what is correct’ cannot be disentangled from what ‘seems correct’. That is, relative to my perspective, the only distinction I may produce is one between what “seems correct” and “another seems correct”, which is something else than the distinction between what seems correct and what is correct. What I need to overcome this predicament is to “go outside of myself” and to access and consider something less subjective than my own beliefs about how to follow a rule. As stated by Kusch, that can only be the beliefs of someone else on how to follow the same rule. That is, by taking into account the beliefs of another person, my gap between what seems correct and what is correct is sufficiently extended for it to measure up to a more objective distinction between correct and incorrect. Let me put emphasis on two points concerning this line of reasoning.

(1) The reason for why we need to bring in more people is not, according to Kusch, that we need to consider the judgement of an expert on how a certain rule is to be followed. The idea is rather that by considering the opinion of someone else, a person can compare their thoughts on how to follow the rule with another person’s viewpoint; it is the distance between separate minds and not the quality of each mind that is important. Differently put, the standard is socially constituted and not only socially mediated.<sup>350</sup> Kusch also thinks that the same is true of Kripke’s Wittgenstein and writes:

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<sup>349</sup> Kusch 2002, p. 194–195.

<sup>350</sup> This may also point to a difference between the community-thesis and social externalism. Tyler Burge writes for instance: ‘When we defer to someone else’s linguistic authority, it is partly because the other person has superior empirical insight, insight that bears on the proper characterization of examples to which

In saying that the distinction between seems right and is right needs an intersubjective scenario, Kripke's Wittgenstein is not of course committed to the claim that the second person, the evaluator, inevitably gets things right. The point is more subtle: it is that the distinction between seems right and is right is applicable only when one evaluates the performance of another.<sup>351</sup>

A second person is thus not needed by virtue of having an accurate standard or opinion; they are instead needed by virtue of making possible an independent standard. In what follows I will assume and accept this reading of the community-thesis.<sup>352</sup>

(2) Moreover, which requires a more extensive elaboration, thinkers in overall agreement about the idea that rule following needs a community of peo-

our words or concepts apply. The reason for their insight is not that they have made a study of us. It is also not that they are foisting some foreign, socially authorized standard on us. It is that they understand their idiolects better than we understand ours, and they have a right to assume that our idiolects are in relevant respects similar, or the same.' See Tyler Burge, 'Wherein is Language Social', in Tyler Burge, *Foundations of the Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 287.

<sup>351</sup> Kusch, 2006, p. 84. In a different text, Kusch expresses the same idea by saying that: 'The only way in which we can make sense of the idea that an individual's response does not just seem right but is right is to relate it to the responses of others in the same social practice. It is the comparison between different people that purport to follow the same rule that creates the conceptual space for the distinction between getting the rule right and merely believing to get the rule right. [...] Communitarians do not say that the individual is right if, and only if she does what the others do. Rather, communitarians insist that in order to make sense of an individual being right we must make reference to something that is external to the individual. And these external conditions are the actions and judgements of others.' See Martin Kusch, 'Beliefs, Kinds and Rules: A Comment on Kornblith's "Knowledge and Its Place in Nature"', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 71, no 2, 2005, p. 417.

<sup>352</sup> One reason for accepting this reading of the thesis is that it seems necessary in order to distinguish it from for instance social externalism. Moreover, if you only had to consult with someone else because they are considered more competent than yourself, the appeal to the social context would only be required occasionally. If you for instance are the most competent one within a certain area, you would not have to consult with someone else; and this does not seem to be in line with the community-thesis.

ple may disagree about to what extent more precisely a community of people is needed to account for rule following.<sup>353</sup> That is, even if one would accept that a socially isolated person cannot be considered a rule-follower, this idea is consistent with more than one position regarding to what degree a person must be connected to a community of rule-following people to be considered a rule-follower.<sup>354</sup> In reflecting on this matter Michael Esfeld for instance describes a fictive scenario in which all humans but one are ‘annihilated in a nuclear war or a natural catastrophe’. He then asks if the sole survivor of this catastrophe can be thought of as a rule-follower. Although Esfeld realizes that the community-thesis and its emphasis on external assessment, which he endorses, may seem to be suggestive of a negative reply to this question because ‘there is nothing which can be considered as an external standard for a judgment of the way in which

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<sup>353</sup> For a more extensive list of different community-theses, see McGinn 1984, p. 194f., and Kusch 2002, p. 181–182. Kusch for instance differs between six different community-theses.

<sup>354</sup> As is well known to anyone familiar with this subject matter, the precise position of Kripke’s Wittgenstein on this question is the subject of some controversy and bewilderment due to one of his remarks on this question, made on page 110 in his study. Kripke writes: ‘Does this mean that Robinson Crusoe, isolated on an island, cannot be said to follow any rules, no matter what he does? I do not see that this follows. What does follow is that *if* we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him. The falsity of a private model does not need to mean that a *physically isolated* individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather than an individual, *considered in isolation* (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so.’ See Kripke 1982, p. 110. In this passage Kripke’s Wittgenstein seems to mean that it is not required that a person must be part of a rule-following community of people to be considered a rule-follower. It seems enough that the person is observed and identified as a rule-follower by people belonging to a community of rule-following people. Kripke’s comment has resulted in a complex and extensive discussion. In reply to it, some have accepted the very idea of a solitary rule follower but also thought that this does not appear to fit with the general position on rule following presented and argued for by Kripke’s Wittgenstein. That is, the general thesis being presented through Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein seems to suggest that rule following requires that one is part of a community of people. Some thinkers in favour of some type of the community-thesis think that the more general picture is the correct one and that it excludes the possibility of considering an innate Crusoe as a rule-follower. See for instance Michael Esfeld 2001, p. 95–96 and Kusch 2002, p. 184. They argue that Kripke’s own and general account of Wittgenstein’s stance excludes the possibility of a forever solitary person doing anything that should be identified as rule following. The reason for this is that for a person to be judged to follow a rule by someone else, they need to interact; it is not enough that the latter observes the former and, on the grounds of what they see, judges the former to be following a rule.

this human being continues her purported rule-following',<sup>355</sup> he seems open to the acceptance of a different diagnosis. In elaborating on the reason why, he writes:

Since this human being was a member of a social community before the catastrophe occurred, she has internalized the habits (*Gepflogenheiten*) of the community. She thereby acquired the ability to judge her own actions in the light of the norms of the community even if there is no feedback from other community members anymore. Having internalized the norms of the community, she is able to continue to follow these norms and to judge herself whether her actions and dispositions accord with these norms even after the imagined catastrophe.<sup>356</sup>

According to Esfeld, for the distinction between what seems correct and what is correct to apply to the performance of a single person it appears it is enough that the person *once has been* part of a rule-following community and as a result of this has grasped what the difference between following a rule correctly and incorrectly amounts to. In once being a member they have internalized enough information to be able to assess their own performances from an independent standard. In critically responding to this type of community-thesis (and similar ones), Kusch writes:

I disagree with these lines of thinking. When we ask whether an individual A can follow rule R *now*, we are asking whether A can now meaningfully distinguish between 'seems right' and 'is right' with respect to actions governed by R. And

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<sup>355</sup> Esfeld 2001, p. 94.

<sup>356</sup> Esfeld 2001, p. 95. See also Meredith Williams, *Wittgenstein, Mind and Meaning: Towards a Social Conception of Mind*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 172 for a softer version of the community thesis compared to the one argued by Kusch.

for this it is not enough to point to A's ability to distinguish 'seems right' from 'is right' with respect to some other rule, or to A's *past* ability to distinguish 'seems right' from 'is right' with respect to R. Consider again the distinction between rule-stipulation and rule-application. I suggested earlier that this distinction is not clear-cut. Paradoxically put, in applying a rule, we stipulate its content. In deciding how to apply my rule 'go running in the morning' I decide which rule it is I am actually following. Clearly, as long as I do so on my own, I am not encountering any friction; however I choose to apply it my rule is correct, since it is only my decision regarding application that fixes (momentarily) the rule's content. In other words, whatever seems right to me is right. And this means that the distinction between 'seems right' and 'is right' does not have a foothold in my practice. It can apply to me only if a gap can open up between what I decide to allow as correct and what others are willing to accept as correct with respect to my rule of going running. The problem of generating a distinction between 'seems right' and 'is right' for this rule is not solved by having the distinction available for some other rule.<sup>357</sup>

Kusch thus thinks that for a person to be able to follow a certain rule it is exactly this rule, rule R, at this time to which the distinction between is correct and seems correct must apply. Concerning this rule, one's ability to differ between is correct and seems correct with regard to another rule is of no assistance. In some

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<sup>357</sup> See Kusch 2002, p. 194. As Kusch puts it: 'My family might have a rule to go out for dinner on Sundays, and, given that we interact and correct each other in applying this dinner-rule, I have access to the distinction between 'seems right' and 'is right' for this rule. But again, having the distinction available here does not make it accessible to me if then I try to follow the running-rule on my own.' See Kusch 2002, p. 195. Esfeld's version of the community-thesis seems for instance to be rather similar to what Kusch calls the 'Past-Tense Community Thesis C, which he expresses as: 'Advocates of the Past-Tense Community Thesis C are relying on the following thought. A congenitally isolated individual cannot acquire the conceptual distinction between 'seems right' and 'is right'. However, once an individual has learned to make this distinction in and through interaction with others, the distinction remains permanently available to the individual—even if he finds himself in long periods of physical isolation, or even if he decides to introduce a new rule for himself.' See Kusch 2002 p. 194.

sense Kusch seems to think that it is “every rule for itself”.<sup>358</sup> In reasoning like this, he does also not seem to accept that a person in virtue of once being a member of a community of rule-following people has acquired a *general* concept of the distinction between being correct and incorrect, which could then be applied to whatever *specific* rule they wish to follow, regardless of if someone else is following the same rule or not.<sup>359</sup> Moreover, it will also not suffice to appeal to a person’s past ability to follow the rule and the reason for this is that the rule is open and changeable. If we recall, in following a rule we cannot, according to Kusch, maintain a definite distinction between stipulation and application of the rule. Due to this, a person cannot master and appeal to a universally applicable formula that dictates how they should act in every case where they wish to follow the rule. If it were possible to have such a robust and stable standard with regard to every rule, the community, it seems, would only be needed at the outset, to impart this standard on anyone interested in following the rule. Once this was done, the need for a community of people following the same rule would no longer remain. But since the norms are changing, this is not possible.<sup>360</sup> According to Kusch, the social context is thus needed throughout for the distinction between following a rule incorrectly and correctly to apply to anyone following a rule, because his standard, to be up to code, must be calibrated more than once.

<sup>358</sup> He also opposes what he refers to as the Strong Present-Tense Community Thesis B which states that: ‘If only the distinction between ‘seems right’ and ‘is right’ is generally available in a community, and if an individual has learned the distinction from others, then the individual can apply it to his own rule-following, never mind whether the rule is shared with others in the same community.’ See Kusch 2002, p. 194. He opposes this by insisting on that the rule must be shared.

<sup>359</sup> See for instance Patricia Werhane, *Scepticism, Rules and Private Languages*, (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1992), p. 71–73 for this idea.

<sup>360</sup> As Kusch writes elsewhere: ‘The envisaged scenario is undermined by two considerations: similarity is not identity; and arrays ‘drift’. That is to say, the imagined situation would be a plausible one if the application to new cases involved judgements of identity rather than judgements of similarity, and if the judgements referred back to a fixed and unchanging array of exemplars. In such a scenario there would be a clear ‘fact of the matter’ as to whether a given application is correct or incorrect, and such a fact of the matter would not involve a community. However, similarity and drift are central and not eliminable. And since they are not eliminable, the individual does not have the resources to monitor her own performances in light of an *independent standard*. [...] We get an independent standard only if we bring in continuous interaction among individuals, that is, if we bring in the community.’ See Kusch 2002, p. 205.

As a consequence of thinking so, Kusch thus argues for a rather strong community-thesis according to which '[a]n individual is able to follow a rule only if the individual is currently a participating member of a group in which the very same rule is followed by other members'.<sup>361</sup> In objecting to the community-thesis in sections 5.6 and 5.7, I will address and target one idea common to all or most versions of the community-thesis, the idea that any respectable distinction between correct and incorrect requires an intersubjective scenario.<sup>362</sup>

## 5.5 The community-thesis and recognition-transcendent meaning

The thesis that rule following requires a social context is an important part of the community-thesis. It is also the important part of the thesis as far as this study is concerned, because it is with regard to this idea that I find it reasonable to ascribe to Kripke's Wittgenstein and thinkers in general agreement with him a certain idea about how the meaning of words is, and must, be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. As I interpret Kripke's Wittgenstein and his followers, they believe in the importance of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words in the sense that the proper use of them has to be recognized by someone else apart from one single user. If this account of

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<sup>361</sup> See Kusch, 2002, p. 181. Also Bloor, whose position I have considered before, accepts such a strong thesis: 'Collectivism does indeed have the implication that Crusoe cannot really or strictly be doing what we think he is doing, or what we think he is doing when we are under the influence of the individualist argument. Indeed, it carries the implication that no single individual, whether alone or interacting with others, can achieve such a result by depending entirely on their own resources.' See Bloor 1997, p. 96. Bloor thus agrees with Kusch that rule following requires continuous social interaction.

<sup>362</sup> This does not however mean that it may not be more relevant to target Kusch's (and Bloor's) strong version of the community-thesis. For instance, even if you would feel inclined to accept that you need to be brought up among others to develop a conception between correct and incorrect, you may think that once you have acquired this conception, the role played by your community becomes less important. And Kusch would oppose that.

these thinkers is accurate, we have come across one more idea about how the meaning of words is recognition-transcendent. In contrast to the accounts of such a meaning previously considered in this study, the present account does not state that some meaning-constitutive circumstance or object can extend beyond what the user of some words explicitly or implicitly recognizes it to be, but rather that the norms for the correct use of words must be recognized by someone else than a single user. However, this latter idea is also directly and fundamentally connected to the former accounts and for more than one reason. Let me mention some of them.

To begin with, it seems that according to the community-thesis, the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning would not apply to a single person in social isolation because no meaning, recognized or unrecognized, is applicable to a single user of words. Or to put this differently, within my study I have been exploring to what extent the meaning of words can go beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them recognizes it to be, and in doing so, I have more or less assumed that linguistic competence can be assigned to and be possessed by one person. However, according to the community-thesis, a person can only be considered linguistically competent in the company of others. If this is true, this would seem to suggest an important qualification of my objective and how I in general have approached the possibility of recognition-transcendent meaning.

The community-thesis also appears to jeopardize or qualify the proposal considered in the previous chapter, the suggestion that a person's intuition can inform them of how a word should be used in a fictive scenario and thus be used to reveal some so far unrecognized meaning of the word. The community-thesis seems to imply that if a person's intuition is going to have this function, it must be possible to differ between correct and incorrect intuitive judgements; which, in turn, presupposes a social context. This, in turn, would seem to entail that the project of performing a conceptual analysis only makes sense within a social context; not because others in my community may be better at performing the analysis (that would amount to the qualified appeal to intuition), but because



without the company of others, the distinction between a correct and incorrect intuitively-made response is lost.<sup>363</sup>

I have also in chapters 3 and 4 of this study, to some degree, been leaning towards an individualistic (and idealistic) conception of the meaning of words. I have done so in virtue of arguing that even if Putnam can be correct in thinking that part of the meaning of words may be a posteriori recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them, this requires that the user in question, implicitly or explicitly, recognizes and endorses this possibility. That is to say, they must implicitly or explicitly be committed to the idea that some part of the meaning of their words may go beyond their conception in the sense suggested by Putnam. It seems that thinkers arguing for the community-thesis may accept the spirit of this assessment but offer, according to them, an important qualification of it, namely that the commitment in question only makes sense relative to a community of people.<sup>364</sup> Moreover, in defending intuition-driven conceptual analysis, I have insisted on that we should accept that the rule we implicitly follow in using a word may sometimes be indeterminate or flexible. In the case of this, one may of course want to make a decision on how one should follow the rule in this or that case. The question is however if this is something a competent user can do by themselves? According to the community-thesis, it does not seem possible.

Apart from all this, it is also interesting to consider the community-thesis simply because it expresses a different account of how meaning is recognition-transcendent, in the sense that the meaning of a word must be recognized by more than one person. Therefore, it seems important to consider the community-thesis within the context of my study. Although the community-thesis does not only apply to the words used within a religious community of people, it may

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<sup>363</sup> In arguing for this, the advocate of the community-thesis will perhaps wish to quote Wittgenstein himself when he writes: 'If intuition is an inner voice—how do I know *how* I am to obey it? And how do I know that it doesn't mislead me? For if it can guide me right, it can also guide me wrong.' See Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 213. Drawing upon this, communitarian-minded thinkers may hold that if intuition is going to play an important role, it must be possible to differ between correct and incorrect intuitive judgements, and according to the community-thesis this kind of distinction can only be upheld in a social context.

<sup>364</sup> In some sense they would accept the idealism but not the individualism of my assessment.

be of special interest with regard to such words and such communities. I will offer two examples of this circumstance.

To begin, the community-thesis would seem to problematize certain accounts of how a religion originates or develops because it is not uncommon to hold one particular person, some founding father or mother, to be responsible and of special importance for the initiation of a religion, or for the development of an old one in an innovative direction. In the latter case, this person may have devised an unorthodox reading of the holy scripture of the religion they belong to and this reading may be presented as a different rule for how to read the holy book compared to how it has traditionally been read, even when they have not told anyone else of their proposal. This may also be along the line of what Colin McGinn suggests when he more generally argues for ‘the possibility of someone introducing a new rule which only he follows, say a word which only he (in fact) understands’.<sup>365</sup> McGinn finds this sensible and is convinced that few will beg to differ. David Bloor, however, certainly does.<sup>366</sup> According to him and the strong community-thesis he advocates, what such a person is proposing can only be considered a real rule if it is regarded so by someone other than its inventor. To exemplify this line of reasoning we can consider what he writes about the idea of a single creative genius, which may be compared to the authoritative status commonly ascribed to the founding father of a religion. Bloor writes: ‘The community decides whether the deviant behaviour of the would-be rule-follower is error, or confusion, the misapplication of existing rules, or the innovative following of a new rule. The innovator doesn’t earn the description ‘following a new rule’ until the community decides to award the title – at which stage it be-

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<sup>365</sup> See McGinn 1984, p. 194–95. McGinn describes a fictive scenario in which a person who has been part of a community of people is doing something that according to him can be described as making up a new rule, regardless of whether anyone else knows about this new rule. McGinn exemplifies this possibility by: ‘...a creative mathematician who discovers a new mathematical function which he names and perhaps goes on to investigate (think of the discovery of exponentiation), or a zoologist who comes across a hitherto unknown species and gives it a name. Such newly introduced expressions are of course not incapable of being grasped by persons other than their original introducer, but they would be cases of words which only one member of a linguistic community in fact understands’. See McGinn 1984, p. 195.

<sup>366</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 96.

comes a shared institution.<sup>367</sup> Hence, relative to Bloor's position, it would seem to follow that the innovation or development of a religion is inevitably a social process. For a religious proposal or experience to be seen as authentic, it must be so according to some standard and, according to the community-thesis, this standard cannot be the standard of just one person but only the standard of a community of people.<sup>368</sup>

The community-thesis may also be deemed to conflict with certain religious beliefs about the ground for the objectivity of moral values. Some argue for example that without an external standard, like the standard set by an almighty God, we are left with our own subjective perspective on what is morally correct and incorrect, which according to them would mean, as Nietzsche famously put it, that everything is permitted. Therefore, without some community-transcendent standard, like the thoughts of God, the whole idea of our values having an objective basis is unaccounted for. People arguing for this position also commonly suggest that it does not matter if you are a believer in God or not or if you know what the objective values are or not. The idea is rather that without an external standard, the very idea of our values having an objective basis is hard to make sense of.<sup>369</sup>

This line of reasoning seems to conflict with the community-thesis, not because such an external standard, according to this thesis, may be of no use as long as it is undiscovered and unacknowledged, but rather because it does not constitute a standard before it is recognized and acknowledged by people within the community.<sup>370</sup> Hence, although communitarian-minded thinkers stress the

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<sup>367</sup> See Bloor 1997, p. 107.

<sup>368</sup> Or as Bloor also writes: 'Collectivism [...] carries the implication that no single individual, whether alone or interacting with others, can achieve such a result by depending entirely on their own resources.' See Bloor 1997, p. 96.

<sup>369</sup> In terms of rule following one may perhaps express the idea like this: To be able to accurately apply the category 'morally good' to some action, the basis for your application must be connected to some in relation to us humans external standard, like for instance the standard set by God.

<sup>370</sup> As David Bloor says: 'Consensus makes norms objective, that is, a source of external and impersonal constraint on the individual. It gives substance to the distinction between rule-followers thinking they have got it right, and their having really got it right.' See Bloor 1997, p. 17.

importance of an external standard for each and every one within a community of people, the community as a whole is not accountable to an external standard outside the community. On the contrary, the very idea of a community being committed and accountable to such a standard is unintelligible to communitarian-minded thinkers.<sup>371</sup> Consequently, the very idea of some transcendent being functioning as an absolute norm for us humans would not make much sense in their opinion. If one accepts the community-thesis, one would also perhaps be in a position to question if a being like God, despite its alleged perfection, would be able to perform the mundane task of following a rule.<sup>372</sup>

## 5.6 Questioning the community-thesis

The community-thesis is not limited to a certain category of terms; hence, we can expect it to apply to religious and existentially important words without any special qualification or motivation.<sup>373</sup> The question we need to consider and try to settle is if the very thesis is viable or not, which is the purpose of this section and the following one.

The community-thesis is usually presented as part of the sceptical solution to the problem of rule-scepticism. This is also how I have presented it. This

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<sup>371</sup> In a different context, Kusch writes: ‘...the very idea of omniscience is dubious, at least for the communitarian epistemologist. [...] knowing is a social state, and knowledge is a social status. In calling a belief or statement ‘knowledge’, we ascribe it a certain position in a social network of exchange, argument, and justification. Such a network fulfils the needs of beings that are not omniscient. Indeed, it is hard to see how an omniscient being could fit into such a network. And outside this network the concept has no clear application.’ See Kusch 2002, p. 42–43. This passage is not strictly about the notion of a God, so one should not put too much emphasis on it, but it may exemplify the idea that outside the community of people, the idea of an omniscient being ‘has no clear application’.

<sup>372</sup> Perhaps polytheism is more plausible in this respect than monotheism? Much more can and should of course be said about this issue, but it is only my intention to point out a possible conflict between the spirit of the community-thesis and a certain thesis commonly found within religion or philosophical thinking about our values more generally.

<sup>373</sup> The sceptical paradox is supposed to question all use of words or concepts, see Kripke 1982, p. 7.

entails that one can oppose the community-thesis differently; that is, for more than one reason and from more than one perspective. One may for instance argue that rule-scepticism does not make sense and if one believes that one is successful in arguing for this, the need for a sceptical solution, including the community-thesis, does not arise. That is to say, rather than questioning the solution one questions the intelligibility of the problem that motivates the solution. Some theorists have done just that.<sup>374</sup>

Alternatively, one may accept some version of rule-scepticism, but oppose the idea that this implies that rule following only makes sense within the context of social interaction between people. This is the critical approach that I will adopt. My reason for this is basically twofold. To begin with, at particular points in my study I have committed myself to a certain amount of semantic indeterminacy; for instance, in chapter 3 I accepted what I called sophisticated descriptivism and towards the end of chapter 4 I conceded that the object of intuition-driven conceptual analysis may not be the determinate and distinct object that it has traditionally been assumed to be. Although this may not amount to rule-scepticism it may also not be completely different from it. For this reason, the initial critical approach to the community-thesis, that of directly opposing rule-scepticism, does not seem open to me. Moreover, it is also the community-thesis that contains an interesting thesis about how the meaning of terms is recognition-transcendent in the sense that the norm for the correct use of them must transcend the recognition of just one person. This constitutes a second reason for focusing on the community-thesis rather than trying to defuse rule-scepticism.

In opposing the community-thesis I will initially propose and assume that the core idea of it can adequately be described as the application of a general

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<sup>374</sup> For criticism of this part of the strong community-thesis, see for instance Wes Sharrock and Graham Button, 'Do the Right Thing! Rule-Finitism, Rule-scepticism and Rule-following', *Human Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2–4, 1999, p. 193–210. Some of the comments on Kripke's Wittgenstein by Baker and Hacker also seem applicable to this part of the community-thesis. See for instance Baker and Hacker, 1984, p. 87.

principle to the specific context of rule following.<sup>375</sup> The general principle, which I call the *principle of external assessment*, states that *the entity performing action X should not be the same entity that assesses if action X was done correctly*. The principle should be seen as neutral in the sense that an 'entity' can refer to a person, nation and community; that is, the principle in itself does not establish this. It seems to me that something like the principle of external assessment is assumed by people who put forward and defend the community-thesis. What I mean by this is that thinkers advocating the community-thesis assume that any substantial difference between correct and incorrect must be given some external basis and assessment, which is what the principle of external assessment declares. In applying this principle to the context of rule following, they assume that a single individual constitutes one entity in the relevant sense. By assuming this, they naturally conclude that one and the same person (one entity) is not to be regarded as their own assessor because if they accepted that one entity could assess itself this would be a violation of the principle in question. This is why a different person (a different and distinct entity) has to be brought in.<sup>376</sup> Relative to my present construal of the community-thesis, I believe the problem with the thesis is not so much connected with the principle of external assessment, but rather with how it is applied (by communitarian-minded thinkers) in the context of rule following, because it is then assumed, it seems, that one can only do justice to the principle within this context by seeing one individual as one entity. I dispute this because I find this application of the principle to be only one out of many possible ones. This is important to realize because it is only by thinking differently – that the application favoured by communitarian minded thinkers is the only that makes sense – that the community-thesis can appear reasonable.

In exemplifying one such alternative application of the principle in the context of rule following, we may identify one entity with one distinct thought

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<sup>375</sup> I take this to be a core thesis for most versions of the community-thesis, it seems for instance to be true for the ones identified in the previous section.

<sup>376</sup> Although this construal of the community-thesis is my own, I do not think that it does any injustice to the community thesis. The purpose of this reconstruction is to make it easier for me to isolate and target, and also to communicate, what I find to be problematic about it.

on how to follow a rule. If so, then another thought on how to follow the rule can be considered an external and independent entity in relation to the former one. Or to express this possibility in terms of intuitive judgements, one such judgement can be identified as one entity and, in virtue of this function as a standard for a different entity, that is, a different intuitive judgement. Moreover, assuming that both these thoughts and intuitive judgements belong to the same person, we have also shown how the principle is applicable to a single person. In this case they would not, it seems, need to appeal to a different person for the sake of accessing an external and independent standard.<sup>377</sup>

To persuasively and successfully question the accuracy of this analysis (of how a single person can access a sufficiently independent standard all by themselves), one must show that something is fundamentally wrong with how one individuates entities within the analysis. That is, one must show why it is only by identifying and treating one person, rather than some of their thoughts, as a complete entity that one can do justice to the principle of external assessment. In selecting and individuating entities, we can of course draw the line between different individuals rather than between the different thoughts and intuitive judgements of one and the same individual, but what we need (to be convinced of the viability of the community-thesis) is a good argument for why we must proceed like this for the sake of respecting the principle of external assessment, that is, why this is the only option, rather than only one among many possible ones.

Let us consider some attempts to present such an argument. Sometimes it seems that the kind of analysis just described (that one thought of a person can correct another thought of the same person) will not be accepted by the communitarian-minded theorist for the following reason: no matter how much distance we have between the different thoughts of one and the same person, in the

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<sup>377</sup> This kind of critical remarks with regard to the community-thesis is also similar to those argued by others. See for instance Blackburn, 1984, p. 294; Philip Gerrans, 'How to be a Conformist, part II. Simulation and Rule Following', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 76, no. 4, 1998, p. 582; and William Max Knorpp, 'How to Talk to Yourself or Kripke's Wittgenstein's Solitary Language Argument and Why it Fails', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3, 2003, p. 215–248.

end their concluding thought on how to follow the rule is still only what seems correct to them.<sup>378</sup> That is, in the end they cannot escape their own mind (and if they could, they would not in fact, it might be added, rely on their own mind, but on something else). The driving idea is then that a person may never go beyond what 'seems correct to them' in that they cannot help seeing and assessing the case from their own subjective perspective. This may appear to constitute an irrefutable argument for the community-thesis in that no individual can escape their own mind.

The problem with this reasoning is that it assumes that just because a person has a certain idea in mind on how to follow a rule, this idea is somehow subjective and relative to this person's perspective. That is, rather than seeing one such idea as just one idea on how to follow a rule, one relativizes it to a person and mainly regards it as an expression of that person's perspective on this matter. And of course, once this is assumed, this entity (the amalgamation of a person and their perspective) must naturally be contrasted to a similar kind of "entity", that is, another person with another perspective. True, the idea on how to follow the rule is theirs in the sense that it is currently thought and accepted by them, but it is not theirs in the sense that this is only how they conceive of the matter, that is, something only manifesting their perspective. Once more, one simply treats the person, rather than any of their thoughts, as the basic entity. One can also express the misgiving I have about the argument under consideration by claiming that it involves an illegitimate move from the more general difference between being correct and incorrect to the difference between one person being

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<sup>378</sup> According to Kusch it is not that a person cannot correct themselves in some sense, but that this type of correction is not the same kind as being corrected by someone else. Or as he puts this point elsewhere: 'Wittgenstein is not ruling out the possibility that an isolated individual might correct herself. We do so all the time. It seemed to me that the door was open (I heard noises), but now I realize that it is in fact shut. I thus have shifted from an 'is right' (it is right that the door is open), to a mere 'seems right' (it seemed to me to be right that the door is open). And I have done so in the light of what I now take to 'be right'. Does this not prove that the distinction 'is right/seems right' can be drawn on the level of the individual? It does not. To see why, we only need to note that the 'is right' that we have invoked to correct a 'seems to be right' is itself only a new 'seems to be right'. [...] The only way for me to escape from this iteration is to draw on a 'standard' of what is right. Such a normative standard must be (largely) independent of my individual judgements; otherwise it again collapses into a 'seems'.' See Kusch 2002, p. 97–98.



correct and incorrect. The former distinction may be important to uphold, but it is wrong to equate it with or only account for it through the latter distinction.<sup>379</sup>

Let us consider a different argument for the same purpose (that of explaining the difference a social context is thought to make concerning the possibility of rule following). It is sometimes argued that if we compare the case in which a person is thinking on their own about how to follow a rule with the case in which they are thinking about the same matter together with someone else, we should according to communitarian-minded thinkers realize that the latter case will give rise to features that the former case cannot induce. The following quotation from Kusch, in which he explains why we cannot compare a person reasoning with themselves with their reasoning with somebody else, may exemplify this line of reasoning:

Assimilating individuals to groups is no less problematic. I submit that this assimilation underlies Parity Argument 2, that is, the claim that, as far as normativity is concerned, *intrasubjectivity* is not principally different from *intersubjectivity*. This thought will seem natural and obvious if we think of the individual mind as a group of interacting voices or time-slices. Indeed, many philosophers will find this thought intuitive—after all, it has informed their theorizing at least since Plato’s *Republic*. And yet there are reasons for scepticism regarding this assimilation. Surely, a direct negotiation in the present between myself and my family members differs from a negotiation between myself today, myself yesterday, and myself tomorrow. For instance, my family members might sanction (e.g. browbeat) me if I display intransigence, or fail to cooperate. They might persuade me with unexpected arguments, and they might force me to give

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<sup>379</sup> I believe that perhaps Wittgenstein too is guilty of this illegitimate move when he writes: ‘And hence also “obeying a rule” is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it.’ See Wittgenstein, 1958, paragraph 202. In this he seems to go from the more general distinction between following a rule and only thinking one is doing so to the distinction between *one* person following and rule and only thinking they are doing so. See also Knorpp 2003, p. 242 for raising a similar concern.

in. All this is possible because I have only limited control over the course of the interaction and its termination. A negotiation between my different time-slices is a very different kettle of fish. I have no idea of how I can browbeat my previous or future selves, and my present self has full control over the course of the interaction.<sup>380</sup>

In this Kusch seeks to account for the difference a second person can make. In assessing what he claims, it may be wise to have the following two questions in mind: (1) Does what he claims point to an essential difference between the individual and collective case (that is, between a person within a community thinking about this all by themselves and a person engaging in a dialogue with someone else about this) and (2) even if it does, is this difference relevant for rule following? Bearing these questions in mind, let us examine some of the claims Kusch makes in the quote. One difference between the individual and collective case stressed by Kusch is that, in the latter case, someone else can present to me a thought which I had not considered before and which I perhaps would never have come up with on my own. This is at any rate how I read his suggestion that others can ‘persuade me with unexpected arguments’. If so, one may respond that this can happen, but also that it may not. That is, we have no reason to think that others, as a matter of fact, can do this all the time. Does this mean that others only sometimes have a function to fill with regard to this; when they are able to come up with ‘unexpected arguments’? If so, this would seem to diminish the importance of the social context considerably. Moreover, is it not true that we can on our own suddenly come up with ideas and arguments not previously thought about? They just occur to us; they just “pop up”, so to say. Would this mean that when this happens, I sometimes possess what it takes to

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<sup>380</sup> Kusch 2002, p. 190-191. What he refers to as ‘Parity Argument 2’ is the idea that one person’s thought can correct another one of their thoughts which then can be held to be on par with the idea that one person in a community can correct another person. Hence, according to this argument there would be no essential difference between the case where one person’s thought corrects another one of their thoughts and the case where a person corrects someone else. Therefore, in responding to what he calls the ‘Parity Argument 2’, Kusch is basically responding to the criticism of the community-thesis I have put forward.

follow a rule on my own? To put it another way, if the source for a so far unconsidered argument is someone else or my own mind (and I have little control over both) what difference does it make?<sup>381</sup> I find it hard to tell and because of this, I feel inclined to conclude that even if others may sometimes present unexpected arguments to me, this does not seem to amount to substantial difference between what is true of me in social isolation and what is true of me in the company of others. Lastly, if the possibility of being presented with an unexpected argument is important, one may argue that two people would also not be enough, because one could say that another person may present unexpected arguments to them. And so on.

My comments so far have been concerned with the former of my two questions. Let us also turn to the latter question, that even if we would come across an important difference between the individual and the collective case, does this difference seem relevant for the possibility of rule following? For the sake of making this question relevant, let us assume that, in point of fact, each and everyone one of us is unable to produce one argument that someone else can present to us (perhaps this is part of the almighty God's plan to make us all feel valuable and important). We should then ask: Would this make all the difference concerning our ability to follow a rule? In reflecting on this matter, we should remember that we are not thinking of the quality of the arguments, only that they are arguments that a person has not thought about before.<sup>382</sup> Would this fact in itself then be that important? That is to say, important to the extent that it would mean the difference between following and not following a rule? To me this just does not seem plausible. That is, even if we accept that someone else may come up with one argument or consideration which I for some reason

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<sup>381</sup> I also wonder about the following matter: Even when I discuss with someone else how to follow a rule, must I not accept what they propose before I can be held to act in accordance with what they propose? And when I accept it, is it also what I would propose? What difference does it then make if the source of the suggestion originally came from me or someone else? And in the absence of agreement between me and someone else about what is correct to do, does this mean that neither of us has what it takes follow a rule?

<sup>382</sup> If we recall, according to Kusch and Kripke's Wittgenstein, a second person is not needed in virtue of having an accurate standard or opinion; they are rather needed in virtue of making possible an independent standard.

cannot, I find it hard to believe that this would make all the difference between whether or not I can be held to follow a rule. To anyone thinking so I would, paradoxically as it may sound, respond in the spirit of the sceptical solution, that our rule-following practice does not demand it. That is, in the same sense that our ability to follow a rule does not presuppose an absolute and complete rule without any exception or indeterminacy, it also does not presuppose that one must constantly take into account possible and hitherto unconsidered arguments before one can be held to follow the rule. To elaborate on this, it also does not seem to presuppose that any indeterminacy concerning how the rule is to be followed must be solved before one can be held to follow the rule, and certainly not that any such indeterminacy must be solved within a social context before it can be accepted as an adequate and sufficiently objective solution.<sup>383</sup>

A second individual or a whole community of people may also, of course, as Kusch suggests in the quotation, make my life difficult if I do not listen to them on how to act in accordance with a certain rule but this, it seems, would present a pragmatic reason for why I should follow the rule in the same manner as they do, rather than constituting an essential presupposition for me following any rule at all.

Moreover, in the case of a public conversation I may also, as Kusch states towards the end of the quotation, have 'limited control over the course of the interaction and its termination'. However, I think this may also be true with regard to my own thoughts. We all know that it is hard, sometimes impossible, to have control over the thoughts of our own mind. My thoughts are mine in the sense that they are produced by and located within my mind or body, but not mine in the sense that I can choose to keep or drop them at will. Hence, in a certain sense I have, it seems, as little control over my own thoughts as I may

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<sup>383</sup> This may be something along the line of what Jose Medina thinks when he writes that on 'Wittgenstein's view, our shared techniques of use simply do not leave room for radical determinacy. These techniques do not draw a sharp boundary around the meaning of terms, but they make meanings as determinate as it needs to be for the purpose of particular activities. Whether the term "rabbit" refers to rabbits, to rabbit stages, or to undetached rabbit parts is a doubt that simply do not enter into the minds of those who use the term to coordinate their actions (for instance, rabbit hunters).' See Jose Medina 2006, p. 20.

have over the thoughts of someone else or the outcome of a public conversation.<sup>384</sup> We also know that a person in fact can have more control over the mind of someone else than their own mind. So if limited control over a process is what turns the process or the end result of it into an independent standard, I still see no reason why the mental processes of one person cannot give rise to an independent standard; if the idea is that the standard should be out of their control, some of their thoughts seem to qualify as a possible standard.

In response to what I have argued, one may perhaps wish to suggest that the chance for more varied thoughts may increase if I begin to discuss a certain matter with other people compared to if I just sit and reflect on the matter on my own. This may be true, but again, it does not need to be; due to group pressure and various psychological mechanisms the opposite may in fact be the case and for this reason the variety of different thoughts may not increase with the number of people taking part in the discussion.<sup>385</sup>

To elaborate further on the last points and to also help us appreciate that a social context in itself does not seem to automatically give rise to an independent standard or the features in virtue of which Kusch and Kripke find a social context to be important for rule following, we may consider the following fictive example. Picture a very charming but manipulative religious leader who for some time has had the opportunity to make a deep impact on and strongly influence the minds of some of his devotees. The result of this is that the minds of the people in question are just like a mere reflection of the leader's mind. If the leader was to make a decision concerning how to follow a certain religious rule, he may of course consult with his devotees for the sake of accessing an independent standard along the line suggested by Kusch. One may, however, wonder just how independent the judgement of them would be with regard to how

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<sup>384</sup> The latter may of course be more complex, but that would, if true, only make the difference a matter of degree and not a difference in kind.

<sup>385</sup> Moreover, even if one would think that the chance for more varied thoughts may increase if I begin to discuss a certain matter with people compared to if I just sit and reflect on the matter on my own, would this not suggest that the difference between one person thinking on their own and together with someone else is a matter of degree and not a difference in kind? And if so, the possibility of rule following would not be a matter of all or nothing but a matter of degree.

deeply affected they are by the leader. So far as they know, what he believes to be true and correct is true and correct. That is to say, in relation to the leader, they would not behave and reason along the lines described in the quotation above from Kusch and in virtue of which they, according to him, would make a difference, that is, constitute an independent standard. For instance, the chance of them presenting unexpected arguments is rather slim (due to how strongly influenced they are by the leader) and they will not try to browbeat the leader (they have all too much respect and admiration for him to do that).<sup>386</sup> Drawing upon this fictive example we may, I think, construe a dilemma for communitarian-minded thinkers. Either they (A) agree with me that in this case, the crowd does not make any difference or (B) they insist that it does. If they choose the former option, this would indicate that it is not the social context in itself that is important for rule following, but a certain kind of social context, one that contains a particular type of people. That is, not every social context may be thought to be able to create independent and sufficiently objective standards for people within it for them to be deemed to follow a rule; some social contexts may actually have the opposite effect. It all seems to depend on the minds (perhaps the degree of autonomy) of the people making up the social context. However, I am not sure if such a qualification is consistent with the main idea of the community-thesis, because according to it, it seems to be the distance between different minds that matters, not the quality of the thoughts of each mind. As one reviewer of Kusch's *Knowledge Through Agreement* puts it: 'in developing his communitarian epistemology, Kusch places absolutely no epistemic restrictions on the qualifications of the community members whose agreement constitutes

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<sup>386</sup> Please note that my criticism does not rest on the assumption that Kusch or Kripke's Wittgenstein thinks that one person is correct because someone else thinks so; I am rather pointing out that the reason for why person X can be held to constitute an objective standard for person Y cannot only be that Y is another person than X, because we can present the kind of examples I have just done and by that hopefully realize that the "say-so" of Y may not qualify as an independent and external enough standard in any important sense.

the possession of knowledge. Presumably, getting anyone in your community to agree with you that *p* makes it the case that you know that *p*.<sup>387</sup>

If communitarian minded thinkers instead choose the latter option, the (B) option, this would be more along the line of the community-thesis; that it is the social context in itself that is important. But this option also seems problematic because one then has to accept that the crowd in my example is making a difference, although it is far from obvious precisely why and how they do. What I mean is that it seems rather hard to accept that a person in social isolation cannot follow a rule on their own, but once they are positioned within this kind of context, like the one just exemplified, they suddenly can. That is, in the example with the religious leader the difference between thinking on my own and thinking together with someone else does not seem to matter much.

One may object that the example I have just offered, or analogous ones, is unfair because it is too unrealistic or extraordinary. However, such a response would, it appears, contain the idea of, and the belief in, a “normal” or “ordinary” social context, perhaps one containing freethinking and autonomous subjects prepared to create an appropriate amount of ‘friction’ for anyone trying to follow a rule. I believe however that it may be rather difficult to draw the line between such a context suited for rule following according to Kusch and social contexts not suited for it (perhaps the kind exemplified with the religious leader and his true followers). Most social groups exemplify, to a certain degree, the kind of features that are true in a more extreme form in the social context constituted by the religious leader and his followers in my fictive example. This would then perhaps suggest that the status of following a rule according to the community-thesis is a matter of degree.

We can also relate this more specifically to Kripke’s reading of Wittgenstein. Kripke may be correct in thinking that one person is not following a rule just because they think they are but it seems equally correct to say that one person is not following a rule just because someone else thinks they are.<sup>388</sup> Moreo-

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<sup>387</sup> See Jennifer Lackey, ‘Review of Martin Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement: The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2006, p. 238.

<sup>388</sup> See also Knorpp 2003, p. 239.

ver, Kripke may be correct in thinking that the former idea, the idea that a person is not following a rule just because they think they are, is part of our concept of rule following and for this reason important to account for. However, this idea is not a foundational or neutral idea but in my opinion part of a common-sense account of rule following, an account according to which we can have a rather objective and determinate standard for how to follow a rule. To the extent I am correct about this, this can pose a problem for Kripke's Wittgenstein in that he may be appealing to a common-sense account of rule following that we would not have if we accepted rule-scepticism. That is to say, if we all came to accept rule-and meaning-scepticism, I think this may affect to what degree and in what sense people think that one person is following a rule (or not) just because that person would say so. I will elaborate on this further in the next section.

## 5.7 More remarks on the idea of an independent standard and assessment

Independently of the community-thesis and more generally speaking, the idea of and appeal to an 'independent standard' and 'independent assessment' is not that difficult to appreciate. Since the notion and intelligibility of an independent standard or evaluation is accepted within many contexts, it is important to be conscious of the difference between the common and intuitive reason for invoking such a standard and the reason for appealing to such a standard when arguing for the community thesis. Usually, when we accept the idea and use of an independent standard we normally have something like the following thought in mind: We assume some standard from the outset and we suspect that people for some reason may fail to conform to it. The reason for thinking the latter may vary. It may be that we believe all humans are fallible; so eventually we will all fail to act according to the standard we intend to follow. If we take this possibility seriously, which I think is usually the case, we try to avoid being erroneous by being extra-attentive to what we do and by asking someone else to evaluate our performances. The latter suggestion may come across as supportive of the community-thesis, but closer inspection shows that it is not, as in this case I appreciate the judgement of a second person because I assume that they can



show me I am wrong, if I happen to be, according to a certain objective standard that we are both committed to from the outset. Differently put, I do not consult with a second person in this case just to be able to be correct or incorrect according to a different standard than my own, but rather because I think that their assessment may be better than my own. I may for instance ask someone else what they think about my analysis of the meaning of a certain term as I use it. To some extent, the driving idea behind the community-thesis is the opposite; that I need to invoke an external standard (through someone else) to have something I can be committed and held accountable to. More generally, one may also find it somewhat arbitrary and asymmetrical to insist so strongly on an external assessment with regard to a single person within a community but at the same time view the need for an external assessment of the community as a whole as unintelligible.

This also entails that the communitarian appeal to a social context and intersubjective assessment is different from the idea that it must be possible for a scientific experiment, in order to be accepted, to be reproduced by more than just one person (and more than one time) for the sake of ruling out that the experiment is based on some mistake or is part of some scam. In this case, one presupposes an objective standard from the outset and wants to make sure that the experiment is correctly performed and has the outcome it is claimed to have. I am not saying that this presupposition is correct, only that the appeal to intersubjective control within the scientific context is different from the appeal to a social context within arguments for the community-thesis. This is important to realize because I think that one reason why one may find the community-thesis attractive is that one accepts the following conjunction: (1) That we may make a mistake and that (2) one person is more likely to make an error when thinking on their own rather than together with somebody else. Although this is not how for example Kusch would defend the community-thesis, this idea is not, in fact, uncommon within discussions on this matter. That is, according to some thinkers the problem with the idea of a single rule-follower seems to be that a single person can easily make a mistake while the risk of ten people (following the same rule collectively) doing so is more limited. In reasoning like this, it seems to be implicitly or explicitly assumed that the rule is determinate and that the main problem is that a person can fail to act in accordance to it without realizing it, hence a second person is needed to make sure that this does not happen (or if it does happen, inform the person of the mistake they are guilty of). I find this

reasoning dubious in that I am simply unconvinced that the number of people would make any major difference concerning our ability to avoid mistakes. That is, if the problem is that we may fail to act according to a certain standard, this kind of failure is surely not limited to a single individual, it may also just as easily happen to ten people working together on how to follow a certain rule.

A different reason for appealing to an independent evaluation is that we suspect that a particular person is not going to be able to set aside their own personal interest in a certain matter. In such a case we can find it reasonable to appeal to the evaluation of a second person. This may appear to be a concession to the community-thesis, but closer inspection will once more reveal that this is not the case. The motivation for considering the judgement of a second person in this case is not that the former person is just one individual, but a *specific* individual, one who we suspect will fail to set aside their personal interest.

Let me also, in closing, consider one of Bloor's main arguments for thinking that rule-innovation is essentially a social process. If we recall, just like Kusch, Bloor argues for what is called the 'strong thesis', which states that: '*before someone can truly be said to follow rule R they must belong – really belong – to a community whose other members also follow R.*'<sup>389</sup> Bloor basically objects to the possibility of individual rule-innovation by claiming that innovation is a process composed of two distinct phases, 'initiation' and 'culmination'. According to Bloor, a single person may only accomplish the former because the latter, culmination, is only reached when the individual's proposal becomes communally accepted.<sup>390</sup> He writes:

The important step is to realise that innovation, even the simple innovation of giving something a name, is a process. Being a process it has an inner structure, and that structure is both historical and social. The process can be divided into two main phases. The first may be called the 'initiation', the second the

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<sup>389</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 95. That is, one has to be a current member of a community; it is not enough to have only once been part of a community of people.

<sup>390</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 96–97.

'culmination'. Thus someone may propose that an object has such and such a name, or that such and such procedure become a rule, or that some technique be adopted and understood in a certain way. This act of initiation may go no further: the proposal may fall on deaf ears. Alternatively others may begin to take up the suggestion and model their practices on the new exemplar. Its use may spread and become the accepted currency of interaction. Now the innovation would be complete. This would be culmination: the innovation would have become a veritable institution.<sup>391</sup>

Bloor thinks that an innovation is not completed until a community of people has agreed upon accepting it. If he is correct in thinking so, this would of course rule out the possibility of a person making up and following a rule all on their own. Applied to a religious community of people, it would for instance not seem possible for a member to make up and follow a religious rule in any real sense until their proposal has been accepted by their fellow believers.

I think that Bloor's criticism of the possibility of individual innovation is based on an all too narrow conception of rule following and what should be considered an adequate innovation of a rule. What Bloor calls culmination is a status that can be attributed to an act of rule following but, in my opinion, this does not mean that the activity was not an act of rule following in any real or important sense before it received this status, unless you make culmination a part of the definition of rule following, which you (in my view at any rate) should not. As an analysis of the nature of social or institutionalized rule following, Bloor's account may be correct, but as an analysis of rule following in general it is not. It is simply wrong to extend what is true for institutionalized rule following to all kinds of rule following and demand that an act must be institutionalized or agreed upon before it can constitute a genuine act of rule following.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> One may think that Bloor is only talking about a certain case of rule following, trying to save this from an individualist reading. This would make more sense, but it does not seem to be what he is implying since he

A similar kind of problem arises with regard to how Bloor conceives of and uses the notion 'social' when he argues for the strong thesis. In explaining this I will connect the current discussion about rule following more directly to his take on rule-scepticism. In presenting his response to rule-scepticism, Bloor asks us to imagine a person who owns a piece of land. According to Bloor, no fact about the person alone can establish that they own some land. It is only by placing them in the context of the social institution of property ownership that we may think of them as owning a piece of land. Something can thus be true of the person, although no fact about them separate from this social institution can make it so. It all depends on the social context. In contrast to the community-thesis argued for by Kripke's Wittgenstein, which is presented as a sceptical solution – according to which no fact whatsoever can establish what rule I follow – Bloor actually maintains that his proposal constitutes a straight solution to rule-scepticism. If we only consider facts about a single individual, we cannot establish what rule they follow but if we consider social facts, it is possible to settle what rule they are following.<sup>393</sup> Bloor writes:

Suppose we say Jones owns so many acres of land. What sort of claim is this? Clearly it is about Jones. We take ourselves to be asserting a fact about him – namely, the fact of his ownership. We now encounter Kripke's sceptic, flushed with his victory in the field of mathematics. He thinks legal facts will be easy meat after arithmetic. He therefore challenges us to produce the fact of the matter constituting Jones' ownership. Obviously, if we inspect Jones' person, or his mind, or his behaviour in isolation, we shall fail to meet the challenge [...] We should look elsewhere, to the contracts Jones has signed, and to the deeds in his

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claims that the strong thesis 'must be the basis for our understanding all cases of rule following, including Crusoe-like cases and innovations'. See Bloor 1997, p. 96. Of course, Bloor's position on institutions is more complex and developed than I have accounted for, but this complexity does not seem to add anything to what appears to be the core idea in his arguments for the community-thesis.

<sup>393</sup> See also Kusch 2002, p. 205–206 for a similar idea.

name. We need to look around Jones, not at him, and locate the relevant legal institutions that define his status as a property owner.<sup>394</sup>

To own property we must then, according to Bloor, have a social convention or institution of property ownership. Apart from this convention or institution, no natural or nonconventional fact about a person can make it the case that they own a piece of land. As a consequence of reasoning like this, Bloor seems committed to a certain kind of social constructivism-thesis, which principally appears to consist of the following two thoughts: (1) Not everything is what it is apart from how it is conceived and described and furthermore, (2) for a conception or description to matter, it must be communally endorsed. I find the former idea of the conjunction more sensible than the latter idea and moreover, the former idea is not difficult to make sense of from an individualistic perspective on rule following.<sup>395</sup> That is, one may accept that property ownership is not a natural fact and that it requires a certain conceptualization or description of the universe. However, for such a conceptualization or description to matter and fill its function, it does not need to earn the status of being collectively endorsed.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Bloor 1997, p. 64–65.

<sup>395</sup> In response to McGinn's example of 'a zoologist who comes across a hitherto unknown species and gives it a name', Bloor also writes that: 'The important point is that the status of a discovery claim is not settled by the opinions and judgements of a single innovator. It is only settled when the scientific community has established a consensus. McGinn's talk of a zoologist 'coming across' a new species and 'giving it a name' signally fails to do justice to the process involved. It blurs over the process character of the discovery and encourages us to treat it as a point event. To begin with, species are not things we can come across, though we might come across a finite number of members of a (putative) species.' See Bloor 1997, p. 106. Bloor seems to think that McGinn's individualist position requires that we think of species as being part of the natural world, as 'things we can come across' and since they (according to Bloor) are not like this, McGinn's position is troublesome.

<sup>396</sup> Drawing upon the key terminology of this study we may say that property ownership belongs to the kind of properties that are not recognition-transcendent. If we recall, a mountain may be held to be what it is although no one has recognized it, but it does not make sense to say that an item is worth one dollar even though no one has recognized this to be the case. Being worth one dollar requires that someone recognizes the item is worth that much, which in turn minimally requires a person equipped with the notion or concept of currency.

One may also express my misgivings about Bloor's position by distinguishing between two senses of 'social'. We may accept that 'property-owning' is a social status in the (i) sense that it requires a convention, very much in the same way as 'being pretty' or 'being worth one dollar' requires a convention. The properties of being pretty, being worth one dollar and owning property are all social in this regard, that is, in the sense of not being natural properties of the world. This does not however mean that they are social in the (ii) sense of being communally accepted. They can be of course, but nothing about the former sense of "sociality" leads automatically to the latter sense of it. It is a step that has to be argued for. It seems to me that Bloor is arguing for the importance of the "collective" meaning of 'social' by relying on the "non-natural" meaning of 'social', but since they are distinct, this will not work. And even if he does not move from the latter to the former without minding the difference between them, one should still separate them and notice that one can accept the former without the latter. It is important to realize this because it will stop any argument for some kind of Kantianism and anti-realism to be perceived as an argument in favour of the community-thesis.

## 5.8 Chapter summary

The purpose of this chapter has mainly been to present and critically examine a certain idea about how the meaning of religious and existentially important words may be recognition-transcendent, the idea that any distinction between correct and incorrect uses of them must be recognized by more than only one person. If not, the distinction is thought to be too subjective to measure up to an objective and substantial distinction between correct and incorrect uses of the word. That is to say, if we want to make sense of the idea of an objective and independent standard in the context of using a word, the standard cannot only belong to the user itself. According to this line of reasoning, the meaning of words is thus social in the sense that it must extend beyond the mind of one person but not beyond the minds of all people using the word.

The main reason, I believe, for thinking that only a second individual can account for an independent standard seems to be that when I consider the opinion of a different person I gain access to a *different* and *distinct* mind. That is, the thoughts of a second person are independent of and different to my own

thoughts and beliefs on how to follow the rule, and because of this they can constitute an independent standard for how to follow the rule correctly. Of course, in some sense it may seem natural to regard the mind of one person as independent and different compared to the mind of someone else. Even so, I am less certain that it is *only* by considering the judgement of someone else that I have access to an independent standard, a standard that does justice to the difference between what is right and what seems right. On the contrary, I have argued that the difference between thinking on my own and together with someone else is not as absolute and important as communitarian-minded thinkers seem to assume. Since I believe my argumentation to be successful, I end this chapter with the conclusion that the meaning of religious and existentially words are not recognition-transcendent in the sense that any standard for their correct usage must be recognized by more than one person. This also for instance implies that it is not impossible or unintelligible to assign meaning to the words of a single user, and therefore it is also not impossible to assign a recognition-transcendent meaning to the words of a single user. And to whatever extent the rule, we implicitly follow in using a term, may turn out to be indeterminate and open for several interpretations, this circumstance in itself does not mean that a decision on how to continue to use the word only makes sense within a social context. My conclusion also entails that intuition-driven conceptual analysis does not need to be executed within a social context; or more carefully put, the community-thesis does not offer us any good reason for thinking so.

## 6

# The recognition-transcendent nature of grammar

## 6.1 Introduction

At the beginning of chapter 4 I introduced specification *S*. *S* expressed a certain suggestion of how the semantic meaning of religious and existentially important words may be community-transcendent, namely the idea that such words can have a meaning which goes beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them presently and immediately recognizes it to be but which, in principle, can be accessible to them through intuition and intellect (rather than through some a posteriori oriented scientific investigation). In the same chapter I considered the possibility of making sense of this possibility through what I called intuition-driven conceptual analysis.

In this chapter I wish to relate specification *S*, intuition-driven conceptual analysis and various key theses and points brought forward in this study to a Wittgensteinian-oriented philosophy of religion, represented through the position of D. Z. Phillips.<sup>397</sup> In a number of writings, D. Z. Phillips has argued that

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<sup>397</sup> The later Ludwig Wittgenstein is probably one of the most quoted and referred to thinkers within modern and contemporary philosophy of religion. Apart from demonstrating his impact on philosophy of religion, this fact also says something about just how he has come to be an influential thinker in this area. Even though Wittgenstein made remarks on religion, his name and what many take to be his position regarding this are more associated with philosophers of religion who “preach his gospel”, like D. Z. Phillips (or Peter Winch and Norman Malcolm), than with his own personal contribution. The movement – a Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion – has simply become much bigger than the position of the person indirectly responsible for it. D. Z. Phillips is a representative member of this movement.



the meaning of many words used in the religious context, especially within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, has frequently been misinterpreted. Interestingly and also highly relevant for the present study is the fact that religious believers, which can be assumed to be involved in serious and competent use of such words, are not excluded from this charge; they too according to Phillips can be guilty of this mistake. As a result of taking this stance, Phillips seems committed to the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious words. Due to this, and the fact that his position has been the object of much discussion, it seems relevant to consider his position and, to some extent, compare it to some of the theses previously put forward in the course of my investigation.

I proceed as follows: In the next section I present an account of the notion of grammar as used by Wittgenstein. In section 6.3, I present an initial reading of the position of D. Z. Phillips, focusing on his conviction that many have failed to adequately account for the religious use of words. In section 6.4, I consider a common and critical assessment of Phillips' conviction. Drawing upon this critical assessment I also offer a specification of Phillips' position and in what sense more precisely I consider him to be a believer in a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words. In section 6.5, I open up a more critical investigation of his position. In doing so, I also compare Phillips' approach to a recognition-transcendent meaning of words with the one associated with intuition-driven conceptual analysis. Section 6.6 contains a summary and conclusion. Nonsense

## 6.2 The notion of depth grammar

The exact meaning or function of the notion of 'depth grammar' within the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein is not all that straightforward and easy to access; hence what follows is a rather elementary account which highlights certain features of it that will facilitate my presentation of Phillips' position. The

basic idea seems to be that (i) for a word, we have what can be called a “grammatical rulebook” that determines what would and would not constitute a sensible use of a word. As John H. Whittaker writes, ‘Grammar, in fact, simply is the set of norms by which we distinguish between sensible and senseless uses of a term...’.<sup>398</sup> This explication does not tell us what grammar is more precisely, but as a functional analysis it may suffice for the moment. That is, the grammar for a term determines which uses of the term that would make sense and which would not. To exemplify this function of a grammatical rule, we may consider that it seems meaningful to assert that my cousin is in a good mood since ‘being in a good mood’ is a property that may be ascribed to human beings. Hence, to assert that my cousin is in a good mood is grammatically sensible (even if the statement turns out to be untrue). In contrast, to assert that the tree outside my office is in a good mood or the opposite, that it has had a bad day and is looking forward to tomorrow is not, grammatically speaking, sensible, but just nonsense; a tree cannot be in a good mood, nor can it look forward to anything. What explains this difference is that the grammar for ‘tree’ is not the same as for ‘humans’; what is sensible to assert about trees is very different from what is sensible to assert about people. Moreover, in contrast to a rule of etiquette, a grammatical rule does not tell you precisely what to do in each case to follow the rule; it only dictates what would constitute a sensible and legitimate use of a word. It thus has more in common with the rule for how to move the king in chess; that rule also does not tell you precisely where to move the king, but determines what is an acceptable move within the game. The grammar for a term has a similar function.

It is also commonly thought that grammar is implicit in our use of words rather than explicitly stipulated beforehand and then implemented into our linguistic practice. That is, the grammar for our words is constituted by previous

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<sup>398</sup> John H. Whittaker, ‘Belief, Practice and Grammatical Understanding’, *Faith and Philosophy*, vol.18, no. 4, 2001, p. 465. Or as Michael Forster writes: ‘Wittgenstein’s most basic conception of grammar is that it consists in rules which govern the use of words and which thereby constitute meanings or concepts.’ See Michael Forster, *Wittgenstein on the Arbitrariness of Grammar*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 7.

and actual use of them. Partly for this reason, the grammar for a word is thought to sometimes be difficult to access and thus also commonly distinguished from what is called 'surface grammar' (by for instance being referred to as 'depth grammar').<sup>399</sup> In what follows, it is depth grammar that is of our concern, although I will mainly refer to it as just 'grammar'. The grammar for a word is also believed to be context-dependent, in that what would constitute a grammatically sensible use of a word within one context may differ from what would constitute a sensible use of it within a different context; although, one may add, the surface grammar can remain the same between the contexts.

(ii) One may think that grammar only accounts for linguistic meaning and competence. It is however also frequently thought to have a basic and foundational status beyond this. More generally speaking, it is commonly assumed that we humans have and rely on some basic beliefs and norms that are considered incontestable. These norms and beliefs function as a kind of foundation for all subsequent thinking, reasoning and believing.<sup>400</sup> Wittgenstein also seems to have accepted the idea of such foundational beliefs and norms, but he believed them to be of a contingent nature; they may vary from one culture to the next and within one and the same culture they may also change over time. That is to say, the difference between foundational and non-foundational beliefs is not static or universal.<sup>401</sup> This implies that what at a certain time was unthinkable or impermissible may at a different time be considered rather uncontroversial. Furthermore, and to relate this thought of Wittgenstein to his notion of grammar,

<sup>399</sup> To quote Wittgenstein himself: 'In the use of words one might distinguish 'surface grammar' from 'depth grammar'. What immediately impresses itself upon us about the use of a word is the way it is used in the construction of the sentence, the part of its use—one might say—that can be taken in by the ear—And now compare the depth grammar, say of the word "to mean", with what its surface grammar would lead us to suspect. No wonder we find it difficult to know our way about.' See Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 664.

<sup>400</sup> This is also similar to the idea that we humans conceptualize what we experience and what we are in cognitive contact with; recall for instance my comments on the notion of conceptual schemes in chapter 4. Some would say that these beliefs and norms are foundational in virtue of being necessary for us having any thoughts at all (like 'p and ¬p cannot be true at the same time') while some would rather say that they are foundational in virtue of being self-evident (in the sense that I know I am in pain).

<sup>401</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein *On Certainty* (eds) G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1975 (1969)), paragraph 95–97, 167.

Wittgenstein seems to think that such basic beliefs and thoughts are commonly expressed and manifested in the grammar of words.

Lastly, (iii) relative to the Wittgensteinian viewpoint it is also rather common to equate the verbal and material mode in the sense that the essential nature of to what a term refers and applies and the grammar for the term is intimately connected.<sup>402</sup> As Wittgenstein himself puts it: 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is'.<sup>403</sup> Hence, the fact that Wittgenstein occupies himself with the depth grammar of words should not be taken to convey an attitude of disinterest towards the essential nature of what words are about. Rather the opposite is the case, or as Erich Ammereller explains: '...Wittgenstein does not suggest that we investigate the use of words *instead* of investigating the essence of the phenomena, to which these words are meant to apply. What he suggests is something else entirely and much more radical, namely, that the puzzlement about essence *is* in truth a puzzlement about the use of our words...'.<sup>404</sup> This also points to the importance of grammar with regard to mankind's big questions and how to pursue them. That is, to the extent that we find it reasonable to postulate anything like an essential nature of justice and wisdom, the grammar for 'justice' and 'wisdom' would have a strong bearing on determining what it is.<sup>405</sup>

<sup>402</sup> See for instance Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 370: 'One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word "imagination" is used. But that does not mean that I want to talk only about words. For the question as to the nature of imagination is as much about the word "imagination" as my question is.'

<sup>403</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 373.

<sup>404</sup> Erich Ammereller, 'Puzzles About Rule-Following – PI 185-242' in (eds) Erich Ammereller and Eugen Fischer, *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 130. One may of course think that it seems wrong to say that Wittgenstein would find the notion of essential nature intelligible, but I think this has more to do with how one conceives of essence. See for example Bede Rundle 'Wittgenstein on Grammar, Meaning, and Essence' in (ed.) Richard Gaskin, *Grammar in Early Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 185 who in connection to this writes that: 'Essence' may be used in a broad sense, according to which any correct grammatical observations about a concept, whether positive or negative, can be said to elucidate essence.'

<sup>405</sup> In this respect, the Wittgensteinian perspective on what determines the essential nature of something is different compared to the perspective on this matter put forward by the natural kind externalist.

To sum up the key points put forward in this section, the grammar for words may be held to be important for more than one reason: (i) it sets a standard for the correct usage of words, (ii) it functions as a kind of epistemic foundation and (iii) it determines what is essential for what words apply to. Equipped with this rudimentary account of grammar we are in a better position to introduce and describe certain features of D. Z. Phillips' strongly Wittgensteinian-influenced account of religious language.

### 6.3 Phillips on religious language

According to Phillips, it is often assumed that the meaning of 'real' and 'exists' as used about God within the Judaeo-Christian context is not to be seen as altogether different from the meaning these words have when they are used about humans or physical entities.<sup>406</sup> This assumption is, as stated by Phillips, deeply mistaken because the difference between how the words, correctly interpreted, are used in each context is extensive. Phillips' complaint is not merely that some people think that God exists in precisely the same manner as humans or physical objects, because this is seldom asserted within the religious context he is thinking of, but rather that it is assumed that the word 'exists' is still not used in an altogether different way when applied to humans as when applied to God. As a result of this blunder, all too many thinkers insist that God is real or that God exists without specifying the sense in which God is real or exists. According to Phillips, this implies that many accounts of what certain terms within the Judaeo-Christian context mean are incomplete. That is to say, due to many people's conviction that the word 'exists' in the statement 'God exists' is not that different compared to its use in the statement 'King Charles exists', few people

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<sup>406</sup> D. Z. Phillips, 'At the Mercy of Method' in (eds) Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr, *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Beliefs*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 3.

bother themselves with trying to account for any deeper difference between the uses of 'exists' within the context of each statement.<sup>407</sup>

Moreover, when addressing and exploring issues about the reality of God it is also, according to Phillips, important to realize that God's reality is foundational for the religious believer in the same way that the reality of physical objects, as such, are foundational for most people. Hence, to remark that 'God is real' or 'God exists' is not to be compared with the less foundational statement that this or that physical object is real.<sup>408</sup> It is rather to be compared to the remark that physical objects as such are real. Phillips thinks that many fail to realize this, a failure that in his opinion is manifested in the tendency to regard religious beliefs about God as hypothetical, more or less in the sense that a scientific hypothesis is so, and thus just believed and warranted to the degree that one has a reasonable basis for believing in them. In expressing his dissatisfaction over this interpretation of religious beliefs, Phillips writes: 'Beliefs, such as belief in the Last Judgment, are not testable hypotheses, but absolutes for believers in so far as they predominate in and determine much of their thinking. The absolute beliefs are the criteria, not the object of assessment.'<sup>409</sup>

<sup>407</sup> In opposing Phillips on this, some have stated that religious terms and beliefs within the Judaeo-Christian context are about real and mind-independent objects and that one indication of this being the case is that they are used to refer. In response to this, Phillips states: 'Consider the following: 'I have a hole in my heart'; 'I have a pain in my heart'; 'I have a sadness in my heart'; 'I have God in my heart'. Suppose someone, anxious to show that all these statements have to do with what is real, assured us by saying that they all refer to something'. What has been achieved? Nothing. It is not the reference to 'something' that shows that these statements have to do with what is real. Rather, it is in the contexts in which they are made which inform us what the distinction between the 'real' and the 'unreal' comes to within them.' See Phillips 1995, p. 4–5.

<sup>408</sup> In expressing this thought, Phillips writes for instance: 'When God's existence is construed as matter of fact, it is taken for granted that the concept of God is at home within the conceptual framework of the reality of the physical world. It is as if we said, 'We know where the assertion of God's existence belongs, we understand what kind of assertion it is; all we need do is determine its truth or falsity.' But to ask a question about the reality of God is to ask a question about a *kind of reality*, not about the reality of *this* or *that*, in much the same way as asking a question about the reality of physical objects is not to ask about the reality of this or that physical object.' See D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>409</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 90, see also 1970, p. 102.

The last quotation also bears witness to how Phillips' analyses of religious words and beliefs are based on Wittgenstein's idea of treating certain beliefs as foundational and contextual. According to Phillips and many Wittgenstein-minded philosophers of religion, we should realize that a specific religion, or religion more generally, has its own standard for rationality or intelligibility.<sup>410</sup> Relative to this standard, it is possible to make mistakes but the standard itself has no absolute or deeper foundation. As Phillips writes: 'The criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition. [...] the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself.'<sup>411</sup>

Phillips thus thinks that many people misconstrue the basic function and epistemic status of religious beliefs and hence what the religious words used to express these beliefs mean. Naturally, a mistake of this foundational character, to the extent that it occurs, is hard to isolate, and will spread itself and have a negative bearing on the interpretation of many words and beliefs within the religious context. And this is what Phillips claims to be the case. For instance, when the expression 'beyond our understanding' is used in the religious context – as if one stated that 'God is beyond our understanding' or 'Why this terrible incident has occurred is beyond my understanding' – it is common to think that this expresses our current inability to know some features of the universe that, if known, would help us to comprehend why certain events have occurred. However, according to Phillips this is wrong. The phrase and similar ones when used in the context of religion commonly expresses the attitude that no reason for the events in question can be given. In the context of religion, the expression should then be interpreted as a cry of despair and not as a cry for an explanation.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Compare to Wittgenstein 1975, paragraph 105, 192.

<sup>411</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 4; see also Phillips 1970, p. 7, 69 for similar remarks. This does not however mean that the religious context according to Phillips is disconnected from others; see for instance Phillips 1970, p. 97. Phillips also thinks that religious beliefs and uses of terms can be criticized when they do not do justice to what is accepted within such extra-religious contexts; see Phillips 1970, p. 98–100. This seems however to manifest a different kind of criticism than the purely grammatical one and for the sake of not complicating matters more than necessary, I will not go into this kind of criticism in this study.

<sup>412</sup> D. Z. Phillips and Kai Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 168, 175f.

To sum up, religious believers and scholars alike are being accused by Phillips of having misconstrued the meaning and function of many words used within the religious context. They have thus failed to appreciate that the grammar for a word, like ‘real’ for instance, as used in a certain religious context, may differ from the grammar for the word when used within a different context. The “root behind this evil” is, according to him, due to ‘...the craving for generality, the insistence that what constitutes an intelligible move in one context must constitute an intelligible move in all contexts’.<sup>413</sup>

About Phillips’ position I am not primarily interested in his specific analyses of the meaning of certain religious words but the idea underlying his analyses, the idea that religious people may fail to know the grammatically proper use of terms that belong to the religion they themselves preach and practise. Hence, although I will be focusing on Phillips in this chapter, the purpose is not to present a thorough and deep analysis of his position, nor do I intend to do full justice to the rich corpus of Phillips’ writings. I am instead using Phillips as an instructive example of someone who seems to accept what I call a recognition-transcendent meaning of words from a Wittgensteinian philosophical perspective. My interest in Phillips’ philosophical account of religion is more or less limited to this aspect of it.

## 6.4 A specification of Phillips’ position

A common response to Phillips’ position is that to the degree that an interpretive mistake has been made it is rather Phillips and people accepting his account that are guilty of the error. It is they who misrepresent the proper use of religious terms and the beliefs expressed by them.<sup>414</sup> To deny, as Phillips does, that

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<sup>413</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 87. For probably the most detailed account of Phillips’ philosophy of religion up to date, see Bloemendaal 2006.

<sup>414</sup> See Richard Messer, *Does God’s existence Need Proof?*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 49–50 for a good presentation of this matter.



many religious people use the word 'God' to refer to a mind-independent and transcendent entity or to deny that religious beliefs can be seen as hypothetical in nature, Phillips is doing deep injustice to the common religious use of 'God' and connected terms like 'soul' and 'transcendence'. Of course, Phillips begs to differ. In response to for instance John Hick and Ronald Hepburn, who have made such critical claims in opposition to what he thinks, Phillips writes:<sup>415</sup>

I am suggesting, on the contrary, that it is Hick and Hepburn who are blinded, though not in a sophisticated way, to the depth grammar of religious discourse. They are too impressed by the surface grammar of religious language, which is the source of the conceptual confusion in this context. [...] Despite the protests of these philosophers against an appeal to religious language to find out what is meant by the reality of God, what they have done is to impose the grammar of *another* mode of discourse on religion – namely, our talk about physical objects.<sup>416</sup>

Rather than changing his mind, Phillips then maintains that some thinkers are unable to see beyond the surface grammar of certain religious words. However, these thinkers remain unconvinced of Phillips' analyses. In insisting that it is Phillips who is wrong, many of them appeal to the circumstance that many religious people do not appear to feel quite at home with Phillips' analyses of what the religious words they use mean. This must surely matter to Phillips, the critics claim. That is to say, if the majority of the people of a

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<sup>415</sup> Just to show more specifically what Phillips is responding to, the remarks from, for instance, Hick were as follows: 'I do not know how it ever could be demonstratively proved that Amos and Paul and the other biblical writers presupposed the real existence of the God whom they worshipped; but I also think that anyone who doubts that this presupposition operated in their minds must be blinded in a very sophisticated way to the natural and ordinary meanings of words.' See John Hick, 'Sceptics and Believers' in (ed.) John Hick, *Faith and the Philosophers*, (London: MacMillan: 1964), p. 241.

<sup>416</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 131-132.

religion do not agree with his account of what the terms within that religion mean, his account can surely not be correct. One of Phillips' basic responses to this line of reasoning is that even religious people can be mistaken about the adequate use or interpretation of religious words, so to appeal to them as a kind of infallible and neutral authority on this matter will not settle which interpretation that is the correct one. This response from Phillips has only increased the distance between his position and some of his critics. Not very long ago John Hick wrote for example:

In the end, Phillips was implying that religious people don't mean what they say, but that he knows differently and better than them what they must mean. This constitutes a fundamental flaw in his philosophy of religion: he both appealed to and yet contradicted the use of religious language by devout religious people. He based his case on the actual use of religious language by religious people, within their form of life, but rejected their own understanding of what they are doing.<sup>417</sup>

According to Hick, Phillips' approach is problematic in that he claims to base his analysis of a religious term on how it is actually used by religious people while at the same time not finding it necessary to relate his account with how the religious believers themselves would describe the meaning of the word. Hick thus wonders how Phillips can possibly claim to do justice to what religious people mean while disrespecting what they claim to mean. Does Phillips actually claim to know what religious people mean better than the religious people themselves? To Hick this suggestion seems baffling.

In what follows I will assume that both Hick's and Phillips' positions can be identified and categorized through the conceptual apparatus developed and used in this study. John Hick's criticism of what he conceives of as a disinterest from Phillips' side for the religious inside-perspective seems to be based on a

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<sup>417</sup> John Hick, 'D. Z. Phillips on God and Evil', in *Religious Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2007, p. 440.

version of soft contextualism. That is, in criticizing Phillips' position, Hick seems to assume that the competent and ordinary users of a term cannot fail to know the proper meaning of it. Hence, if one puts forward an analysis of the meaning of a religious word that is not consistent with the general consensus of the people using the word, one should seriously reconsider the accuracy of the analysis. Phillips can also, I suggest, be described, through the terminology introduced and used in this study, but then as an opponent to soft contextualism and as a defender of the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning.<sup>418</sup>

It may be warranted to consider more precisely in what sense Phillips can and should be described as a believer in a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words and hence what to make of his claim that certain religious people do not mean what they think they mean by the use of certain religious words. Sometimes it seems as if Phillips, in telling us what religious people actually mean and do not mean, is involved in some kind of highly sophisticated mind-reading; that he knows what is actually on the mind of certain religious devotees despite their assertions to the contrary. This impression should be resisted in that Phillips is involved in what may be called "grammar reading". As a presupposition for the latter activity, he appears to distinguish between what people intend to mean by a word and to what extent this is in accordance with the grammar for it. He is then, it seems, not mainly concerned with doing justice to what people think they mean by the use of religious words, but with the use itself and to reveal any discrepancy between this and religious people's account of it. Differently put, the sort of meaning he is interested in is a property of words in use and not a property in the mind of the user.<sup>419</sup>

I will naturally return to this idea of Phillips as I proceed, but we may try to exemplify it through a non-religious example. Consider a person who believes, and intends to mean, that 2 plus 2 is 5. I assume that it would be wrong

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<sup>418</sup> In doing so, I mean the original version of soft contextualism introduced in section 2.2.

<sup>419</sup> This also brings out an important but sometimes neglected aspect of Wittgenstein's dictum that 'meaning is use' in the context of philosophy of religion, namely that meaning is not what people think about the use, but the actual use.

to state that such a person does not intend to mean that 2 plus 2 is 5. One may also, however, suggest that in an important sense, the person cannot mean that because it is illogical to say that 2 plus 2 is 5. If a person made such a statement, we may very well respond to them: "Whatever do you mean?"<sup>420</sup> We can also recall my previous example about the statement 'the tree outside my office has had a bad day and is looking forward to tomorrow'. If someone were to say this, they would perhaps mean something by it; nevertheless, they cannot mean it, setting aside for the moment the possibility of a metaphorical reading of this statement. In my subsequent remarks and reasoning I will assume that Phillips should be read as reasoning in a similar manner when he says that certain religious people cannot mean what they hold themselves to mean. This reading of Phillips' approach assumes that he does not think that religious people do not mean what they mean (A) *as far as intending to use words with a certain meaning or to give a certain account of the meaning of this use*. That they do so cannot be questioned, according to Phillips. At the same time, Phillips also thinks that religious people, in principle, can fail to mean what they think they mean in (B) *that they fail to use or interpret the words in accordance to the proper grammar for them*. This is not, in Phillips' opinion, out of the question. What I have just proposed should not be taken as being part of any attempt to defend Phillips' position, nor does it put an end to all questions about it. It is intended as a preliminary attempt to disambiguate what may seem puzzling about some of his claims that religious people do not mean what they think they mean. My reading of Phillips' position also reinforces the impression that in claiming that certain people do not mean what they think they mean, he is focusing on what is intelligible or sensible to mean by a word rather than what people consciously or explicitly think they mean by it.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Or compare to a chess game, in which a player is moving the king in violation to how the king can move across the board. An instructor says, 'You cannot do that!' to which the player sarcastically responds: 'Are you sure because I just did!' But of course, the fact that the player did move the king is not questioned, the instructor only points out that such a move cannot be done if he wants to play the game appropriately, the move does not make sense.

<sup>421</sup> Phillips writes for instance: 'Can a man believe what does not make sense? It is important here to resist the temptation to answer in the negative, just as it is important not to deny that the metaphysician means what

So far I have sought to account for why and how Phillips can be described as a believer in a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important words. In a moment, I will begin to discuss the viability of his position and also relate it to some of the previous points and theses considered in my study. Before that, let me just consider and respond to one possible objection to my reading and use of Phillips within this study. One may wish to object to my description of Phillips as an opponent of soft contextualism and as a defender of the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning on the basis that Phillips' position actually seems closer to strong contextualism. If we recall, strong contextualism states that, as a general rule, only people belonging to a linguistic community can comprehend the complete and adequate meaning of the words used within it; people outside the community cannot do this to the same extent. And of course, if Phillips is more accurately described as a strong contextualist, he cannot at the same time be reasonably read as a critic of soft contextualism.<sup>422</sup> Mark Addis for instance seems to think that Phillips is a 'fideist' and then explains fideism as the position that states that:

[R]eligious language is intelligible only to those who participate in the religious form of life. [. . .] Religious language constitutes a distinct linguistic practice which non-participants in the form of life could not grasp and show to be incoherent or erroneous.<sup>423</sup>

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he says. It is not that these people do not mean what they say. They do. The point to emphasise is that what they want to say cannot be said.' See Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p. 108–109.

<sup>422</sup> That is, it would be difficult to maintain that only people belonging to a religious tradition can know the proper meaning of the words employed within it – which is the thesis of strong contextualism – if they can be mistaken about the meaning – which a rejection of soft contextualism would imply.

<sup>423</sup> Mark Addis, 'D. Z. Phillips' Fideism in Wittgenstein's Mirror' in (eds) Robert L. Arrington et al., *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 85.

What Addis refers to as 'fideism' would be similar to what I have called 'strong contextualism'. To the extent that Addis thinks that Phillips believes that only religious people can comprehend the proper meaning of religious words and discourse, I think Addis is wrong.<sup>424</sup> Apart from the fact that it is hard to correspond such an account of Phillips' position with his criticism of what I call soft contextualism, the textual evidence for thinking that this account does not capture Phillips' position seems quite extensive.<sup>425</sup> If this is what Addis claims, how did he come to this mistaken idea? One possible explanation is that he does not distinguish between the idea that you need to take the religious context into consideration to appreciate what religious believers talk about and the idea that one has to partake in the religious context to appreciate that. True, Phillips seems to accept the former. As previously observed, he has for instance stated that: 'The criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition. [...] the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself.'<sup>426</sup> However, even if one would accept that the meaning and even meaningfulness of religious words are relative to the religious context in which they are found, this does not entail that only a person belonging to the religion in question is competent enough to access the meaning of them.

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<sup>424</sup> This does not however mean that he cannot be accused of accepting different kinds of fideism; see for instance Kai Nielsen, 'D. Z. Phillips on the Foolishness of Wittgensteinian Fideism' in D. Z. Phillips and Kai Nielsen, *Wittgensteinian Fideism*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 54ff. Nielsen argues that Phillips' approach contains more than one thesis that can be identified as fideistic. Nielsen is also the man responsible for making the term *Wittgensteinian Fideism* prevalent through the publication of his 'Wittgensteinian Fideism' in *Philosophy*, vol. XLII, no. 161, 1967, p. 191-209. Phillips does not accept the criticism from Nielsen, see for instance Phillips 2005, p. 65f. However, in this case I am less certain that Nielsen's charge and criticism is based on a mistaken reading of Phillips, but this kind of fideism is however of no concern to the matter under investigation.

<sup>425</sup> See for instance D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 30 for what can be conceived as a refutation of this interpretation of his own position. Of course, Phillips may be wrong about his own position, but one should at any rate take into consideration this kind of remarks.

<sup>426</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 4.

## 6.5 An assessment of Phillips' case for recognition-transcendent meaning

In this section I examine to what extent and in what sense Phillips' proposal and the Wittgensteinian approach he is deeply influenced by may help us to make sense of the recognition-transcendent meaning expressed by specification *S*. In exploring this matter I will relate Phillips' position to some of the points and theses previously brought forward in the course of my investigation. Basically, we are interested in finding out to what degree religious and existentially important words can be applied according to a grammar which goes beyond what the competent and ordinary user of the words directly recognizes it to be but which, in principle, can be accessible to them through intuition or intellect (rather than through a posteriori oriented scientific research). The key idea in the Wittgensteinian account of how this is possible is that grammar is implicit in a person's use of words. It is this that makes it possible to hold a person committed to a certain grammar, even though they are currently ignorant or mistaken about it.<sup>427</sup> Phillips' commitment to this kind of recognition-transcendent meaning of words also explains why he does not consider the religious devotee and user of such terms as an undisputed authority on their proper meaning. To quote Phillips on this: 'In response to my work, they have said that if believers reject the accounts of their belief I offer, their rejection is the last word on the matter. The believers' account is final. [...] According to the impatient philosophers, we must accept the believers' gloss. The suggestion is baffling.'<sup>428</sup> At the

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<sup>427</sup> As Mario von der Ruhr writes about Phillips' analysis on 'immortality': 'That analysis is not, after all, conducted in a vacuum, but informed by insights already articulated in the very religious tradition on whose conceptual inventory the ordinary religious believer also draws.' See Mario von der Ruhr, 'Philosophy, Theology and Heresy', in (ed.) Andy F. Sanders, *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 62. See also pages 60–65 in the same essay for an interesting and sympathetic interpretation of Phillips' position. See also Jamie Ferreira, 'Religion and 'Really Believing': Belief and the Real', in (eds) Timothy Tessin & Mario von der Ruhr, *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Beliefs*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 110, for a similar interpretation of Phillips' analyses.

<sup>428</sup> Phillips 1993, p. 243.

same time, Phillips does not want to hold the religious person committed to anything he would not accept in practice. In this he considers himself to be in agreement with Wittgenstein. Phillips writes:

In disputing the gloss on religious beliefs which theologians, believers or philosophers may give, Wittgenstein does not take himself to have tampered with these beliefs in any way. His touchstone is what is shown in practice. He says of the believer: 'If I say he used a picture, I don't want to say anything he himself wouldn't say. I want to say that he draws these conclusions' (LC, p 71). These conclusions are found in a believer's practice, not in his philosophising about them. Wittgenstein acknowledges that a philosopher would have to revise his account if he found a believer drawing conclusions he did not expect him to draw: 'I want to draw attention to a particular technique of usage. We should disagree, if he was using a technique I didn't expect' (LC, p. 71). Once the unexpected technique comes to light, its practice has the last say; 'All I wished to characterize was the conventions he wished to draw. If I wished to say anything more I was merely being philosophically arrogant' (LC, p. 72). Philosophy mirrors practice; it does not change it.<sup>429</sup>

According to Phillips, Wittgenstein only wants to say what the religious believer themselves would say, nothing beyond that. Hence, relative to Phillips' position, and also Wittgenstein's as Phillips reads him, the grammar for a word is external and objective enough for the competent user of it to be ignorant of it. At the same time, it is internal enough for the user to be committed and accountable to it, and the reason for this is that the only source for the grammar is the person's and everyone else's use of the term. In this sense, Phillips' (and Wittgenstein's)

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<sup>429</sup> Phillips 1993, p. 244–45. The work Phillips refers to in parenthesis is Ludwig Wittgenstein, (ed.) by Cyril Barrett, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, (completed from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).



account seems to do justice to the balance presupposed by a recognition-transcendent meaning of words.

Relative to Phillips' position, but also the Wittgensteinian perspective in general, it seems possible to differ between two kinds of mistakes one can make about grammar in this context: To begin with, we seem to have the suggestion that religious people may be mistaken in that they fail to use a word according to its proper grammar without realizing it. This can be seen as a kind of performance mistake and be exemplified through my previous example of someone who asserts that the tree outside my window is looking forward to tomorrow. The concept of looking forward to something does not apply to a tree, and someone who thought that it did and made statements that manifested this misconception would thus be guilty of this kind of grammatical mistake. A second type of mistake may occur in that even though religious people's use of a word is grammatically correct all the time, they may still misrepresent the grammatical rule according to how it is used when trying to account for it more explicitly. This may be exemplified by Phillips' belief that even if religious people state that God exists, they may fail to appreciate what this amounts to. We can consider each type of mistake as an instance of the more general kind of mistake previously referred to as (B). We may thus differ between the (B1) claim that the competent and ordinary user of a religious word may fail to use it according to its proper grammar and the (B2) claim that although a person's use of the word is grammatically correct all or most of the time, they may fail to present an accurate analysis of the grammatical rule underlying and explaining their use. I deal with each kind of mistake in turn, beginning with the former but giving more attention to the latter.

It seems to me that the degree of the (B1) type of mistake must be somewhat limited. The reason for this is that it does not seem plausible to assume that people are massively wrong or inconsistent in using words, because then one would have no use that can constitute a grammatical standard according to which certain specific and subsequent uses can be evaluated as correct or incorrect. If we recall, grammar is not some free-floating structure, but is deeply relative to the actual use of words; it exists in relation to a linguistic practice and without a rather systematic and sensible use of words, we would have no grammar at all. For the purpose of highlighting this more explicitly, we may compare the use of a word with playing a game. Suppose my daughter Emilia explains a certain game to her sister Ella, who then begins to play for a while. Suppose that

Emilia returns and says to Ella that she has been playing the game incorrectly. One may then wonder to what extent Emilia's accusation can be true. It seems that she cannot mean that Ella has played the game completely incorrect, because it does not seem possible to play any game completely wrong; if one is able to play it, one must do something correct. Hence, it would not seem possible for Ella to play this game (or any game) at all, if she is generally mistaken about how it is to be played. Or if she has played the game in a way that, according to Emilia, appears generally and systemically wrong, one may wonder if Ella has instead been playing a different game, which would make her committed and responsible to a different set of norms than the ones Emilia was thinking of when explaining the game to her from the outset.

In an analogous sense one may propose that religious people cannot be deemed to use religious words in a manner that is massively incorrect. And if they *seem* to be doing precisely that, one may take this to indicate that they are instead using them differently. One may of course suggest that the use of words can be significantly wrong if we invoke and compare it to a "higher" standard completely external to the linguistic practice they partake in and uphold – like platonic forms or the mind of an all-knowing God, assuming such a being exists. This is true, but this suggestion appears rather non-Wittgensteinian.

The possibility of the kind of mistake under consideration thus requires a delicate balance: if there are too many or too big mistakes we have no standard according to which certain uses can be evaluated as correct or incorrect. Therefore, the claim, if it was made, that certain religious people are vastly wrong in the use of certain words seems self-defeating. (Furthermore, if we seem to have too many mistakes, this may be taken to indicate that they are not actually mistakes, but manifestations of a usage according to a different grammar.) Lastly, we must recall that we are exploring to what extent the meaning of words may be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. If an individual errs too much in their use of words, one may also suggest that they do not qualify as a competent user of these terms. For this reason, the (B2) option may seem more interesting to pursue because this presupposes that one is rather

competent at using the terms although one may fail to know how to properly analyse the grammar implicitly manifested in one's use of the term.<sup>430</sup>

Let us then turn our attention to the (B2) type of mistake. In doing so, we investigate more precisely to what degree it seems reasonable to assume that a person can use a word according to a certain grammatical rule without more explicitly recognizing the content of this rule. That is, assuming that the rule is manifested in and constitutively dependent on their use of the word, to what extent can they be assumed to be unable to recognize it more explicitly? To put this question in the proper perspective, we should remember that I, to some extent, have previously accepted the very possibility of a person being ignorant about some features of their use of words. The important and difficult question to answer is to what extent this can be the case. This will also be the key question in our subsequent assessment of Phillips' position. In pursuing this question, I will mainly reflect on a possible problem for Phillips' case, considering the fact that he, in making his case, is drawing greatly upon the later Wittgenstein's philosophy. In doing so, I will draw upon some thoughts from Oswald Hanfling, a contemporary defender of ordinary language philosophy and a well-known commentator on Wittgenstein's philosophy.

In one of his texts, Hanfling discusses Wittgenstein's rejection of philosophical theories by interpreting this as a lack of sympathy towards theories that appeal to something hidden.<sup>431</sup> One aspect of this which Hanfling attends to is that Wittgenstein seems rather critical towards semantic theories that locate what determines the meaning of a word far beyond the context of its ordinary use, in some transcendent domain for example. Within this context, Wittgenstein claims that 'what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us'.<sup>432</sup> Hanfling correctly in my opinion observes that one may think that we have some conflict

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<sup>430</sup> Phillips writes for instance: 'Our talk and behaviour show that we recognize these differences when not philosophizing, but we ignore them when we philosophize. Why do we do this? Much of the answer can be found in what Wittgenstein, called the tendency to sublime the logic of our language...' See Phillips 1993, p. 12.

<sup>431</sup> Oswald Hanfling, 'The Use of 'Theory' in Philosophy', in (eds) Erich Ammereller and Eugen Fisher, *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 192f.

<sup>432</sup> Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 126.

between this remark and Wittgenstein's idea that what is important is the depth grammar because the latter surely seems to be hidden in some way; how else can people, for instance, be ignorant of it from time to time?<sup>433</sup> According to Hanfling himself, this tension can however be resolved by reflecting on in what sense the true and deeper nature of language and meanings of words are hidden.<sup>434</sup> Commenting on Wittgenstein's remark that what we need is 'Insight into the workings of our language, in such a way as to make us recognize those workings; *in spite of* an urge to misunderstand them', Hanfling says:

This insight should lead us to a deeper understanding of the words in question and of the nature of language in general. But this kind of 'depth' is not like that of the hidden items that are posited in science and metaphysics and which, according to PI 126, are 'of no interest to us'; for the required understanding is available for those who take the trouble to reflect on the workings of their own language. The workings are, in a suitable sense, open to view: but in another sense they are not. For the achievement of that understanding – of seeing through the 'surface grammar' – proves to be a matter of considerable difficulty.<sup>435</sup>

According to Hanfling, what is important to realize about Wittgenstein's position is precisely how the deeper aspect of the meaning of our words may or may not be hidden. The meaning is commonly concealed to us due to our tendency

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<sup>433</sup> AS Hanfling writes: 'There seems to be a contradiction between this passage [PI 664] and the statement in PI 126, that 'what is hidden ... is of no interest to us'. The 'depth grammar' of the word 'to mean', for example, was very much of interest to Wittgenstein, as it is to his readers. But how can something be said to lie open to view if it lies deep below the surface?' See Hanfling 2004, p. 194.

<sup>434</sup> For a similar position see Bede Rundle *Wittgenstein on Grammar, Meaning and Essence* (ed.) Richard Gaskin, *Grammar in Early Twentieth-century Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2001, p. 196: 'A speaker may be competent in an area of the language where the rules, if formulated, would be complex, yet he may be quite unable to give an adequate account of his practice.'

<sup>435</sup> Hanfling 2004, p. 195.

to misapprehend the true nature of our use of words, but not in the same sense that certain features of the universe can only be discovered by advanced scientific technology. According to Hanfling, Wittgenstein's hostility "to what is hidden" is only directed towards the latter possibility. Hence, on Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein would not have much sympathy for natural kind externalism and the idea that the meaning of our terms is tied to and dependent on unknown natural kinds.<sup>436</sup>

Moreover, Hanfling thinks that the meaning is not only accessible to us by accident or only sometimes. He rather seems to imply that the solutions to deeper questions about the meaning of our words are essentially before our eyes, presupposed that we realize that it may be difficult to reveal them. More precisely, he seems to think that for the same reason and in the same sense we cannot use words if we do not recognize the difference between correct and incorrect uses of them, we cannot address and investigate certain questions if we are unable to recognize what would constitute a proper response to them. In his own words:

The paradox is similar to that which Plato presented in the *Meno*. Given the question, 'What is virtue?', we are confronted with a dilemma. Either we already know what virtue is or we do not. If the first is the case, then the question does not arise and no discussion of it is needed; if the second, then we would not be able to recognize the correct answer even if we came across it. It is, however, essential to such answers that we recognize them as correct and do not merely take them on trust, as we might in the case of scientific or historical information.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Hanfling himself is also rather critical of Putnam's and Kripke's externalist-oriented analyses of meaning. He writes that: 'Philosophical questions are essentially about meaning, and the meaning of a word is known by anyone who uses it correctly in the contexts in which it is at home. But according to scientific realism, this may not be the last word: the real meaning of words may depend on "scientific essences" – the real nature of things as revealed by science.' See Hanfling 2000, p. 222.

<sup>437</sup> Hanfling 2004, p. 195.

Now in such a system there are rational (logical) constraints by which we distinguish between right and wrong uses of words; between what makes sense and what does not; between what is and what is not implied by a given speech-act; etc. But these logical conditions (unlike those imposed, say, by the nature of the vocal organs) must be within our purview; they must be *available* to those who participate in the use of a language – available to be produced in answer to a question, in challenging an improper use of language and, indeed, in producing or evaluating a philosophical claim.<sup>438</sup>

Hanfling thus thinks that the correct solution to a question like ‘what is virtue?’ is principally accessible to us because it is part of the content of such a solution to be recognized as correct once we have it before our eyes.

To sum up the main points of Hanfling’s reading of Wittgenstein: (i) The depth grammatical meaning of words may be hidden and difficult to reveal although not in the sense of being tied to so far undiscovered natural kinds. (ii) Furthermore, the capacity to recognize an account of the meaning as correct, assuming it is, does not seem to demand the specialized competence possessed by, for instance, a history scholar or a physicist. By virtue of participating in the competent use of words a person should rather, in principle, be able to see if a certain analysis is correct. And (iii) the reason for this seems to be rather similar, if not identical, to the idea that the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of words must be recognizable to the competent and ordinary user of them. As Hanfling writes, it ‘is essential to such answers that we recognize them as correct and do not merely take them on trust, as we might in the case of scientific or historical information’.

Let us relate Hanfling’s reading of Wittgenstein to Phillips’ position and specifically to Phillips’ conviction that religious people may fail to know what they mean, in the sense of failing to know the grammar for the words they use. On the face of it, Hanfling’s analysis may seem supportive of Phillips’ position, since Hanfling’s Wittgenstein acknowledges that the grammar of words may be

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<sup>438</sup> Hanfling 2004, p. 192.

difficult to reveal. Assuming that Phillips is correct in claiming that we should not presume that religious believers in general need to be able to appreciate the accuracy of his analyses, this may perhaps be what explains this circumstance.<sup>439</sup> However, I also think that a particular aspect of Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein may complicate or even problematize Phillips' position. The reason for thinking so is that Phillips claims to have recognized the proper grammar for the words in question. This circumstance may change our verdict about how much support Phillips can expect from Hanfling's position and reading of Wittgenstein, because if it is recognized by someone it seems possible for that person to inform someone else about it. Hanfling writes for instance:

If, for example, a philosopher asks 'What is knowledge?', the answer he seeks is one that can be found by reflecting on the conditions under which the word is used, both by him and by other members of the language community. And if his project is to succeed, then the conditions to which he draws attention must be recognisable as such by his readers: they must, as Wittgenstein put it, 'lie open to view'.<sup>440</sup>

Hanfling seems to think that if the philosophical analysis of a concept is correct, it should be recognized as being so by the ordinary user of it once it is presented to them.

One may of course question Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein, and Phillips or anyone else is certainly free to do so. It seems to me however that Hanfling's reading captures something that is commonly brought forward by Wittgenstein himself and various thinkers following him – that all we need are reminders of what is implicit in the use of our words.<sup>441</sup> I do not mean to propose

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<sup>439</sup> As he puts it: 'One must remember that the ability to believe is not the same as the ability to give an account of one's belief.' See Phillips 1970, p. 263.

<sup>440</sup> Hanfling 2004, p. 192–193.

<sup>441</sup> See Wittgenstein, 1958 paragraph 127.

that Wittgenstein, in this context, uses the concept of remembering literally or completely in the ordinary sense of it. Still, it seems to be used to draw our attention to the idea that grammar and a proper account of it is accessible to us in a certain direct manner. This idea is also similar to one connected with intuition-driven conceptual analysis; according to the latter, to the extent we implicitly use a word with a certain meaning it should, in principle, be possible to reveal what it is by intuitively reflecting on its use.

One may thus perhaps question to what degree the content and outcome of Hanfling's reading would lend unqualified support to Phillips' position, because if a religious person only needs to "be reminded" of what the grammar is, would one not expect their response to a correct analysis to be something like: 'Yes, you are correct, you have made me realize what I have failed to notice on my own'?<sup>442</sup> That is, if it for instance would be correct to think that religious statements like 'God exists' or 'God is love' express foundational propositions (in the Wittgensteinian sense) rather than hypothetical ones, or that the expression 'why God, oh why' as used in the religious context is not actually a cry for an explanation but a cry of despair, would not religious believers recognize this as being true once they are informed of it, even if they would not need to have recognized this more explicitly from the outset? And if they do not accept the analyses as correct, does this not show or indicate that something is not entirely correct about the analyses? In what follows, I will argue that this observation indeed points to a possible problem with regard to Phillips' approach. That is to say, I will argue that the idea that grammar of words is principally open to all to see may problematize his idea that religious people do not, in general, need to be assumed to be able to evaluate the accuracy of grammatical analyses of the words they use. Before turning directly to this matter, I will consider some possible accounts of his approach that may let him escape or be less affected by this criticism.

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<sup>442</sup> John Whittaker writes for instance: 'That is why the recognition of religious superstitions requires only reminders about things that believers themselves might say.' See John H. Whittaker, 'Can a Purely Grammatical Inquiry Be Religiously Persuasive?' in (eds) Timothy Tessin & Mario von der Ruhr, *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Beliefs*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 350–1.



(i) One may possibly wish to question the frequently made report that religious people usually disagree with Phillips; perhaps we have just become accustomed to thinking like this when reading and assessing his position. Perhaps a lot more people than what is commonly assumed agree with him and his analyses of religious language. This is an interesting possibility that maybe needs to be reconsidered and explored further. However, even so, this may not affect the matter we are currently focusing on because Phillips is not primarily arguing that his account is accepted by many religious people, but that with regard to the question if his analyses are accurate, this does simply not matter. Hence, the question of whether people actually agree with Phillips or not can perhaps be left out; at least if we are considering the very possibility of them being mistaken to the extent that they fail to recognize a correct analysis when presented with one.

(ii) But what if many religious words can be used and interpreted differently and Phillips is only trying to make us appreciate one such use and interpretation that is seldom brought to the fore? Occasionally Phillips appears to be doing this. In a response to John Hick's criticism of his account of the meaning of certain religious words and beliefs, Phillips has stated that he 'only wish to stress that there is another kind of belief in God'.<sup>443</sup> This would also be more along the line of the position put forward in chapter 4, that the meaning of terms targeted through a conceptual analysis may differ between different people. However, although I think that we should be open to this possibility, this interpretation does not seem to do justice to everything Phillips claims.<sup>444</sup> That is, sometimes he seems rather to be saying that his analysis is the only correct one, and not only a possible one.<sup>445</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Phillips 1970, p. 129.

<sup>444</sup> See however also Ferreira 1995, p. 111-112 for making the same observation and on the basis of this finding it motivated to ask: 'Which position does Phillips want to maintain?' See Ferreira 1995, p. 112.

<sup>445</sup> Gareth Moore for instance seems to accept what can be called "grammatical pluralism". See Gareth Moore, 'Wittgenstein's English Parson: Some Reflections on the Perception of Wittgenstein in the philosophy of Religion' in (eds) D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr, *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 222. He does not however seem to think that Phillips accepts this possibility. See also Stig Hansen, 'The later Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Religion', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 5, no. 11, 2010, p. 1019, where he writes: 'The likes of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy may be right about a lot of things about the

In what follows I will assume that option (i) and (ii) fail to do full justice to Phillips' position.<sup>446</sup> For this reason it seems warranted to reconsider the option that even when a religious person considers a correct analysis of their use of words more attentively, they can still be unable to appreciate the accuracy of what the analysis states. Sometimes Phillips seems to accept and defend this possibility. For instance, when he presents a certain account of how certain religious terms should be interpreted and he is told that this account is questioned by the religious people who use them, he does not seem to be overly troubled and discouraged by this fact. To the extent this account of Phillips' position is correct, it may highlight what some deem to be controversial about it.<sup>447</sup> Perhaps Phillips is pushing this kind of fallibilism on behalf of the user all too far? If so, one may also accuse him of violating the balance presupposed by the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning, and grammar, of words. One reason for thinking so has been brought to the fore through Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein, because according to this reading, the accuracy of grammatical analyses are either open to view from the outset or possible to make open. As he puts it: 'if they do not initially lie open to view, it is the philosopher's aim to *make* them open to view, for those who are prepared to read or listen. [...] the philosopher's conclusions can be confirmed or disconfirmed directly, by those who have followed the argument. They are expected to *see for themselves* that this proves

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Christian faith, but their theological views are not the only games in town, and ruling competing views on faith, salvation, and religion proper out of court by use of the tag "superstition" lays Wittgenstein and his followers open to the charge of displaying the kind of narrow-mindedness and lack of attention to detail that Wittgenstein saw in Frazer.' He too thus seems to interpret Phillips as doing more than only describing one *possible* use and account of religious words and beliefs.

<sup>446</sup> Please notice the qualification – the fact that they do not do full justice to this – does not mean or imply that they do not do any justice to his position.

<sup>447</sup> See for instance Bloemendaal 2006, p. 388–389. In 'Contemplative Philosophy and Doing Justice to Religion' in (eds) D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr, *Religion and Wittgenstein's Legacy*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 195–196, Van A. Harvey expresses a similar concern regarding Phillips' position when he writes: 'it is not all clear that the contemplative philosopher can "do justice to" the believer's sensibility if the believers do not recognize themselves in the description in which their important beliefs are regarded as glosses.'

(‘shows’) what is being claimed.<sup>448</sup> To the degree one accepts Hanfling’s thought, one may wonder how far an analyst may insist that a certain analysis is correct although the religious believer and competent user of the words that are being analysed is unable to realize this. If Phillips and religious people strongly disagree over the accuracy of an analysis, does this not indicate that something may be wrong with the analysis?

However, to put it in this way may be too strong. It should perhaps not be assumed that every religious devotee as a result of being a competent user of certain terms should be able to appreciate the accuracy of a grammatical analysis when informed about it.<sup>449</sup> We should perhaps only assume that this is the case unless we are offered a viable explanation for why the user may not be able to see through the surface grammar. Hence, and to sum up, if Phillips is arguing that the ordinary and competent user of words may be unable to recognize a grammatical analysis as correct when presented with one, it is less certain that Hanfling’s position can be used as support. In this case, the credibility on Phillips’ case depends on his or our ability to offer an explanation for why the religious devotee should not be assumed to have this ability. In considering this aspect of Phillips’ position, we naturally once more face the kind of questions raised and discussed in chapter 4 with regard to the QAI-response to some of the criticism of intuition-driven conceptual analysis. It thus seems natural to relate the present discussion to the one presented in chapter 4.

If we recall, according to one common version of intuition-driven conceptual analysis, if one is interested in the principle or rule according to which people use a word, one should consult the people assumed to operate with it, perhaps not directly but nonetheless by asking them to reflect intuitively on possible uses of the term within this or that hypothetical scenario. The rationale be-

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<sup>448</sup> Hanfling 2004, p. 193–194.

<sup>449</sup> Simply by highlighting what I mean by this qualification, I may not be able to comprehend the content of certain physical theories about the universe. Why not, you may wonder, when the content may be expressed in English? Well, one main reason for this is that I have not gone through the training and education that is usually needed to comprehend such advanced theories. This would constitute a reasonable explanation for why I cannot comprehend the content of the theories in question.

hind this approach is that the user's intuition, as a general rule, is thought to express what lies hidden in their use of words, if anything does. As Jackson says: 'For what guides me in describing an action as free is revealed by my intuitions about whether various possible cases are or are not cases of free action. Thus my intuitions about possible cases reveal my theory of free action...'<sup>450</sup> Jackson thus seems to regard the user's intuition about possible uses of a term as a rather valuable source or data for working out a proper analysis of the term in question. Also, Goldman is in general positive to the use of intuitive judgements (although he thinks of the proper target of conceptual analysis as something more mental): 'It's part of the nature of concepts (in the personal psychological sense) that possessing a concept tends to give rise to beliefs and intuitions that accord with the contents of the concept.'<sup>451</sup> According to Jackson and Goldman, this does not mean that a person can easily access the rule or principle implicit in their use of a word or concept, nor does it mean that their intuition is infallible. It rather suggests that, as a general rule, the intuition of a competent user of the term is a somewhat reliable instrument for the purpose of revealing what, if anything, that is implicit in their use of it.

Phillips would agree with Jackson and Goldman that some part of the meaning of a word may go beyond what its competent user may recognize. However, in contrast to Phillips, Jackson and Goldman appear to manifest a greater confidence in the user's own ability to make explicit what is implicit in their use of words.<sup>452</sup> However, to what degree the appeal to intuition distinguishes Jackson's and Goldman's approaches from Phillips' approach also depends on how one interprets this appeal to intuition. For instance, with regard

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<sup>450</sup> Jackson 1998a, p. 31–22.

<sup>451</sup> Goldman 2007, p. 15.

<sup>452</sup> Jackson also seems to express a commitment to the idea that certain people may be better positioned than others concerning certain terms. He writes that 'if our audience should happen to be, say, theoretical physicists and our subject to be phrased in terms local to theoretical physics, it would be the intuitions and stipulations of this special subset of the folk that would hold centre stage...' See Jackson 1998a, p. 46–47. Applying this idea to the case of religious language, it would seem important to take into account the intuitive judgements of religious people. This may suggest a certain difference between Phillips and defenders of intuition-driven conceptual analysis.

to the QAI-response and especially the idea that the ordinary user may not be the one best positioned to know the meaning of their own words, we have a standpoint that, in spirit at any rate, may be closer to Phillips' position.

I have expressed some misgivings about the QAI-response in chapter 4. However, even if one did accept the essence of this kind of response, one should notice that it might not be of great help for the sake of defending Phillips' position. In explaining why this is the case, we may recall that some thinkers in support of the QAI-response argued that one should only appeal to the intuition of the competent user of the terms and the intuition of people with an experience of dealing with this kind of questions. One reason for this was that although the typical user may be able to know or figure out how words are to be used in ordinary contexts, not all people are able to know or figure out how they are to be used in more extraordinary contexts.<sup>453</sup> What is relevant to notice about this is that Wittgensteinian-minded thinkers are not in favour of considering possible uses of words under extraordinary settings. For instance, reflecting on what Wittgenstein would find objectionable with the appeal to intuition, John Canfield writes 'He is suspicious of intuition. One reason for suspicion is that by his lights one's mastery of a concept does not justify one in applying it, in the Kripkean manner, beyond its limits'.<sup>454</sup> Hence, for whatever reason the ordinary user may be thought to be less able to know the grammar of their own words, it does not seem to have to do with the fact that grammar is best analysed through the consideration of extraordinary uses of the words in question. Hence, it may not be for this reason that the ordinary and competent user of religious terms may be thought to be less able to appreciate the viability of grammatical analyses in comparison to a more experienced analyst.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> If we recall for instance how Kauppinen put this idea: 'Some concepts will be harder to grasp than others—perhaps most people with normal physiological capacities will be able to tell, when presented with a visual scenario, whether an object is white or not, but it is not as easy to tell whether an argument is compelling or whether a person in a counterfactual scenario should be described as morally responsible or not, if one is to accord with the correct pattern of applications of the concept.' See Kauppinen, 2007, p. 102.

<sup>454</sup> Canfield 2009, p. 131. See also Hanfling 2000, p. 55 for a similar view.

<sup>455</sup> Wittgenstein himself writes for instance: 'When philosophers use a word – "knowledge", "being", "object", "I", "proposition", "name" – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the

Another possible reason for why the ordinary user may be unable to evaluate the accuracy of a grammatical investigation of certain words is that the words in question are unusual, perhaps of a more technical kind. I have considered and objected to this option more generally in chapter 4, where I argued that it seems unlikely that most terms of religious and existential importance are terms of this kind. Phillips does not seem to be of a different opinion concerning this and one may also observe that his analyses are usually directed at terms that can be considered rather common for many religious believers, like for instance 'God'. Consequently, in considering a possible explanation for why the ordinary user of religious terms should not, in general, be assumed to be able to appreciate the accuracy of grammatical analyses, we cannot say that this is because the terms are of a technical and unusual kind.

Perhaps one wishes to suggest that even if we are dealing with ordinary (rather than technical) terms and also confine ourselves to actual (rather than extraordinary and possible) uses of them, it may still take time, effort and intense thinking to recognize that an analysis is correct, assuming that it is, something which the ordinary and religious user of the terms does not have or is prepared to do to the same degree as more experienced and educated analysts. If this is true, this may be used to save Phillips and others from the charge that the analyses they have presented are probably mistaken in virtue of not being accepted by the religious people in competent and ordinary use of the words being analyzed. To respond like this would be to play the "expert card". I have partly objected to this before, but we may have reason to develop my criticism of it with regard to the current case.

Even if this is certainly not the case all the time, it is also not uncommon that one's religious conviction and participation in a religious community or tradition is the result of an active and conscious choice. In that case, it does not seem unlikely that the person who has made the choice has thought a lot about

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word ever actually used in this way in the language which is its original home?' See Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 116.

what their religion is all about. That is, even if one would accept that people in general do not think too much about what it is to have thoughts or what it is to know something, it may still be the case that people who are religious believers as a result of a mature and reflective choice, have done some serious thinking about what certain features of one's religious conviction amounts to. This may not apply to everyone and it may perhaps apply more to people within certain religious traditions than people within other religious traditions. It seems however, to a substantial extent, apply to the religious tradition that Phillips is most occupied with, because within the Judaeo-Christian tradition it is not that uncommon to reason about and discuss the nature and content of religious beliefs and expressions. As Bloemendaal points out, 'at least in Christianity, reflection on our religious language has always been a crucial element of religious practice'.<sup>456</sup>

One may of course, in the spirit of the QAI-response, claim that this is not enough. Having an interest in certain questions about the religious faith of one's choice is not the same as being competent enough to investigate the questions adequately or being able to assess the accuracy of certain analyses of the terms one use. For this reason, it may be argued, one should perhaps only consult philosophically experienced and educated thinkers. However, this may not help Phillips' case, because many of the people who disagree with him are religious people working as philosophers of religion! With regard to them, it does not seem plausible to appeal to a lack of philosophical training and education as part of a possible explanation for why they do not accept his grammatical analyses, because these people possess precisely that.

## 6.6 Chapter summary

I have considered the approach taken by philosopher of religion D. Z. Phillips, an approach very much influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and his notion of depth grammar. For a long time, Phillips argued that

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<sup>456</sup> Bloemendaal 2006, p. 263.

the grammar of words used in religious contexts has been misinterpreted, even by the religious believers themselves. Hence, even though the meaning of religious terms is internal to a religious community it may not be transparent to the ordinary and competent member of it, which in turn, seems to imply that Phillips is committed to the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious words. By drawing upon Oswald Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein and especially his analysis of how the grammar of words according to Wittgenstein can be both hidden and accessible to people in use of them, I have argued that Phillips' case may be problematic. The reason for this is Hanfling's idea that although the grammar may be difficult to make explicit, it also seems to be intersubjective in the sense that once someone has revealed it, it should be possible for everyone to appreciate the accuracy of such an account. I also qualified this idea by proposing that we should accept it as the general rule, and only bypass it if we can come up with a reasonable explanation for why someone should not be able to appreciate the accuracy of a grammatical analysis. However, among the possible explanations that I have considered towards the end of this chapter, none of them seem credible. One may perhaps find others that are, but for the moment I have no clue what they would come to. Even if I have relied extensively on Hanfling's reading of the later Wittgenstein in bringing forward this idea and mainly employed it in my assessment of Phillips' position, we may of course relate it to the idea of intuition-driven conceptual analysis. Applied to it, we may have reason to accept that if someone claims to have produced a successful analysis of a common and public concept, the accuracy of the analysis should, as a general rule, be recognizable to most people in ordinary and competent use of it.



## 7

## Summary and concluding remarks

The purpose of my study has been to address and critically examine the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of religious and existentially important terms. That is, to investigate to what extent and in what sense the semantic meaning of this category of terms can extend beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them recognizes it to be. Within my study, a recognition-transcendent meaning of words has been assumed to presuppose a delicate balance between what can be considered the adequate meaning of words and what the ordinary and competent user of them recognizes the meaning of them to be: The meaning must be external and objective enough in relation to the user for them to possibly be mistaken or ignorant about it. At the same time, the meaning must be internal and subjective enough for them to be committed to it because not every unrecognized fact or object has a bearing on the meaning of their terms. They must somehow be committed and connected to this fact or object for it to be relevant for what they mean by their words. I have also stressed that my study explores the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words in relation to a competent and ordinary user of them. Although this notion must be used with some flexibility it has been important for the purpose of ruling out a trivial sense in which the meaning of words can be recognition-transcendent to someone, like for instance the meaning of 'computer' is recognition-transcendent to a person living during the medieval era; such a person does not know the meaning of 'computer'; but in virtue of not being an ordinary and competent user of the word, he should not be expected to.

What can we conclude? That is, in what sense and to what extent – if it all – can the semantic meaning of religious and existentially important words be recognition-transcendent to the competent and ordinary user of them? I deem my investigation to have demonstrated that this is a real possibility. In this summary I will recapitulate and stress certain features and outcomes of my investigation and how they more precisely support this conclusion.

In chapter 2 I introduced the thesis of 'soft contextualism', which expressed the supposition that people employing a word frequently and with serious intent cannot fail to know its meaning. That is, to the extent that 'God',

'immortality', 'holy' or 'soul' has a certain meaning within a religious community, this meaning can generally be assumed to be transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them, that is to say, to the ordinary member of this religious community. Soft contextualism does not entail that only people belonging to a religious community may come to know the true and complete meaning of the terms found within it, but it does imply that people belonging to it cannot be ignorant of it.<sup>457</sup> In search of a motivation for soft contextualism, I presented what I called an idealistic and individualistic account of linguistic meaning and competence, which stated that the (idiolectic) meaning of words used by one person is constitutively dependent on that person alone in being relative and limited to what they recognize the meaning to be. This account was basically produced through a comparison between linguistic competence and rule following. To repeat the key idea, in the same sense that one cannot follow a rule without knowing it, it was suggested that one cannot use a word without knowing its meaning. Since soft contextualism seems to be inconsistent with the possibility of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words, my investigation of the latter has naturally and automatically also been about the former. However, as my investigation has proceeded, I have also found it necessary to qualify to what extent this, in fact, is true.

In the same chapter, by drawing upon certain thoughts and theses presented by Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam, I presented the position of social externalism. If one accepts social externalism and applies it to religious and existentially important terms, one may suggest that a person can use such terms with the ordinary meaning (rather than with some deviant and incomplete one) although their account of the meaning is incomplete or mistaken. They can do this as a consequence of being committed to the definition of the term accepted within their community, presupposed that their comprehension of the meaning is sufficiently accurate. It was instructive to consider social externalism to illus-

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<sup>457</sup> Soft contextualism was contrasted with strong contextualism. Applied to a religious context, the latter thesis states that a religion can only be fully known from the inside, from the participant-perspective of the true believer.

trate one sense in which the meaning of a religious and existentially important words may be thought to be recognition-transcendent to their ordinary user, and hence also one manner in which one may possibly modify the thesis of soft contextualism; basically by accepting it for a community as a whole rather than for each and every member of it.

However, as I also observed towards the end of chapter 2, this account of a recognition-transcendent meaning of words would perhaps only be of limited interest in the current context. The reason for this is that it presupposes that someone knows what the meaning of the words is and concerning many religious and existentially important terms, we simply have no established or expert definition; we are instead in search for one. This seemed to indicate that social externalism cannot offer us a complete account of how the meaning of all such terms can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. Therefore, we found ourselves with a reason for considering and investigating the possibility of a more global recognition-transcendent meaning. More precisely, is it for example possible for a whole community of religious people, and not just some people within it, to be mistaken about what they mean by the religious words they use? Put another way, do we have reason to reject or modify the thesis of soft contextualism even when applied to a religious community as a whole?

I also observed at the outset of chapter 3 that it is important to examine the possibility of a global and community-transcendent meaning of words regardless of whether we accept the position of individualism or social externalism because they both construe the meaning of words idealistically rather than realistically. That is, according to both theories, as I have interpreted them, someone has to know the meaning, either the user themselves or someone else in their community who they defer to.

In chapter 3, I initially explored the possibility of a community-transcendent meaning of 'God' relative to its use within the Judaeo-Christian community, and beyond. I explored to what extent the meaning of 'God' can be tied to a mind-independent object, assumed to be the referent of 'God', so that to the degree that the ordinary and competent user of 'God' is ignorant about the object referred to by this term, they should also be thought to be ignorant about the meaning of 'God'. What I called sophisticated descriptivism, a position introduced under the influence of John Searle's position on descriptivism, seemed to make this possible up to a point: What religious people hold to be

true of the intended referent, expressed through the descriptions they associate with 'God', do not need to be completely true of an object for it to be considered the proper referent of 'God'. On the face of it, Kripke's causal "theory" seemed however to make possible an even more recognition-transcendent meaning of 'God'. For this reason it naturally seemed important to consider it within the current context.

I did so by critically considering William Alston's Kripke-influenced proposal on what 'God' most commonly refers to. Alston basically argues that religious people can refer to God by the term 'God', either due to having had a direct experiential contact with God, which has given them the opportunity to baptize God 'God', or if they themselves have not had such direct contact with God, they can refer to God by intending to refer to the same object as people who have had such experience refer to by 'God'.

In objecting to Alston's position, I argued that even if it would be possible for a religious person to use 'God' to refer to the object of one's own or someone else's religious experience, no matter if this object fits the descriptions and mental content associated with 'God', this may not be very common among religious people. I have also argued that Alston may be more successful at showing that 'God' picks out its referent independently of certain descriptions associated with 'God' rather than independently of most or some of the descriptions and intentional content associated with 'God'. Along the same line, and by drawing upon Frank Jackson's neo-descriptivism, I argued that what, according to the causal theory, determines the referent of a name does not need to be inconsistent with what according to a certain kind of descriptivism determines the referent. The main reason for this is that whatever type of fact that determines the referent of a term, this referent-fixing fact can be assumed to be either explicitly or implicitly associated with the term by its competent and ordinary user.

In the same chapter, I also put emphasis on the idea of a sortal in the current context; the idea that for an object to be considered the referent of 'God' it must fit the general category associated with the term. Hence, for an entity to be considered the real referent of 'God', it must be a certain *kind* of object and not just any kind of object; perhaps it must be spiritual rather than material. I argued that without a sortal the causal theory applied to 'God' runs the risk of becoming "unbalanced" in that it offers too little to make religious people committed to the referent. For them to be referentially committed to this object by the term 'God', the object must fit the basic category implicitly or explicitly

associated with this term, what I have called a God-sortal. Such a 'sortal' would seem to constitute an important constraint on how mistaken theistic people may be about what they refer to by 'God' while still referring to it.

Towards the end of the chapter, I also explored the possibility of considering certain general terms of religious and existential importance, like 'life' or 'knowledge', as natural kind terms. The reason for considering this possibility was that, if viable, it would seem to account for how the meaning of such terms can be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. I argued, however, that this option might be problematic. One problem is that general terms of religious and existential importance do not seem to pick out a natural kind in the same sense that 'gold' is believed to do; nor do they seem to be used with this intention. The proposal may also not be able to make sense of how questions about the nature of free will, knowledge and God have traditionally been pursued, through intuition-driven conceptual analysis.

And even if one would find it intelligible to apply natural kind externalism to some terms of religious and existential importance, this seemed to presuppose that this option is either explicitly or implicitly recognized by the ordinary and competent user of them. That is, even if all objects picked out by some term were discovered to have some underlying nature in common, this fact alone does not make the term into a natural kind term. Empirical discoveries alone cannot have such a strong and overriding bearing on how a term should be semantically categorized. I do thus not consider it possible for a term to pick out a natural kind, and hence be considered a natural kind term, if people introducing and using the term have no intention to use it like that and no features implicit in their use of it are supportive of such an interpretation.

Lastly, the user of a natural kind term can also not be overly ignorant and mistaken about what the underlying nature is and still refer determinately to it. That is, if I am too ignorant about the underlying nature shared by some objects, my use of 'underlying nature' may not be determinate enough to pick out some specific nature. For this reason I have argued that the very idea of pointing determinately to something without knowing what it is, which can be seen as the core thesis of natural kind externalism, is more complicated and difficult than often assumed by its defenders. This difficulty can be connected to the balance of recognition-transcendent meaning of words. As we know, such meaning presupposes a delicate balance in that the meaning must be external and objective enough in relation to its user for them to be able to be mistaken or

ignorant about it. At the same time, the meaning must be internal and subjective enough for them to be committed to it. It may be that natural kind externalism, in its strong emphasis on a mind-independent natural kind, miscalculates what is needed to uphold the balance with respect to the latter part of this proviso.

On the basis of all this, I concluded that I had reason to continue my investigation of the possibility of a global recognition-transcendent meaning, especially by considering the viability of a proposal expressed as specification *S*. *S* states that religious and existentially important words can have a meaning which goes beyond what the competent and ordinary user of them presently and immediately recognizes it to be but which, in principle, can be accessible to them through appeal to their intuition and intellect (rather than through scientific research on the underlying nature of some features of our universe or by asking some expert in their community).

In chapter 4 I explored the possibility of making sense of *S* through what I called intuition-driven conceptual analysis. The purpose of intuition-driven conceptual analysis is to try to make explicit what is implicit in our use of words, if anything, especially when the words are constitutive of people's classificatory practices. To do so, the conceptual analyst commonly construes detailed thought-experiments and appeals to our intuitive judgement about which uses of a term seem sensible within the thought-experiment. I naturally discussed to what degree this kind of conceptual analysis could be used to account for how the meaning of religious and existentially important words can be recognition-transcendent and it seemed to apply rather well to this kind of terms. It also appeared to offer another possible and constructive reconstrual of soft contextualism, which states: As a general rule, the meaning of religious and existentially important terms is either directly or indirectly transparent to the competent and ordinary user of them; in the latter case it may be that the user implicitly possesses an account of the word's meaning, an account that is possible to make explicit through the process of intuitively contemplating actual and possible uses of the term.

In the same chapter, I also dealt with the circumstance that the viability of intuition-driven conceptual analysis within the contemporary intellectual climate is very much discussed. One may identify several different types of criticism. One is that it is simply inconsistent with the spirit of natural kind externalism. Since I had considered the latter position more thoroughly in chapter 3,

I confined myself to making some important comments on the relation between this position and intuition-driven conceptual analysis. For example, I recapped, but also elaborated on the idea from chapter 3, that the advocacy of the former position seems to presuppose the viability of the latter.

In attending to possible and actual criticism of intuition-driven conceptual analysis, I mainly turned to the current criticism from experimentalist philosophers and thinkers drawing upon modern research within cognitive psychology. What is brought into question by the former thinkers is the universality and stability of what people find to be intuitively correct about possible uses of terms. The latter thinkers maintain that recent research within psychology suggests that the very target of conceptual analysis, at least if we identify it with some mental entity we possess, appears to be too flexible and indeterminate for it to be suitable for any analysis worthy of our time and effort.

My response to this criticism was basically to take much of it seriously and let it have a bearing on to what extent and in what sense one can rely on one's intuitive judgement. Hence, I did not adopt one common critical response, that we would have less disagreement and instability if we only considered the intuitive judgement of professional thinkers or only appealed to a certain kind of intuition. I found that kind of response to be partly unconvincing and in the end also perhaps self-destructive. The reason for the latter assessment is that one common ground for, at all, believing that people implicitly use terms according to some rule is that they are quite able to produce intuitive judgements about possible uses of these terms. What else, it is thought, would be the source for a person's intuition, if not some implicitly possessed information? Hence, to the degree that we disqualify the intuitive judgements of people too much, we run the risk of removing the very basis for believing in this kind of meaning.

I did not however consider this to mean the end of intuition-driven conceptual analysis, but a good reason for endorsing a more modest version of it containing what I called a balanced appeal to intuition. One reason for adopting a balanced appeal to intuition was the risk that intuitive judgments from philosophically experienced and educated thinkers may be affected by their philosophical theories and ambition to present an elegant analysis. For this reason, it seemed important to balance the responses from them with ones from philosophically inexperienced and uninformed, but still competent, users.

I also argued that one should separate intuition-driven conceptual analysis from a common picture of what its target is supposed to be like. This picture of

how the target must be for the project of conceptual analysis to be worthwhile is rather common. Precisely how common it is can be held to be manifested in the fact that once we find ourselves with a reason for questioning this picture of what we are analysing – something precise, stable or shared among different people – some people almost automatically seem to have found good reason for questioning the very idea of conceptual analysis. This inclination should, I think, be resisted. Rather than giving up on the whole idea of something implicit in our uses of words and the common appeal to intuitive judgements to make this explicit, we should only discard this commonly accepted picture. That is to say, we should accept that the meaning of words may be imprecise, flexible and different for different people and still worthy of our attention. Relative to this construal of an intuition-driven conceptual analysis, including its request for a balanced appeal to intuition, I concluded that it seemed to offer a promising motivation for specification *S*.

In chapter 5 I considered a different idea about how the meaning of a word can and must be recognition-transcendent; an idea that any distinction made between correct and incorrect uses of a word must be recognized by someone else apart from the person using the word in question. If not, the distinction made is all too subjective to measure up to an objective distinction between correct and incorrect uses of the word. It seemed relevant to consider this idea, called the community-thesis, within the context of my study and this for more than one reason. For instance, in exploring to what degree the meaning of words can go beyond the competent and ordinary user of them, I have assumed that linguistic competence can be assigned to, and be possessed by, one person. However, as stated by the community-thesis, a person can only be considered linguistically competent in the company of others. If true, this would of course suggest an important qualification of my objective. The community-thesis also seemed to jeopardize or qualify the proposal considered in chapter 4, namely the suggestion that a person's intuition can inform them of how a word should be used in a fictive scenario and reveal some so far unrecognized meaning of the word. The community-thesis seems to imply that if a person's intuition is going to have this function, it must be possible to differ between correct and incorrect intuitive judgements; which, in turn, according to the community-thesis, presupposes a social context. This would seem to entail that the project of performing a conceptual analysis only makes sense within a social context; not because others in my community may be better at performing it (as one who defends the



qualified appeal to intuition would suggest), but because without the company of others, the distinction between a correct and incorrect intuitively made response seems lost.

I opposed the community-thesis mainly by arguing that although one person can help another person see things from a different perspective or may be decided to function as an independent standard, the latter person is not, in principle, needed for the distinction between what is correct and incorrect to apply to the former person's use of words. For this reason, I concluded that the meaning of religious and existentially important words is not recognition-transcendent in the sense that any standard for how to correctly use them must be recognized by more than one person.

In chapter 6 I continued my analysis of how to possibly rationalize specification *S* by introducing a different perspective – a more Wittgensteinian oriented one – represented through the writings of D. Z. Phillips. In a number of writings, Phillips has argued that the grammar of words used in the religious context has been misinterpreted. That is, although the meaning of religious terms is internal to the religious practice, it may not be transparent to the people belonging to it. To the extent this is true it would mean that the meaning of religious words could be recognition-transcendent to the ordinary and competent user of them. Due to this, and the fact that Phillips' position has been the object of much discussion, it seemed necessary to consider his standpoint within the context of my study and to compare it to some of the theses previously put forward in it.

Relative to Phillips' Wittgensteinian-inspired position, it seems that the meaning of a religious word can be recognition-transcendent to its ordinary and competent user in either of the two following senses: either in the sense that the user may use it in a manner which is not in line with the grammar for the word or in the sense that although they may use it in accordance to the grammar, they may still not be able to assess the accuracy of an analysis of the grammar. Regarding the former kind of mistake, I argued that it must be rather limited. The reason for this is that the only source for grammar is actual use. That is to say, grammar is not some free-floating structure, but is deeply relative to the actual use of words; hence, without a rather systematic and sensible use of words, we would have no grammar at all. Therefore, the claim, if it is made, that certain religious people are very mistaken in their use of words seems self-defeating.

The latter kind of mistake was given more attention. By drawing upon Oswald Hanfling's reading of Wittgenstein and especially his analysis of how the grammar of words, as stated by Wittgenstein, can be both hidden and accessible to the user of them, I argued that Phillips' position might be problematic. The reason for this is Hanfling's idea that even though the grammar may be difficult to make explicit, it also seems to be intersubjective in the sense that once someone has revealed it, it should be possible for everyone to appreciate it. It is this aspect of grammar, I suggested, that might make it difficult to correspond Phillips' specific analyses of religious language with the disagreement surrounding them.

In closing, for the last decade, the nature, importance, and consequently the future, of philosophical research have been much discussed. Can we trust our intuitions? Should we begin to interpret traditional objects of philosophical analysis as natural kinds? I welcome this discussion and it has been my aim in this study to show how questions in the centre of it is connected to issues commonly addressed and explored within philosophy of religion. Philosophers of religion commonly debate how one should interpret and construe the meaning of religious words and expressions, in general, or as they occur within a certain religion. Too seldom do we however according to me engage in critical meta-discussions about what it is more precisely that we in this case are supposed to target or what kind of evidence one may appeal to when doing so. This is something we need to be more concerned with. I hope that my study to some extent have illustrated why and in virtue of this, perhaps, may contribute to invoking a higher interest in this kind of questions among philosophers of religion.

## Svensk sammanfattning

I min avhandling utreds frågan om, och om möjligt, av vilken orsak den semantiska innebörden i religiösa och existentiellt viktiga termer, så som 'Gud', 'kunskap' eller 'liv', kan sträcka sig bortom en kompetent användares förståelse av dessa ord. Möjligheten av en sådan mening tycks förutsätta upprätthållandet av en viss balans: meningen måste vara tillräckligt objektiv och extern i relation till användaren för att hon eller han ska kunna missförstå den och samtidigt tillräckligt subjektiv och intern i relation till användaren för att vara det som han eller hon menar. Huruvida sådan mening hos ord är möjlig har bland annat relevans för hur det är möjligt att avgöra riktigheten och rimligheten i olika tolkningar av religiösa och existentiellt viktiga termer. Till exempel, för att en tolkning ska anses vara riktig, är det då nödvändigt att den sammanfaller med den kompetenta användarens egen förståelse, eller kan det anses mindre viktigt eftersom innebörden är oberoende av användarens förståelse?

En viktig aspekt av min frågeställning är följande: i den mån som religiöst och existentiellt viktiga termer, så som 'liv' eller 'kunskap', har en mening bortom vår nuvarande förståelse, vad är förklaringen till det? Beror det på att vissa grenar av naturvetenskapen inte kommit tillräckligt långt fram eller är förklaringen att söka i att de begrepp som termerna korresponderar till saknar framgångsrika definitioner? Och vad bestämmer vilket av alternativen som är det riktiga?

I kapitel 2 behandlas idén att vissa personer i en gemenskap av människor kan använda termer med en innebörd de själva inte begriper till fullo, givet att andra personer i gemenskapen har en komplett förståelse av innebörden. Även om det är en idé värd att beakta och analysera närmare, vilket görs i kapitlet, är avhandlingen framför allt inriktad på frågan om i princip alla personer i en större gemenskap av människor (ett samhälle eller en kultur) kan ha en felaktig eller ofullständig förståelse av innebörden i religiösa och existentiellt viktiga termer.

I kapitel 3 prövas det om det är möjligt att begripliggöra en sådan "community-transcendent" mening hos existentiellt viktiga och religiösa termer. Inledningsvis utreds det om innebörden i 'Gud' kan vara bortom allas förståelse genom att vara avhängig ett okänt referensobjekt. I min prövning av den frågan jämförs Kripkes kausala teori om referens av namn med olika beskrivningsteorier rörande detsamma. Jag argumenterar bland annat för att tillämpningen av

Kripkes teori på 'Gud' inte tycks göra rättvisa åt hur de troende i allmänhet använder 'Gud' samt att Kripkes och William Alstons kritik av beskrivningsteorin inte angriper alla versioner av sådana teorier lika framgångsrikt. I samma kapitel prövas det även om innebörden i generella termer, så som 'liv' eller 'kunskap', kan vara bortom allas förståelse genom att vara bunden till en, än så länge, okänd naturlig sort (en "natural kind").

Av flera skäl finner jag det nödvändigt att fortsätta min utredning av möjligheten av en community-transcendent mening, bland annat därför att möjligheten som behandlats i kapitel 3 inte är tillämplig på alla religiöst och existentiellt viktiga termer. Givet det behandlas i kapitel 4 vad jag benämner *intuitionsdriven begreppsanalys*. Idén är att fastän innebörden hos ord är bunden till vår egen användning av detsamma, kan den vara svår att förstå omedelbart. Genom att intuitivt fundera över och betrakta möjliga användningar av våra termer under hypotestiska förhållanden, kan det i princip vara möjligt att tydliggöra aspekter av dessa ords innebörd som annars tycks gå oss förbi. Kapitlet behandlar även den samtida kritik som riktas mot idén, bland annat från experimentell filosofi och kognitiv psykologi. Jag menar att kritiken har en viss rimlighet, men att *intuitionsdriven begreppsanalys* ändå kan försvaras, givet en viss tolkning av den, bland annat genom ett balanserat nyttjande av intuition och en viss alternativ förståelse av analysobjektet.

I kapitel 5 lyfts en annan aspekt av avhandlingens fråga fram, en som rör idén om huruvida ord enbart kan tillskrivas en innebörd inom en gemenskap av människor. Om riktigt, innebär det att, i den mån innebörden hos ord kan gå bortom någons förståelse, kan det aldrig gälla enbart en person, utan alltid en gemenskap av människor. I min behandling av denna idé fokuserar jag på Saul Kripke's läsning av den senare Wittgenstein och den regel- och meningskepticism som den mynnar ut i. Enligt denna skepticism kan den distinktion som behövs för att skilja mellan en riktig och oriktig användning av ord enbart konstitueras av en gemenskap av användare eftersom hur en enskild individ drar en sådan distinktion är alldeles för subjektiv. Jag ställer mig kritisk till denna senare uppfattning och argumenterar för att en enskild individ inte har det svårare att följa en regel eller använda ord meningsfullt än en gemenskap av människor.

I kapitel 6 jämför jag vissa av undersökningens centrala poänger med positionen hos den Wittgenstein-influerade religionsfilosofen D. Z. Phillips. Phillips har under lång tid argumenterat för att religiöst troende kan missförstå

vad de själva menar med användningen av religiösa ord. Mer specifikt menar Phillips att "djupgrammatiken" för de ord en person använder inte behöver vara direkt uppenbar för honom eller henne. Jag argumenterar för att det finns en viss rimlighet i Phillips position och att den påminner om den position som försvaras i kapitel 4 i min avhandling. Samtidigt uppmärksammar jag ett visst problem med hans position. Rörande det senare anknyter jag till Oswald Hanflings läsning av den senare Wittgenstein.

I min slutsats summerar jag de viktigaste resultaten i min utredning. Jag menar att min undersökning gör det rimligt att anta att meningen hos religiöst och viktiga ord kan gå bortom användares förståelse och att orsaken till det kan variera mellan olika typer av religiöst och existentiellt viktiga termer.

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