# In Defence of Ordinary Language Philosophy[1]

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The Ordinary Language Movement in 20th century philosophy is typically associated with the work of the later Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, and, to some extent, Strawson.[2] The movement was massively influential, but today it's unusual to find philosophers self—ascribing that label. In some circles, the label 'ordinary language philosophy' is slightly derogatory—an indication that the work is somewhat outdated and methodologically flawed. In this paper, we want to counteract that attitude. Some of the core ideas behind the movement are and should be central to work done in all parts of philosophy. We try to articulate how and why ordinary concepts are central to much of philosophy (in a way that they are not to, say, physics). We develop our positive view by responding to some anti-ordinary language arguments found in David Chalmers' paper "Verbal Disputes" (Chalmers 2011). We then contrast our positive view of the role of language in philosophy, with that found in Timothy Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Williamson 2007).

## When Ordinary Language Does and Doesn't Matter

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[2] The seminal texts in the tradition include Austin 1962, some of Ryle's papers (1971), and perhaps Strawson's work on 'descriptive' metaphysics (1959). For an overview, see Parker-Ryan nd. Relevant also is the so-called 'contemporary' ordinary language philosophy (Hansen 2014; 2018; 2020). This includes work in experimental philosophy, but also mainstream subdisciplines of contemporary philosophy, including ones discussed below. One way to view this paper is as exploring the foundations of contemporary ordinary language philosophy.

We'll start with some paradigms of inquiries where ordinary, non—theoretic notions plays no significant role:

> **Doesn't matter:** Physicists study mass and in so doing, they don't care about the ordinary notion of 'mass' or how ordinary speakers of English use the expression 'mass'. Biologists who study genes don't care about the ordinary notion of 'gene'. Economists who study inflation don't care much about the ordinary notion of 'inflation. When doctors study cancer, the last thing they need to think about is the ordinary notion of 'cancer'. Mathematicians and logicians don't care about facts about how ordinary speakers use the word 'infinite'. In all these cases, there's an entrenched theoretical notion that's well defined within the respective disciplines.

With that in mind, why should philosophers care about the ordinary notions of knowledge, or freedom or goodness? Why don't they just introduce new technical terms, in the way these scientific disciplines do, and leave behind the English words 'knows', 'free' and 'good'?

In many parts of philosophy there is a deep deference to and focus on the ordinary concept, with an accompanying interest in the lexical item that expresses that concept. This paper is an effort to explain why and to defend that strategy. Before we get to the normative point — that deference to the ordinary is a good thing — first some data about the various ways deference to ordinary language permeates many parts of philosophy. Note the strength of the claim, which is important: we take deference to ordinary language to permeate *many* parts of philosophy, but not all. That would be much too strong.[3] The below generic generalizations, accordingly, are to be understood as generics, that is as expressing a variable quantificational force that varies by domain (deference to ordinary language is ubiquitous in formal semantics but barely present in philosophy of biology, for example). With that in mind:

- **Epistemology**: Epistemologists are interested in knowledge and the conditions under which people can obtain knowledge. Here is one thing epistemologists typically **don't do**: they don't just start their papers with a technical definition of 'knows' and then use that in their theorizing. They are concerned with what ordinary speakers talk about when they use 'knows'. They are also interested in

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[3] In addition, we don't maintain what we could roughly think of as the converse claim that if something is of philosophical interest, there is an ordinary language term for it. A pessimistic metainduction should convince one of this: depression is of philosophical interest but prior to somewhat recently there was no term picking out exactly that state (there was of course things like 'melancholy', 'ennuie', 'spleen', but they aren't quite the same.) Inevitably, our language is to some future language as 19th century English is to our language with regards to 'depression'. And we *also* don't think that, even if a term exists in ordinary language, and is of philosophical interest, it's worth studying its ordinary usage. 'Substance' is an example--we shouldn't try to learn about, say, bare particulars by seeing what the folk say about substances. We thank a reviewer for making us get clear here (and for the 'substance' example).

what ordinary speakers think and say when they use those terms. This is why over the last thirty years, many of the most central debates and theories in epistemology have, in large part, been inextricably intertwined with data about the lexical semantics of 'knows'. This is most obviously so for discussions between contextualists, invariantists, and relativists about knowledge (respectively discussion in DeRose 1992, Lewis 1996,  Cohen 1999, Hawthorne 2003, McFarlane 2013 chapter 8, but much else). These debates are also the background for the most important contemporary discussions of skepticism (e.g. Derose (1996), Cohen (1988)). We see the same in other domains of epistemology. Thus Stanley and Williamson 2001 argue that knowing how is a species of knowing that, explicitly basing their view on the semantics of knowledge-how attributions. Ian Rumfitt (2003) demurs, and uses as evidence the fact that the languages such as French, ancient Greek, Latin, and Russian lexicalize knowledge how and knowledge that differently. Across huge swathes of epistemology, then, ordinary language is important.[4],[5]

- **Moral Philosophy:** Here is something moral philosophers typically **don't do**: They don't just start their papers and books with stipulative definitions of 'good', 'bad', and 'ought', and then use that in their theorizing. Instead they pay careful attention to what ordinary speakers think and say when they use those terms. A snapshot of some of that work: At the start of the 20th century (at least per the potted history of analytic philosophy that suffices for our purposes), G.E. Moore (1903) set the tone for ethical theorizing with his defense of moral intuitionism, which placed heavy and somewhat spooky constraints on both the ontology and epistemology of value. A couple of decades later, logical positivists and others reacted to that, and proposed non-cognitivist theories of value (notably Ayer 1936, Stevenson 1944), according to which there was no non-natural reality out there for us to intuit. In cutting out the world from our theory of value, they were left with the explanatory burden of explaining our value-laden thought and talk, and emotivism, as its name suggested, proposed that such thought and talk expressed our feelings about parts of the natural world as opposed to expressing non-natural properties or states of affairs. That in turn inaugurated a research program thriving to this day of making sense of how moral talk, syntactically and semantically seemingly on a par with fact-stating talk, can interact with it while having such a foreign purpose. In 1965, Geach focused energy on his Frege-Geach problem, which presents the issue acutely. If 'eating meat is wrong' expresses disapproval, a non-cognitive attitude (stylised in the literature as 'Boo

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[4] We are not the first to draw attention to this in the context of ordinary language philosophy. See the Hansen works already cited and the Ludlow cited below.

[5] Not all epistemologists are concerned with ordinary language. If one is working on epistemic logic, for example, one might be interested in proving soundness and completeness, and ordinary language won't be of any help. And in some cases the debate itself may turn on whether ordinary language is an adequate source of evidence, as when one assesses Moore-style anti-skeptical arguments.

eating meat!'), then how do we explain the acceptability of 'if eating meat is wrong, then we should subsidise R&D for lab-grown meat' in light of the fact that 'if boo eating meat!, then we should subsidise R&D for lab-grown meat' is nonsense. For some important recent work, see Schroeder 2008, Charlow 2014, Silk 2015, and references therein. While the (often quite technical) details don't matter to us, we should note that this literature is deeply immersed in the careful analysis of ordinary thought and talk. An inability to handle certain natural language embeddings involving ethical vocabulary is viewed—in this research program—as involving important consequences all across the foundations of metaethics.[6]

Attention to the ordinary notions have proved useful throughout philosophy. Here are a few more examples:

- **The nature of belief and thought:** Here is something philosophers of mind who are interested in the nature of belief **don't do**: they don't start their papers and books by introducing stipulative definitions of 'belief', 'hope' etc and then talk about whatever those stipulations pick out. They try to figure out what is expressed by the ordinary notions of 'belief' and 'hope'. They are interested both in the phenomenon picked out by the ordinary notion and by the thoughts and beliefs speakers have when they use them. Much of this literature relies on linguistic data about belief reports. For example, data about what kinds of expressions can be substituted salva veritate within the scope of "believes that", the nature of opacity, and the kind of ambiguity manifested by 'John believes someone in this room is a spy', which provides evidence of a difference between de re and de dicto beliefs. This has spawned much work in mind and language and philosophical logic for over half a century (e.g., Quine 1956, Kaplan 1968, Salmon 1986, Hawthorne and Manley 2012, Keshet 2010 , Chalmers 2006 and much, much else).[7]
- **The nature of truth**: Here is something philosophers who are interested in the nature of truth typically **don't do:** They don't start their papers and books by stipulating a meaning of 'true', and then theorize about what the stipulation picks out. Instead it aims to describe what the ordinary truth predicate stands for (if anything) and what speakers think and believe when they use it. In doing so, a great deal of linguistic data has been helpful. Deflationary theories of truth (e.g. Horwich 1998 originally coming from Ramsey 1927), for example, note the undeniable fact that the word 'true' is used to generalize over utterances (when

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[6] Again, there are many exceptions. For example, some utilitarians will approach the topic not through ordinary language, but instead use technical terms. Ordinary language doesn't and shouldn't constrain thinking about, say, the non-identity problem.

[7] Exceptions here include philosophers who introduce technical terms like 'mental representation' and use that as their core theoretical term, bypassing the need for ordinary language.

we say 'Everything Kripke said was true') and, not being able to find any other facts about truth (such as correspondence), conclude that that fact exhausts the function of 'true', and that accordingly utterances of the form 'P is true' just say what p says. Linguistic data, then, works in tandem with metaphysical exploration (or scepticism thereof) to produce minimalism; but minimalism without the linguistic data wouldn't be much of a theory at all. In the same vein, an important constraint on theorizing about the liar paradox is that we get an account of 'contingent liar sentences' (made famous by Kripke 1975), perfectly natural sentences that lead to big logical complications. A logician proposing a theory of 'trueish', a technical notion for which definitionally Liar paradoxes didn't arise wouldn't get much attention.[8]

- **The theory of generics and genericity:** What are generics and genericity? Work in psychology shows that generic generalizations, those expressed by sentences like 'Tigers are striped' are cognitively fundamental, a way of thinking about the world that arises before explicit quantification. In addition, other work shows that we tend to make cognitive mistakes with such thoughts. In order to fully understand these quirks—like that we're much more likely to judge generics which attribute dangerous or striking properties true of a given kind even if few members of that kind possess the property, and thus to behave in a certain way—we need to understand the manifestation of genericity in language.

- **Theory of Causation**: Theorists of causation have paid close attention to how the verb 'to cause' works. For example, its context sensitivity has been a subject of much discussion (see e.g. Lewis 1973: 558; Schafer 2012; and Swanson 2012 for a helpful overview). And particular theories about semantics have been thought to be relevant for our metaphysics of causation. An example discussed by Swanson shows this. George Lakoff (1965a) influentially argues that sentences like the below have the same "deep structure":

  ○ Floyd caused the glass to melt.
  ○ Floyd melted the glass.

  Although contested, Eric Swanson points out: "*The truth of this hypothesis (or a hypothesis close to it) would be profoundly important to philosophical thought about causation*. Among other things it would open up a whole new range of causal locutions against which to test our metaphysical theories of causation." (772, our emphasis) The exact details aren't important—see Swanson and references therein if you're interested in the behaviour of such idioms—it's that, again, natural language seems relevant to metaphysical theorizing.

- **Philosophy of time**: Peter Ludlow is quite explicit that "we can gain insight into the metaphysics of time by studying the semantics of natural language" (1999:

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[8] Some salient exceptions to this generalization include those in the Tarskian tradition who think the natural language conception of 'truth' is problematic and work more or less with a stipulative version.

xvi). Very roughly, he thinks that the famously differing cognitive and behavioural significance of sentences like the following, where now is time $t$, of someone uttering in a Starbucks far from the office 'I have a meeting now' and 'I have a meeting at $t$' is best explained by a theory of reality, in particular time, according to which nowness is a metaphysically important feature of the world capable of guiding action, which is to say a non-B-theoretic theory of time. And, in fact, for reasons like this, Ludlow defends the A-theory. On such a way of approaching metaphysics, language is straightforwardly very strong evidence in favour of metaphysics, and while Ludlow's language-first approach to metaphysics is surely heterodox today, it shouldn't be discounted without consideration.

What these cases illustrate is that much important work in core parts of philosophy are what we'll call Ordinary-Language Guided (O-L Guided).

> **OL-Guidance:** An investigation is O-L Guided if it aims to investigate (and understand) those parts of the world that a particular ordinary language expression picks out and, in so doing, is in part guided by data about the relevant ordinary language terms.

Our sense is that the examples above are not isolated—they are typical of much good work in contemporary philosophy. OL guidance doesn't cover everything one might associate with 'ordinary language' philosophy: there's little of the typical Wittgensteinian paraphernalia of 'form of life' and 'grammatical rules' etc. Despite that, there's at least an ordinary language sense in which OL-Guidance is a form of ordinary language philosophy.

Having established the OL-Guidance describes many areas of contemporary philosophy, we can turn to a normative question: Is OL-Guidance a good thing or would it be better for these parts of philosophy to leave ordinary ordinary language behind and instead develop terminology that's more precise and crafted to particular theoretical tasks? We think OL-Guidance is not just good, but essential, and we'll develop our argument for that in response to a Chalmers-style objection to OL Guided philosophy.

## A Chalmers-Inspired Objection to O-L Guidance

David Chalmers' paper "Verbal Disputes" contains a powerful argument against O-L Guidance. Rather than going through the details of Chalmers' view of verbal disputes, the method of elimination, and the subscript gambit, we'll present our version of an

Anti-OL Guidance argument that can be extracted from that paper. The conclusion is that we *shouldn't* be OL Guided and that the practice described above is misguided.

The argument start with three core claims and then some elaborations:

Three Core Claims:[9]

1. *Conceptual Pluralism*: If an ordinary language expression, T, semantically expresses concept C,[10] there will be indefinitely many other concepts, C1...Cn, that are in the vicinity of C. Don't assume that C is causally, normatively, or explanatorily privileged. Explore the entire neighborhood.
2. *Property Pluralism*: If an ordinary language term, T, denotes a property P, there will be indefinitely many neighborhood properties: P1...Pn, that are in the vicinity of P.[11] Don't assume that P is causally, normatively, or explanatorily privileged. Explore the entire neighborhood.
3. *Pluralism as Default Assumption:* Conceptual and Property Pluralism should be the default assumption in philosophy: to give priority to C or P is a fetishistic attachment to ordinary language.

As a corollary this yields what we can call *pluralistic philosophy:* Since what T happens to pick out isn't more philosophically interesting than all the other concepts and properties in the vicinity of T, the question: "What is T?" shouldn't be philosophers' primary focus. Instead we should explore the entire neighborhood of properties and concepts, and then see what causal, normative, and explanatory work each can do.

Applied to 'knows', this means we shouldn't be particularly interested in what 'knows' denotes. It might be JTB+(something), but finding that 'something' (whether it's some kind of safety condition or something else) isn't philosophically significant. Instead, we should articulate all the properties in this vicinity $P_1, P_2,…,P_n$ (JTB, JTB + safety, JTB + X, reliabilism, etc). Once we know the truths about each of these, including their explanatory roles, then we know all that's worth knowing. There can be a residual

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[9] Based on this passage in Chalmer's paper: "...there are *multiple interesting concepts* (corresponding to multiple interesting roles) in the the vicinity of philosophical terms such as 'semantic', 'justified', 'free', and *not much of substance depends on which one goes with the term*. The model also leads to a sort of *pluralism about the properties* that these concepts pick out. For example, it naturally leads to semantic pluralism: there are many interesting sorts of quasi-semantic properties of expressions, playing different roles. It leads to epistemic pluralism: there are many different epistemic relations, playing different roles. It leads to gene pluralism: there are many different things that deserve to be called "genes", playing different roles. The same goes for confirmation pluralism, color pluralism, and so on." (Chalmers 2011:539-40, our emphasis)

[10] We don't assume anything particular about concepts, except that they are associated with expressions (perhaps as denotations) and play some role in thought.
[11] As in fn8, we are agnostic about the nature of properties, apart from being committed by what we say to the claim that they are abundant.

debate about which one of these the English expression 'knows' denotes, but an obsession with that question is, according to Chalmers, a form of fetish. This point generalises: it applies to 'freedom', 'time', 'art', 'causation', 'beauty', 'democracy', and other core philosophical terms. In realising this philosophy can free itself from the shackles of ordinary language philosophy.

Why would it be fetishistic to take an interest in which property the English expression 'knows' (or 'art' or 'causation' or …) picks out? Because, and here we're paraphrasing Chalmers, once we know the truth about all properties in the relevant vicinity (e.g., about JTB, JTB+safety, reliabilism etc), the extra true belief (e.g., which one of these 'knows' happens to pick out) does not correspond to any significant increase in our understanding of the world.[12] Here are some quotations from Chalmers that give a sense of his view:

> "In practice, sensible philosophers and scientists who are not concerned with metalinguistic matters are almost always willing to set aside these residual questions [about which of the $P_1$, $P_2$, $P_3$ are in fact denoted by P] as insignificant. As always, these residual questions carry *with them a distinctive sort of pointlessness*. If we are interested in understanding, it is best to simply move on." (537-8, our emphasis)

And:

> "the significance of the residual question (once the other questions are settled) seems to reduce to the significance of the linguistic question of what [philosophical terms] refer to, and has *no interest of its own*" (536, our emph).

And:

> "If we are not concerned with language, then we should not be concerned with the missing sort of knowledge." *(536)*

## Defending O-L Guided Philosophy Against the Chalmers-Inspired Objection

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[12] Other than the metalinguistic piece of information: that this is the property denoted by 'knows'. The argument isn't denying that it is a fact that that one property is denoted by that expression. It's not even saying that such information is worthless. What it *is* saying is that its epistemic value is much less than the value got by exploring all the different 'Tn's.

The Chalmers-Style objection fails for two big reasons, both of which reinforce the normative conclusion that a version of Ordinary Language philosophy is both a good and an essential philosophical methodology.

Put abstractly, the objection to Chalmers is this: It's not a fetish to care about, e.g., the ordinary notion of knowledge, because that's the notion speakers use when they talk and think. The term "knowledge" denotes what they care about. If you care about what people care about and if their caring (and talking and thinking) plays important explanatory roles, then T should be the centre of attention.

We'll illustrate this using some of Timothy Williamson's claims in *Knowledge and Its Limits*. The central thesis in Williamson's book is that knowledge is a sui generis mental state, not reducible to a combination of truth, belief, justification, something else, or any combination of thereof. This sui generis mental state plays important explanatory roles, Williamson argues. For example, it explains facts about assertion, evidence, and action, which is to say it explains a lot. No matter what you think about the details of this view, one thing is clear: it is knowledge and not knowledge$_1$, or knowledge$_2$ or knowledge$_n$ that has these properties. In other words, it is what 'knowledge' denotes that plays these important explanatory roles.

Here is a helpful way to think about it: Knowledge is a core philosophical topic because it's the thing that matters to humans, it's what we talk and think about, and what that motivates us. The same is not true about 'knowledge$_1$', "knowledge$_2$", etc. It's because knowledge matters in these respects (and 'knowledge$_1$', "knowledge$_2$" etc don't) that epistemology is about knowledge, and not 'knowledge$_1$''. This is why it is not a fetish—to use Chalmers' terminology—to care about the denotation of 'knows'. Imagine a Chalmers-style cluster of knows-properties: $K_1...K_n$. The K that 'knows' picks out will be super special and worthy of very special attention because it plays such important explanatory and motivational roles in our lives. The Ks in $K_1...K_n$ are not on a par the one denoted by "knows" has a distinctive philosophical halo.

This point generalizes and shows why it's a good thing for philosophers with certain aims to be be OL-Guided:

> **CARE (as reason for OL-Guidance)**:
> (i) If one aim of theorizing in a domain is to understand what ordinary speakers think and talk about using an ordinary language term, T, then we have to figure out what the denotation of "T" is (because the denotation of "T" is what they're talking about).

(ii) If one aim of theorizing in a domain is to understand what ordinary speakers say and think when they use "T", then we have to understand the meaning of "T" (because that meaning is what constitutes the content of their talk and thought).

Both of these aims then require OL-Guidance. We'll say of those who have such aims that they CARE.

CARE explains the different ways in which apparently identical topics are treated in sciences and in philosophy. Physicists working on time don't CARE, because it doesn't make much difference to them what ordinary speakers are talking about or thinking about when they use the term 'time'. They're not in the business of explaining and understanding human thought and agency. That is a big part of the reason, plausibly, why in fact philosophers of time don't tend to concentrate too much on words like 'time'.[13] Many philosophers, however, CARE. That's why philosophers of time are OL guided, while physicists are not. The same goes for terms like "causation". If you CARE about the role of thought and talk about causation among ordinary speakers, you'll be OL Guided. Importantly, not all theorists of causation CARE: the aim of their research might be to understand the nature of scientific laws or explanations, and that can lead them to be interested in a phenomenon in the neighborhood of causation, say Causation$_1$. But some do. We'll expand on this limited nature of OL-Guidance below.

CARE as a motivation for OL-Guidance also explains why technical terminology isn't OL-Guided. When Kripke introduced the term 'rigid designator', he wasn't OL-Guided. In particular, he wasn't guided by the meaning that 'rigid' has in English. None of Kripke's discussion of rigidity, and none of the subsequent discussion, focused on how the term 'rigid' is used in English. One reason for that was a complete disconnect between the phenomenon Kripke was investigating and anything that speakers say or think using the term 'rigid'.[14]

According to the Chalmers-style argument, we shouldn't CARE about what, say, the expression 'freedom' picks out. We should just learn as much as possible about all the properties in the freedom-vicinity. If we've done that, but don't know what the expression 'freedom' picks out, we're not missing anything more than an insignificant metalinguistic fact: "at worst [we're missing].. one of those facts under a certain

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[13] At the same time, those philosophers who do attend to ordinary language talk in thinking about the metaphysics of time, such as Ludlow (1999: xiv-xvi), explicitly do so because they think metaphysics should mesh with facts about human language and behaviour, like the supposed semantic and action-guiding difference mentioned above between temporal indexicals and names of times.
[14] That said, there are of course mild associative motivations for the choice of terminology. Kripke wouldn't have named rigidity 'stinky designation' or 'funny designation'. That would just be confusing.

linguistic mode of presentation." In other words, all we're missing is information about which of the properties in the freedom-vicinity the word 'freedom' picks out. If we are not concerned with language, then "…we should not be concerned with the missing sort of knowledge." CARE shows that this is a fundamentally mistaken line of thought. Knowledge of the semantic value of a string of letters isn't *all* you're missing. You're also missing the content of our talk and thought: what we are saying and thinking when we use 'freedom'. You're missing what we agree and disagree over when we use those terms. Finally, you're missing that which plays important roles in motivating and coordinating our actions. That points to a further 'worldly' fact that's being missed: the phenomenon in the world we care about is the one that 'freedom' picks out.

## An Objection to CARE

We can here imagine someone, inspired maybe by Chalmers' fetishism objection, ask:

> The argument against Chalmers will be compelling only *if* we accept (what of course many philosophers have thought) that philosophy has the particular aim of understanding ourselves. If *that* is what we are doing then it seems clear why ordinary language should matter. It's less clear why it should if our interest isn't (as it were) so self-directed.

Here is the overall structure of our argument: Suppose someone cares about one or more of (i)-(iii):

> (i) What humans say or think using natural language
> (ii) What motivates our actions
> (iii) The phenomena in the world that we CARE about (and that motivates our actions)

For someone with those interests, OL-guidance is a good strategy. The data at the beginning of the paper shows that this lesson has been absorbed and that those interests are broadly shared. Two points are worth noting here. Firstly, (i)-(iii) are not just about *ourselves* (our thought and talk), as the objection has it. It is also about the phenomena in the world that we think and talk about, and which motivate our actions. The subject of philosophy is, to a large extent, what we care about. We care about the big questions, about what knowledge and truth and justice are, and we care about these questions because these notions are cognitively and conatively central to our lives, and they are that, in turn, because they are *important*. So it's a methodology that goes via human concerns and then out into the world. Investigation into the relevant worldly phenomenon is not a linguistic investigation. As Austin says, "...*we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.* (Austin 1956:182). And secondly, we have not, so far, *advocated* for having

the interests in (i)-(iii). We're observing that philosophers across the discipline have these interests, that it's reflected in their methodology, and that it's a good motivation for careful attention to various properties of ordinary language expressions.

This last point, however, is a bit too modest. While we have no interest, or competency, in being the interest-police, it does strike us as implausible to claim that an interest in (i)-(iii) somehow isn't appropriate or isn't appropriately philosophical. If philosophy is anything, it is, at least, what good philosophers have been doing. (i)-(iii) is a good description of much important philosophical work. None of that is to deny that those who don't share those interests are also doing philosophy, or that they have deviant interests and should be converted.

## ANCHORING

So far, we've been letting the proponent of the Chalmers-style argument get away with talking about property-vicinities, e.g., properties in the *vicinity* of freedom or knowledge. This notion of a vicinity, or grouping or neighborhood, of properties and concepts, is at the core of the Chalmers-style argument. However, and this is closely related to CARE, we need a deep understanding of the ordinary language notion, in order to create vicinities. We call this the ANCHORING role of ordinary language. "Vicinity" makes sense only relative to an anchoring point: there's no such thing as a vicinity *simpliciter* (just as there's no such thing as nearby *simpliciter*). So the first question to ask is: "Vicinity of what?" If again we use 'knowledge' as an illustration, the answer seems obvious: we're talking about concepts and properties in the vicinity of *knowledge*. The point generalizes: We're interested in vicinities around *freedom*, *belief*, *causation*, etc. In all these cases, the anchoring point is an ordinary language expression, and then we somehow define a similarity relation to it. That gives us the scope of the relevant vicinity. If that's how the vicinities are generated, then, again, an interest in what the ordinary language expression picks out is not a fetish. On the contrary, it's a precondition for engaging in the kind of pluralism that Chalmers advocates, as well as for those theorists, like the theorists of causation just considered, who don't need to CARE about the ordinary notion in their research.[15] The underlying principle can be summarized as ANCHORING:

> ANCHORING: The meanings and denotations of ordinary language expression serve as anchoring points for conceptual vicinities: The conceptual vicinity of T is whatever is relevantly similar to T. In order to find what's relevantly similar to T,

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[15] Chalmers appeals to the idea of a functional or explanatory role. Note that these must be the explanatory roles of something. That something is the ordinary language notion.

you need to first know a lot about T. The process of vicinity creation starts with an understanding of T. The relevant kind of understanding of T comes through OL Guidance.

Here's an analogy to make this vivid: Suppose we try to define a cluster of cities: those that are similar to Paris. In order to do that, we can't just say: *Oh, it doesn't matter much what 'Paris' denotes — an obsession with that is just a fetish*. On the contrary, the cluster creation can't get off the ground without detailed knowledge of what "Paris" denotes. You cannot assess relative similarity with Paris without relying on knowledge about the properties of Paris. Even if you agree with Chalmers that conceptual vicinities are important and that we should not privilege the concepts that happen to be picked out by the ordinary language terms, the anchoring point is crucial. if ANCHORING is correct, then identifying the conceptual vicinities relies on OL-Guidance.

Note that anchoring applies across the board. In particular, it applies to what some might call deferential terms. According to externalist orthodoxy, many ordinary language terms, such as 'arthritis', 'contract' and 'brisket' have their extensions determined by a subset of the linguistic community, the experts. Call such terms Expert-Deference Terms (ED-terms). An initial thought is that ED-terms don't require OL-Guidance, and that CARE and ANCHORING don't apply because meanings are determined by these experts. The experts can do whatever they want with it and they don't need to heed OL-Guidance. Maybe 'time' is like that: it's a ED-term, so its meaning is determined by the experts and the experts are the physicists. On this view, the physicists are using the ordinary language term, but they are in charge. They can do whatever they want with it and don't need any OL-Guidance. In Burge's original (1979) thought experiment, the central argumentative move involved just such a change: we're asked to imagine that the medical community decides to use 'arthritis' as a term that denotes ailments that can occur in the thigh, thus overruling the ordinary language notion.

This line of thought is too simplistic for three reasons. First, experts are not free to introduce meanings willy nilly. If the medical experts were to decide tomorrow that 'arthritis' were to denote a certain kind of wart on the toes, then they would just have introduced an ambiguity. The wiggle room experts have is restricted by anchoring in the ordinary notion. Just how anchoring restricts is a difficult question, but we don't need a full account of how the restriction works in order to see that there are restrictions. Second, not all terms are ED-terms. Timothy Williamson and Miranda Fricker are experts in epistemology, but they don't determine what 'knows' or 'knowledge' means in the mouths of ordinary speakers. The speech community doesn't defer to Williamson and Fricker on judgements about 'knowledge' in the way they defer to doctors on 'arthritis'. Speakers of English don't defer to Gibbard's judgements about what 'good' or 'ought' denotes. He defers to them. The same goes for most of the

terms mentioned in the introduction to this paper. "Time" however, is a tricky case. That brings us to the third point: even when there is deference, it's something that's difficult to discern and assess the effects of. How do you discover whether 'time' is different from 'knows' with respect to ED-status? You pay careful attention to the behavior of speakers. That involves paying close attention to the way in which the ordinary notion is used, i.e. you need OL-Guidance *even if just to reassure yourself that you don't need OL-guidance*.[16]


## Talking Stock: From CARE and ANCHORING to Ordinary Language Philosophy

We've made three claims:

> (i) OL-Guidance as a matter of fact dominates large parts of philosophy.
>
> (ii) OL-Guidance is a good and inevitable methodology because of CARE and ANCHORING.
>
> (iii) OL-Guided philosophy is a form of ordinary language philosophy.

Of these, we have done the least to defend (iii), but we don't want to get into a verbal dispute about how to use the term 'ordinary language philosophy'. There certainly are people who would want to use that expression to denote something that incorporates more elements from Ryle or Austin and if so, we'll just be concessive and let people use the term in many different ways. We think ours is one reasonable usage. Nevertheless-- and without getting into detailed exegesis of Austin--it's worth noting that a thought at least close to CARE is expressed in the following seminal passage from "A Plea For Excuses":

> In view of the prevalence of the slogan " ordinary language ", and of such names as " linguistic " or "analytic" philosophy or "the analysis of language", one thing

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[16] A reviewer suggested another reason we might want OL-Guidance: what they call 'cognitive fluency'. Speakers of a natural language will normally have acquired a capacity to recognize (in a wide range of cases) whether a widely used term of ordinary language (e.g. 'know', 'cause', 'ought', etc) applies or not. This is what competency with an ordinary language term typically consists in. The result of that familiarity is a kind of cognitive fluency: an ability to apply the term in new contexts and to assess its use by others, without excessive cognitive effort. This not only simplifies thinking, talking, and theorizing, but it also contributes to our ability to understand what different instantiations of, say, a predicate have in common. This contrasts sharply with terms that are artificially cooked-up. To employ such terms can require an extensive learning period, there's bound to be initial cognitive resistance, and the training period will not be of the kind that are familiar for natural language terms. This isn't to deny that technical terms can be improvements on OL-terminology, but there's an initial cognitive investment and there's an inevitable lack of fluency, compared to what we have with terms from ordinary language.

needs specially emphasising to counter misunderstandings. When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or "meanings", whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: *we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.* (Austin 1956:182)

It seems that this is just what happens when we think about the behaviour of 'knows'. Our sharpened awareness of how 'knows' is context-sensitive sheds light on

knowledge, which is what we as thinkers and actors CARE about. The contemporary contextualist in epistemology, maybe, is just Austin with help of Kaplan; maybe OLP never died, it just changed form, and learned Montague grammar.

So far, we haven't said much about just what kind of information we get from paying attention to ordinary notions--of how exactly ordinary language guides us. How exactly does it enable us to see the phenomena clearer? We don't have a full answer to that and we're not sure it's worth trying to get a fixed taxonomy of the kinds of insights that might be gained. One reason for that is highlighted by Austin in that same paper: "Certainly ordinary language has no claim to be the last word, if there is such a thing." We certainly aren't aiming to defend a 'linguistic idealist' or a constructivist view according to which we can read our theory of the world off our language. The guidance of language is variable, fallible, and unsystematic. It is *one* source of insight that combines with other assumptions, both substantive and methodological, and its guidance can always be overridden. For example, faced with the seeming context-sensitivity of 'knows' one can and should (and people do) wonder whether the data can be explained away, and whether the contextualist explains all we want.

Nevertheless, here are some schematic ways in which ordinary language guides us in combination with other substantive and methodological assumptions:

- The context sensitivity of "T" tells us something about the nature of Ts, but what it tells us will depend on your view of the semantic-pragmatics distinction, your view of speech reports, your view about intuitions about cases, and many other things.
- The (putative) opacity of belief reports will tell you something about the nature of beliefs, but just what it'll tell you will depend on your explanation of opacity and cognitive significance, your view of the logical form of belief sentences, and a more general theory of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs, which might in turn depend on cutting-edge work in syntactic theory.
- Here is an example from the Stanford Encyclopedia's entry on "Love". It starts with an observation about 'ordinary conversations:

"In ordinary conversations, we often say things like the following:

1. I love chocolate (or skiing).
2. I love doing philosophy (or being a father).
3. I love my dog (or cat).
4. I love my wife (or mother or child or friend)."

What follows from this being said in ordinary conversations is an open question. Even if the observation of ordinary usage is correct (as it no doubt is in this case) you get no philosophical mileage without doing more philosophy. In this case the author goes on to make various assumptions about how "what is meant by 'love' differs from case to case'. With that assumption in mind, the author focuses on the kind of personal love picked out in (4) as primary and says that "(3) may be understood as a kind of deficient mode of the sort of love we typically reserve for persons". The author's strategy here is fairly typical: they start with an observation about ordinary language, then make a number of additional assumptions: for example, that there's an ambiguity of some sort ("what is meant by 'love' differs"). That's not something you can read off ordinary conversation. You get that only from starting with doing more theorizing. This illustrates how observations about ordinary usages combines with theoretical assumptions as the starting point for theorizing about the phenomenon picked out by the ordinary notion.

So the take-home message here is that ordinary usage alone doesn't give us much philosophical insight. It needs to interact with assumptions about a potentially extremely broad range of other issues and in particular assumptions about the nature of semantics and pragmatics, the metaphysics of meanings, the connections between semantic content and speech act content, the nature of speech acts, etc. That 'etc' is not a copout, but a way of saying that we don't think there's an a priori limit to the kinds of considerations that can be relevant.

Not only is the payoff from OL-Guidance dependent on additional assumptions, but often there will be no payoff at all. Suppose you want to learn about the denotation of 'Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.' It's a proper name, it can be used in certain syntactic positions in various sentences, it can't always be substituted by a coreferential term in a sentence salva veritate. All that will tell you nothing helpful whatsoever. Note that this is so, even if you satisfy CARE. You want to know something about the object denoted by an ordinary language expression, i.e., "Hegel". If you want to learn about Hegel, then you have to read thick books by and about Hegel. Studying the philosophical or linguistic literature on proper names won't help you.[17]

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[17] This is not to deny that CARE and ANCHORING plays a role in the study of Hegel. In order to find out about Hegel's theories, you need to find out stuff about what the person denoted by 'Hegel' wrote. You can't, just ignore the 'Hegel' and introduce 'Hegel$_1$', 'Hegel$_2$', etc for each potential interpretation and

So one thing that we think any ordinary language philosophy needs to be sensitive to is that it (like everything else) isn't first philosophy, and one goes wrong if one thinks it is. And here we take ourselves to be heeding Austin's famous dictum that while ordinary language is never the "last word" it is the "first word"--it is the starting place for theorizing about many areas of philosophy[18].

## Contrast with Williamson's Instrumentalism about Ordinary Language

We want to end by comparing our view of Ordinary Language Philosophy to the view outlined by Timothy Williamson in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. This is not only because he has interesting things to say, because his view of the recent history of analytic philosophy and the 'linguistic turn' represents, we think, a widely held view among mainstream contemporary analytic philosophers. Logical positivism and ordinary language were language-oriented metaphilosophies that were decisively brushed aside when Kripke came along and showed us how to do metaphysics again. From that angle on our recent history, the reliance shown above in recent philosophy on language should seem methodologically unsound, something hard to square with analytic philosophy's current self-image according to which it's a discipline concerned with finding out truths about the world, and not merely limning our conceptual or linguistic scheme. We hope to offer a way of bringing our self-image into line with philosophical reality, and Williamson is an ideal interlocutor for this.

In the first part of that book, Williamons argues against what he calls 'the linguistic turn' in philosophy, but that doesn't mean, Williamson points out, that language has *no* role to play in philosophical theorizing. Although he is keen to place front-and-centre "the liveliest, exactest, and most creative achievements of the final third of [the twentieth] century" (19), namely "the revival of metaphysical theorizing, realist in spirit, often speculative, sometimes commonsensical" (19) associated by people like Armstrong, Fine, and Kripke, a metaphysics which isn't "primarily concerned with thought or language at all" (18), he realizes that even the most realist metaphysician can't overlook language. Language, after all, is the means by which we theorize. For, to use his example, an analytic metaphysician to disdain language in his theorizing would "resemble an astronomer who thinks he can safely ignore the physics of telescopes because his interest is in the extra-terrestrial universe."(46) He goes on:

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then say: I don't care which one Hegel denotes because that's just a fetish. Or, you can try, but historians of philosophy will probably shout at you for it.

[18] One of us is committed to the idea that an important philosophical project - Conceptual Engineering - involves assessing ordinary language (see e.g., Cappelen 2018). Conceptual Engineering, so understood, is a project that goes hand in hand with ordinary language philosophy: it has to start with an understanding of what we already have. It then assesses and finally suggests ameliorations.

Analytic philosophy at its best uses logical rigor and semantic sophistication to achieve a sharpness of philosophical vision unobtainable by other means. To sacrifice those gains would be to choose blurred vision. Fortunately, one can do more with good vision than look at eyes. (46)

Expanding on this thought in the afterword, he writes:

Explicit compositional semantic theories for reasonable fragments of particular natural languages also have the great methodological advantage of being comparatively easy to test in comparatively uncontentious ways, because they make specific predictions about the truth conditions (or assertability conditions) of infinitely many ordinary unphilosophical sentences. The attempt to provide a semantic theory that coheres with a given metaphysical claim can therefore constitute a searching test of the latter claim, even though semantics and metaphysics have different objects. (285)

From Williamson's discussion, we could extract the following view:

**(INSTRUMENTALISM)** Language can serve as a *tool* to help us understand the objects of philosophical study by helping us to make clear the nature of the arguments we make for philosophical claims.

Williamson-style instrumentalism fails to capture the full significance of ordinary language. That failure undermines some (but not all) of Williamson's criticism of the linguistic turn in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. At the beginning of this paper, we noted an indisputable asymmetry between, say, epistemology, one the on hand, and physics on the other. Epistemologists, including Williamson,[19] rely extensively on data about 'knows', in a way that has no analogue in physics (the properties of the words 'thing', or 'mass' or 'energy' play zero role in physics, for example). Instrumentalists predict that there should be no asymmetry. What Williamson says about analytic philosophy could surely also be said about physics, where bolding indicates our changing Williamson's text:

"**Physics** at its best uses logical rigor and semantic sophistication to achieve a sharpness of philosophical vision unobtainable by other means."

And

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[19] See, for example, the careful treatment of linguistic data in Williamson 2005.

> "A **physicist** who disdains language in his theorizing would resemble an astronomer who thinks he can safely ignore the physics of telescopes because his interest is in the extra—terrestrial universe."

Nonetheless, Williamson is aiming to capture an asymmetry. He asks, "Why should considerations about thought and language play so much more central a role in philosophy than in other disciplines, when the question explicitly under debate is not itself even implicitly about thought or language?" (45) Here is another version of his instrumentalist answer:

> The paradigms of philosophical questions are those that seem best addressed by armchair considerations less formal than mathematical proofs. The validity of such informal arguments depends on the structure of the natural language sentences in which they are at least partly formulated , or on the structure of the underlying thoughts . That structure is often hard to discern . We cannot just follow our instincts in reasoning ; they are too often wrong .... In order to reason accurately in informal terms , we must focus on our reasoning as presented in thought or language, to doublecheck it, and the results are often controversial . Thus questions about the structure of thought and language become central to the debate , even when it is not primarily a debate about thought or language. (45)

Again, this fails to capture the asymmetry. The validity of any argument articulated using a natural language depends on 'the structure of the natural language sentences' used to articulate the argument. This is just as true about political science as it is about biology, geology, or chemistry. It's wildly implausible that philosophers care more about the validity of their arguments than do contributors to those other disciplines. Even the most formal of disciplines care about the structure of the arguments they use. Typically those arguments are presented as a mixture of a formal language and a natural language, with the latter dominating. If you want some illustrations, take a look at some random samples, say Alfven's book *Cosmological Electrodynamics*, a foundational work in plasma physics, or a more recent paper about black holes, say Ferrares and Merritt's "A Fundamental Relation Between Supermassive Black Holes and Their Host Galaxies". Core elements of the arguments are articulated in natural language and whatever need for clarity philosophers have, so physicists have.

This is not intended to be a sophisticated point. Any intellectual endeavour needs logical rigour and semantic sophistication. It needs the semantic tools we use to formulate our theories and assess our arguments to be sharp. These are weak constraints on theorizing. Philosophy, as practiced in the examples with which we began, needs more. In philosophy, ordinary language use, in some way, provides something that a theory in a given domain needs to fit with. A theory in epistemology

needs to fit with how ordinary people use 'know' in a way that a theory of gravity doesn't have to fit with how we use 'gravity'. Philosophy takes more from ordinary language, Williamson-style instrumentalism can't explain why philosophy takes more, and instrumentalism fails as a way of capturing the distinct importance of language for philosophy.

Moreover, it's not as if moving to a formal language removes the need for carefulness of the kind Williamson describes: It's just as crucial for those using mathematical symbols as it is for those using English words. Instrumentalism fails to capture the supposed distinctness of appeals to language in philosophy as opposed to other disciplines.

Overgeneralization isn't the only problem with Williamson-style instrumentalism. Instrumentalism also fails to capture a distinctive way in which OL Guidance plays a role in philosophy. To see this, return to Williamson's analogy of the language as a telescope.

> Some contemporary metaphysicians appear to believe that they can safely ignore formal semantics and the philosophy of language because their interest is in a largely extra-mental reality. They resemble an astronomer who thinks he can safely ignore the physics of telescopes because his interest is in the extra-terrestrial universe . In delicate matters, his attitude makes him all the more likely to project features of his telescope confusedly onto the stars beyond. (46)

While this is a fascinating and helpful analogy in many ways, there's an important disanalogy between language and telescopes. Terms such as 'knowledge', 'freedom', and 'ought', are topic-determining in a way that a telescope is not. A telescope we're free to move around and point at whatever we feel like. "Knows", on the other hand, is fixed on knowledge and can't be moved. One corollary of our ANCHORING principle :core philosophical terms serve as anchors for philosophical investigations in a way that 'thing' or 'matter' don't anchor investigations in physics. Ordinary language is not just a tool or instrument for seeing the world better. It also determines what it is we look at, and--sometimes--it tells us things about what we look at.

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