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Avner Baz's Ordinary Language Challenge to the Philosophical Method of Cases

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Avner Baz argues that the philosophical method of cases presupposes a problematic view of language and linguistic competence, namely what he calls “the atomistic-compositional view”. Combining key elements of social pragmatism and contextualism, Baz presents a view of language and linguistic competence, which he takes to be more sensitive to the open-endedness of human language. On this view, there are conditions for the “normal” and “felicitous” use of human words, conditions that Baz thinks are lacking in the context of the philosophical method of cases, and which make the question that philosophers are prone to ask in that context and the answers they give to that question to be pointless. However, in this paper, I argue as follows. First, Baz’s conditions for the “normal” and “felicitous” use of human words are in tension with the open-endedness of human language and the use of human words. Second, it is not even clear that those conditions are really missing in the context of the philosophical method of cases. And third, even if we grant that those conditions are missing in that context, this does not licence his damning conclusion on the philosophical method of cases since we are not forced to embrace the view of language and linguistic competence on which that damning conclusion is plausible. This last move is secured by advancing and defending a skill or virtue-based view of language and linguistic competence inspired by the later work of Donald Davidson.

The philosophical method of cases (henceforth, PMOC) arguably plays some role in how philosophers investigate issues of great philosophical interest like knowledge, free will, and reference.¹ In this practice, a philosopher would

¹ There is evidence of the use of the method outside the Western tradition of philosophy (Boh 1985).

describe a certain scenario, whether real or hypothetical, and invite us to say whether the case so described would count as falling under the relevant property or term or concept under investigation. The judgement formed on the described scenario is then enlisted in arguing for or against certain philosophical views.²

The question then is, what linguistic competence guides this practice? In some very illuminating works, Avner Baz (2016, 2017) argues that the PMOC presupposes a problematic view of language and linguistic competence, what he calls the atomistic-compositional view. The atomistic-compositional view as he presents it is presupposed by defenders of the method in mainstream analytic philosophy and critics of the method, including experimental philosophers. Combining key elements of social pragmatism and contextualism, Baz presents what we might call a “social pragmatic view of language”, a view he thinks enjoys better empirical support and is more sensitive to the open-endedness of human language. On this view, there are “normal” and “felicitous” conditions for the use of words and human language, conditions he takes to be lacking in the context of the PMOC and the questions philosophers are prone to ask in that context such as: “Does *X* know *Y*?”

However, in this paper, I argue as follows. First, Baz’s conditions for the normal and felicitous use of words and language stand in tension with the open-endedness of words and language. Second, it is not even clear that those conditions are really missing in the context of the PMOC. And third, even if we grant that those conditions are missing in that context, this does not licence any damning conclusion on the PMOC since we are not forced to embrace the view of language and linguistic competence on which that conclusion seems plausible. This last move is secured by advancing and defending a skill-based view of language and linguistic competence inspired by Donald Davidson (1986).

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 1, I discuss what Baz calls the “minimal assumption” about language which he says is presupposed by both armchair philosophers and their experimental counterparts. I show that the assumption expresses two worries. The first is the correctness worry and the second is about the kind of linguistic competence we rely on in the PMOC,

² In recent times, there have been serious discussions about the evidential status of these judgements, in particular, whether this status is due to their being intuitive (Cappelen 2012, 2014; Deutsch 2015; Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009; Ichikawa and Jarvis 2009; Irikefe 2020; Williamson 2007). I would set aside this issue in this paper by staying neutral about the evidential nature of these judgements since nothing here hangs on it.

which he calls the “atomistic-compositional” view. I briefly respond to the first worry, and I indicate that the second worry is more pressing and would therefore be of present concern. In section 2, I discuss Baz’s social pragmatic view of language and linguistic competence, which he takes to have better empirical support than the atomistic compositional view. I explore some of the ingredients of the social pragmatic view, its negative implications for the PMOC and why we might worry that some aspects of the view do not seem consistent with recognisable features of the PMOC and the nature of human language itself. In section 3, I explore how we might look to defend or rely on the PMOC without any problematic assumptions about language and linguistic competence and without either the atomistic compositional view or Baz’s social pragmatic view. I end the paper by showing how the present defence of the PMOC meshes with a broader trend in the epistemology of philosophy and lends independent support to it.

1 The Atomistic-Compositional View of Language and the Philosophical Method of Cases

The philosophical method of cases is a standard practice in analytic philosophy. A philosopher wants to argue for or against certain views about knowledge, causation, free will or moral permissibility. An imaginary scenario is described, and we are asked whether or not a certain property, term or concept obtains in the described scenario. For example, in Gettier’s 10-coin case, we are asked the question whether the protagonist in the described scenario knows some particular proposition, that is, whether the protagonist knows that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket ([Gettier 1963](#)).

According to Baz ([2016](#), [2017](#)), the method depends on a “minimal assumption” about language to get off the ground, namely, the assumption that questions like that as presented in the context of the PMOC are

in principle, in order—in the simple sense that they are clear enough and may be answered correctly or incorrectly—and that, as competent speakers, we ought to understand those questions and be able to answer them correctly, just on the basis of the descriptions of the cases and our mastery of the words in which the questions are couched. ([Baz 2017](#), 6)

We can distinguish two kinds of worries in the minimal assumption. The first one is the correctness worry, namely, the worry whether the questions at stake in the method of cases can be answered correctly or incorrectly, rightly or wrongly, and what the ontological status of such answers might be like, precisely whether these answers would be about concepts or the world independent of concepts (Baz 2017, 6). Baz links this worry with what he calls the “representational-referential” view of language and traces it to Timothy Williamson (2007), Herman Cappelen (2012) and Frank Jackson (2011). On this view, *the primary function* of language at any given moment or as he puts it “the fundamental aim of (all?!) discourses” (Baz 2017, 74, fn. 6) is to say true or false things about the world. Although this is not the worry I intend to address in this paper, I believe that friends of the PMOC do not need to commit themselves to any problematic assumption here. On the contrary, I think *pace* Baz, what they need to hold is that *among other things that human language is for*, human language is used to say true or false things about the world (I would return to this in section 3). In the same vein, friends of the method may not need to settle the issue of what the answers to the questions at stake in the method of cases would be true of, whether they would be true of our concepts or items in the world existing independently of our conception of them. As Ernest Sosa noted: “We can conduct our controversies, for example, just in terms of where the truth lies with regard to them, leaving aside questions of objectual ontology” (Sosa 2007, 100–101).

The second worry in the minimal assumption is the more pressing one. And it is the one I wish to address in this paper. It says that

as competent speakers, we ought to understand those questions [i.e., the questions at stake in the method of cases] and be able to answer them correctly, just on the basis of the descriptions of the cases and our mastery of the words in which the questions are couched. (Baz 2017, 6)

Baz notes that this is an assumption about language that derives from and is dependent on the atomistic-compositional view of language. In this view, the meaning of the whole of an utterance comes from the fixed meaning of the parts of that utterance. Baz traces the atomistic-compositional view of language to Jackson (2011), who presents it as the linguistic competence that the method depends on. Jackson says that how a sentence like “it is raining outside” represents things is a

function of the representational contents of its parts and how they are combined.³ Moreover, we have a grasp of the representational contents of these parts, and of the way various modes of combination into sentences generate representational structures whose contents are a function of the contents of their parts and the way the parts are put together. [Jackson (2011), 472]⁴

In Jackson (2011), this view of language and linguistic competence goes side by side with a view of conceptual competence. On this view, in learning philosophically significant terms like “knowledge” we are latching onto the pattern or rule or categorisation of “knowledge.” Thus, he says:

How did we acquire the word “knowledge”? We came across lots of examples. We were told a bit about what mattered. Perhaps, we were simply instructed that if it is false, it cannot be knowledge. At some point we latched onto *the* pattern. (Jackson 2011, 474)

This rule or pattern on Jackson's view in turn guides our knowledge ascriptions, that is, it enables us to say whether or not the protagonist in a Gettier text knows or does not know a given proposition.

In the next section, I consider Baz's argument that the atomistic-compositional view of language is problematic and his argument that in the context of the PMOC the conditions for the normal and felicitous use of words and language are lacking. As we shall see too, Baz takes himself to be establishing a demarcation of the boundary of linguistic sense, one that makes clear that the PMOC is outside that boundary and that the questions philosophers are prone to ask in that context are fundamentally problematic.

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- 3 Compare the atomistic-compositional view with the view of Paul Elbourne: “Suppose you are interpreting an uttered sentence. In a series of extremely intricate processes that are largely subconscious, you access the sentence's words in your mental lexicon and find their meanings; you work out the intended sense of any ambiguous words it might contain; you work out the references of indexicals in the sentence; you work out the sentence's syntactic structure and resolve any structural ambiguities there may be; and you combine the contents of the words in the compositional semantics... If implicit content is not mediated by means of covert indexicals (and thus covered by the second step mentioned above), you add some of this too. Finally, you have worked out the content of the sentence, as uttered on that occasion”. (Elbourne 2011, 131), cited in (Baz 2017).
- 4 Although differently expressed, Baz identifies Williamson as holding this view as well: “[E]xpressions refer to items in the mostly non-linguistic world, *the reference of complex expressions is a function of the reference of its constituents*, and the reference of a sentence determines its truth value”. (Williamson 2007, 281, emphasis mine)

2 Baz's Social Pragmatic View of Language and Linguistic Competence

The way Baz shows the atomistic-compositional view of language to be problematic is by presenting and defending an alternative view of language that he takes to enjoy better empirical support. He finds support from a scientific study of how children acquire their first natural language (Bartsch and Wellman 1995). But Karen Bartsch and Henry Wellman were not interested in natural language acquisition for its own sake. More specifically, they were tracking the natural development in the use of belief-desire terms in children between ages one and a half to six years. Six of these children are boys and four are girls. One of them is African American and the others are not. Because of their interest, Bartsch and Wellman were necessarily selective. They were coding only for terms expressing genuine psychological reference, where this is judged so if with respect to a suitable context it referred to psychological states like desire, belief, or knowledge. As a result, they discounted conversational use of belief-desire terms like when a child says “you know what?” when seeking to get someone’s attention; repetition of phrases uttered by someone else, for example, a mother saying “tell him you know where it is,” to which the child responds “I know where it is”, and so on.

For present purposes, let us focus on what the study uncovered about the term “knows” and its cognates. The authors found (as Baz pointed out) that the word “knows” and its cognates do not admit of a simple formula. More specifically, they found that children use “knows” and its cognates to refer to instances of belief “felt to be justified, assumed to be true, or that enjoys markedly higher conviction than one described by *think*” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 40). Later on in their development, they use it to refer to “situations involving successful actions or to correct statements” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 60). In other words, there is no single pattern that a child is trying to master in being a competent user of “knows” and its cognates.

What is interesting about this study as Baz rightly observed is that it is one of the few scientific studies that have focussed on philosophically interesting terms like “knows” and its cognates. Most scientific studies about words and concepts are usually too broad in their scope and coverage to tell us what we need to know in doing philosophy. This is important because although the empirical result is not yet conclusive, it indicates that ordinary words like “table” are not just like philosophically interesting words like “knows”; the

latter is more complex and traces no single or simple pattern *pace* Jackson.⁵ It also indicates, as Baz argued, that human language is open-ended, that is, capable of being used to make completely new moves not just at the level of the whole of an utterance but at the level of the individual parts or words in a way that is problematic for the atomistic-compositional view of language and linguistic competence. For present purposes, we can take the current empirical evidence for granted, and inquire into how to make sense of it.

Baz thinks that the best way to make sense of the data is a view that combines contextualism and social-pragmatism, a view whose central ingredients come from Wittgenstein's (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* and Merleau-Ponty's (2002). Following Wittgenstein, Baz argues that we need to think of meaning as use in the sense that the significance of words depends not on their referring to items but "on whether and how we use the words, on our *meaning* them in one way or another, in a context suitable for meaning them in *that way*" (Baz 2017, 130). The advantage of the usage view in Baz's opinion is that it shows clearly that our words need not be representational and need not be thought of as naming items in the non-linguistic world to be suitable for different uses.⁶

Following Merleau-Ponty, Baz argues that we need to reclaim the place of the *actual speaker* in the speech act, "the person who finding herself in some particular situation or other, may find herself moved, motivated, to speak (or think)" (Baz 2017, 131). This means that understanding the speech of another is not merely the putting together of the already fixed meaning of her words, but "coming to see her point," meaning coming to see her cares, her commitments, her history, how she sees the situation, and so on. In a significant sense therefore, the view reverses the direction of linguistic meaning implied in the atomistic compositional view: we understand the parts of speech by first understanding the whole of it, and that requires understanding the point of the actual speaker. In this connection, Baz notes that:

5 In fact, we do not need the study of how children acquire "knows" and its cognates to realise that words like "knows" do not trace a simple pattern that can be framed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for all instances of knowledge. We already have reasons to suspect that this is so from the failure to produce a simple account of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge in analytic epistemology (Shope 1983).

6 Baz says too that Wittgenstein's comparison of words to game pieces also lends credence to this idea of language.

The notion of “motive” is very important to Merleau-Ponty’s avoidance of both mechanistic and intellectualist approaches to the understanding of behavior in general and linguistic expression in particular (see (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 48–50)). On Merleau-Ponty’s way of looking at things, our speech (and behavior more generally) is normally *motivated*, in the sense that we are not merely *caused* mechanically to speak, and in the sense that our behavior manifests an *understanding* of the phenomenal world to which we respond. (Baz 2017, 131, fn. 14)

Baz argues that this view of language and linguistic competence gives support to a social-pragmatic account of conceptual competence inspired by Michael Tomasello (2003, 2008). On this view, in being a competent employer of “knows” and its cognates, what the child learns is different actual constructions of speech and their communicative functions, or more plainly, “stored exemplars of utterances” (Baz 2017, 162) “and what commitments (liabilities, risks) one takes upon oneself when using the words in one way or another, and in responding in one way or another to other people’s use of them” (Baz 2017, 169).

Furthermore, Baz thinks that if we accept this way of thinking about language, linguistic competence, and conceptual competence, the PMOC would be found to be seriously defective. How so? Well, if understanding the speech of another is coming to see the point of an *actual* speaker, which means coming to see her *cares*, her *commitments* vis-à-vis the question, and what *risks* and *liabilities* she may assume in answering the question one way or the other, and what empirical options we might explore to investigate whether things are thus and so, and what practical interest makes that question intelligible either to us or to the speaker, and how what is said in that context may influence what we do after; it seems clear that these conditions are lacking in the context of the PMOC. And it is because Baz thinks these conditions—let us call them “social-pragmatic conditions”—are not so realised in the PMOC that he takes the PMOC to be deeply defective and the questions asked in that context to be pointless as well. Put more generally, the view is the following:

THE SOCIAL PRAGMATIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE. If Hearer *H* in a context *C* understands the speech of a speaker *S*, *H* does so only if the social pragmatic conditions are realised in context *C*.

Notice that the view is silent as to the further question of whether the social pragmatic conditions are the only conditions required for linguistic understanding to be possible or for words to be meaningfully used. It merely says that the social-pragmatic conditions are essential or necessary for words to do their work and for questions to have intelligibility.

One urgent question is, why commit Baz to the broader goal of demarcating the region of the meaningful use of words rather than the more modest view that the questions asked by the practitioners of the PMOC are problematic or pointless?⁷ Or put differently, why think that Baz's criticism concerns the descriptions of the PMOC rather than the questions themselves and whether or not the questions are pointless? Well, the short answer is that the questions themselves are pointless precisely because the social pragmatic conditions for the felicitous use of words by both hearers and speakers are lacking in the description of the case. Baz says this precisely when he tries to show how his project fits within a broader demarcation argument that goes back to champions of experimental philosophy such as Jonathan Weinberg (2007), and more recently Edouard Machery (2017). This kind of argument relies on showing that there is a discontinuity between the scenarios described in the PMOC and the scenarios that we regularly encounter in everyday situations in a way that makes the former bad and the latter good. However, doing that often requires coming up with a set of properties defining one context but not the other context.⁸ Here is textual evidence that lends support to construing Baz in this way.

The argument of this book is meant to show that the discontinuity is primarily a matter, not of *the sorts of cases* theorists have tended to focus on, as Weinberg has suggested, but of *the peculiar context* in which we attend to those cases and try to answer the theorist's questions. (Baz 2017, 33, fn. 33)

And again:

[But] if as I will argue, the ordinary and normal *conditions* for the felicitous use of the word (or concept) under investigation are lacking in the theoretical context—and, again, lacking by design—

⁷ An anonymous reviewer for this journal pressed me on this objection.

⁸ For replies to Weinberg's claim of discontinuity, see Cappelen (2012) and Nado (2015); and for a reply to Machery, see Nado (2022).

then there is good reason to worry that the theorizing is bound to distort what it aims to clarify. (Baz 2017, 3)

Notice that the theoretical context is also the peculiar context. Notice too that if we seek to restrict Baz's demarcation only to occasions of speech when terms like "knows" and "cause" are featured, this would be *ad hoc*. The reason these terms retain philosophical interest is due to their everyday provenance. Indeed, 'knows' and its cognates are some of the most ubiquitous terms in human language.

There are two worries I would like to point out here. The first is this. Baz's claim of discontinuity implies that in the peculiar context of the PMOC, some essential conditions for the felicitous use of human words are lacking in a way that problematises the kind of questions philosophers are prone to ask in that context, as well as the answers they give. But this stands in tension with the open-endedness of human language. How so? The idea that language is open-ended, if it means anything really, means that whatever set of conditions we can identify and establish as part of the normal and felicitous use of language and words, there would always be occasions where those conditions are unmet, and yet a speaker with some ingenuity employs it in a meaningful way; a way that transmits knowledge or understanding or that serves other useful functions. Of course, language is not a human practice where anything goes. However, the thought is that given proper context, speakers and hearers can always tell the difference between what is meaningful and what is not without any predetermined criteria. Further, the thought is that these criteria, if any, would not be something that can be captured in any principled way and articulatable as something like some social pragmatic conditions. Moreover, the realm of meaning and meaningful questions and answers involving terms like "knows" and "cause" is not correctly restricted to the realm of the pragmatic or the practical for creatures like us. And that is because human beings have a capacity to engage meaningfully in things that transcend their self-interest. It seems that for evolutionary reasons, this would be a good thing. Information that has no pragmatic import for a hearer in a given context and at a particular time can have life-saving significance for that agent in a different context at a future time or perhaps for close kin. Edward Craig has a similar story of how our practically oriented concept of knowledge evolved into a more objectivised and demanding standard, where a high degree of reliability even in an improbable world is built into it. Thus, he says:

In saying that someone knows whether p we are certifying him as an informant on that question, and we have no idea of the practical needs of the many people who may want to take him up on it; hence a practice develops of setting the standard very high, so that whatever turns, for them, on getting the truth about, we need not fear reproach if they follow our recommendation. (Craig 1990, 94)

Perhaps it is also why “knows” and its cognates have some exceptional qualities such as being lexical universals, with the rare quality of being in the core vocabulary of all known human languages (Haspelmath and Tadmor 2009), and having a one-word equivalent in all natural languages (Goddard 2010).

The second worry: Baz is assuming that in the theoretical or peculiar context of the PMOC, nothing hangs for the hearers and speakers, or the thought experimenter and his or her audience except for a theoretical interest, namely, the affirmation or the refutation of a view. But can we take that assumption for granted? I think not. For very often, the success of counterexamples or more generally, philosophical cases is decisive for the dominance of a particular theory and field of research. Think about the debate between compatibilism and incompatibilism, internalism and externalism, physicalism and anti-physicalism and the decisive role that thought experiments played in those debates like Mary the colour scientist case (Jackson 1982), Gettier cases (Gettier 1963) and Truetemp case (Lehrer 1990). True enough, we only care about the truth or facts that obtain or do not obtain in those cases rather than their instrumental value. And yet because of the role those cases play in the rise and fall of certain fields of research and research prospects, it is fair to say that the facts that obtain or fail to obtain in those cases make those cases stand in the same relation to real or actual situations that are of interest to Baz: They are not idle issues to which we feel unconcerned and to which our interests, cares, and commitments are unrelated.⁹

In the next section, I discuss a further challenge for Baz's account, namely, the problem of malapropism, which shows that sometimes the conditions for the ordinary use of our words are violated, and yet linguistic understanding

⁹ In the same vein, it is not clear that there is nothing we can do to find out whether the verdict in the cases is correct or incorrect. Indeed, this is what experimental philosophers have been doing. Although one might argue that consensus or corroboration is not correctness of intuitional judgements. But so too are perceptual judgements.

is possible. This then sets the stage for presenting and developing a Davidson-inspired alternative view of language and linguistic competence.

3 The Skill or Virtue-Based Account of Language and Linguistic Competence

In his later writings, Davidson found the problem of “malapropism” very perplexing. Dealing with this problem led him to a view of language that affirms a continuity between linguistic competence and intellectual abilities more generally. To be sure, malapropism is a ubiquitous phenomenon in human language and registers

our ability to perceive a well-formed sentence when the actual utterance was incomplete or grammatically garbled, our ability to interpret words we have never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or to cope with new idiolects. (Davidson 1986, 95)

On the standard view of language and linguistic competence, what a hearer needs to be able to interpret a speaker is something like a complex theory or rule plus the ability to use this rule or theory or generalisation in a systematic way to make sense of novel situations. Further, because this capacity is taken as a learned convention, one that is shared between hearers and speakers, it is something that the hearer has in advance of the occasion of linguistic exchange. Notice that this standard view is also the view defended by Jackson as previously presented and discussed (Jackson 2011). Recall that on that view, namely, the atomistic-compositional view, language is like the numbering system where there are finite numerals that can be used to generate complex ones infinitely. Speakers and hearers have this system in advance of particular linguistic exchanges.

However, the phenomenon of malapropism challenges this notion because the competence (or capacity) that it calls for from the hearer is not part of what normally constitutes one’s basic linguistic competence, mastered in advance of the occasion of linguistic exchange. Indeed, as Davidson points out, the fact that makes the theory or rule general equally makes it unsuitable to cope with the particular linguistic habits of different individuals, say that of Mrs. Malaprop’s “nice derangement of epitaphs” being “nice arrangement of epithets”.¹⁰ More generally, the theory or rule is unhelpful in coping with a

¹⁰ Malaprop was a character famous for her verbal blunders in Richard Sheridan’s play *The Rivals*.

particular speaker at a particular time in a particular occasion. This applies to Baz's account too since for him there are "ordinary and normal conditions for the felicitous use" of human words or concepts (Baz 2017, 3), conditions which he thinks are lacking in the context of the PMOC. But then, in malapropism such as grammatically garbled utterances and slips of tongues, those normal conditions for the felicitous use of words and for their "functioning as they do" in ordinary discourse (Baz 2017, 22) are violated. Further, it is not the case that for Baz there is one generic condition, namely, that one's utterance has a point. On the contrary, that one's utterance has a point is fixed by it satisfying "the ordinary and normal conditions" for the felicitous use of human words and for meaning words one way or the other. For he says:

And the basic problem with so much philosophizing, both traditional and contemporary—the basic problem with the method of cases as commonly practiced, for example—is that the philosopher either takes his words to mean something clear even apart from *his* meaning something clear by means of them, or else takes himself to be able to mean his words in some determinate way, *even though the conditions for thus meaning his words are missing in his particular context* and cannot be created by a sheer act of will, or by concentrating one's mind in some special way. (Baz 2017, 141, italics mine)

Here is an additional challenge from malapropism to any generic view of language and linguistic competence. Sometimes in linguistic exchange, linguistic understanding is transmitted despite the hearer completely mistaking the speaker's verbal communication and vice versa. Davidson gives an example of such a case:

When I first read Singer's piece on Goodman Ace, I thought that the word 'malaprop', though the name of Sheridan's character, was not a common noun that could be used in place of 'malapropism'. It turned out to be my mistake. Not that it mattered: I knew what Singer meant, even though I was in error about the word; I would have taken his meaning in the same way if he had been in error instead of me. We could both have been wrong, and things would have gone as smoothly. (Davidson 1986, 90)

Here as elsewhere, learned convention breaks down and the conditions for the normal and felicitous use of words are violated and yet linguistic under-

standing is transmitted or made possible. The question is, how is this possible? What capacity does the hearer (and speaker) depend on? Davidson makes the following suggestion:

This characterisation of linguistic ability is so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong: it comes to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood, and to understand. It is only when we look at the structure of this ability that we realise how far we have drifted from standard ideas of language mastery. For we have discovered no learnable common core of consistent behaviour, no shared grammar or rules, no *portable* interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance. We may say that linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time—this is what I have suggested, and I have no better proposal. But if we do say this, then we should realise that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. (Davidson 1986, 445–446, italics mine)

We can summarise the import of this account as follows:

THE SKILL OR VIRTUE-BASED ACCOUNT OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE. If Hearer *H* in a context *C* understands the speech of a speaker *S*, *H* does so in virtue of her skills or virtues.

The rationale for speaking of skills or virtues here is two-fold. First, it is to pick up on a suggestion by Davidson when he talks about the skillful hearer (and speaker) as being one that can get along well in linguistic exchanges and performances without needing mastery or knowledge of Gricean principles, because these general principles “are a kind of *skill* we expect of an interpreter and without which communication would be greatly impoverished” (Davidson 1986, 437). Relatedly, he talks about virtues such as practical wisdom, intelligence, and wit as the non-linguistic competencies we rely on in getting things right from time to time, occasion to occasion (Davidson 1986, 446). Davidson also mentions luck. But here luck is not a capacity of speakers or hearers. Rather, it merely refers to their being in a favourable environment such that under normal circumstances, when they attempt to understand one

another in linguistic exchange, they achieve that aim. Further, I persist in speaking of “skills and virtues” because although all skills can be classified as virtues of agents, not all virtues can be classified as skills. One particular exception to this is practical wisdom (Stichter 2018). Let us take these points in turn. First, virtues are skills because acting well is much like working well (Annas 1995) and both involve practices of self-regulation to achieve a goal: in one case, the goal of acting well, and in the other case, the goal of working well (Stichter 2018). And second, although practical wisdom involves some elements of skills, namely, making good judgements in particular situations, it also involves other dimensions, namely, considering how one’s action fits into an overall conception of the good life (Stichter 2018). So, while it might be true that agents rely on some aspects of practical wisdom in order to act well in particular situations and to get along in a linguistic exchange, practical wisdom in itself is too broad and varied to be classified merely as a set of skills.

Furthermore, the competent hearer (and speaker) would also recruit other capacities of the virtuous agents. Of particular importance in the present context would be “sensibility.” In her discussion of the virtues (and the vices of the mind), Alessandra Tanesini defines sensibility as a disposition to “use one’s perceptual capacities in distinctive ways in the service of epistemic activities” (Tanesini 2021, 27). The example she gives is the observant person:

The person who is observant has reliable vision but he also experiences as salient those features of the visual field that are relevant to his epistemic aims. He directs visual attention to these aspects of the environment. By directing attention to them, and thus putting them at the centre of his visual field, he is able to take in more detail about these items since foveal vision has a higher degree of resolution than peripheral vision. Had those items remained at the periphery of his vision, many of their features would have remained undetected. If this is right, being observant is the complex disposition to detect the salient aspects of the environment by experiencing feelings that direct one’s attention towards these features. (Tanesini 2021, 27–28)

Applied as a competence essential to linguistic understanding, sensibility is an auxiliary competence, an enabler of visual and auditory competencies of agents. And what that means precisely is that it makes it possible for one to put to use those primary competencies in picking up what is being passed across,

verbally and non-verbally, where this is something that can be missed easily if one is not attentive to another's peculiar linguistic habits in the context of linguistic exchange.

The second rationale for the skill, or virtue-based model, is that it allows us to cash out the Davidson-inspired view in a way that makes the relevant competence an instance of a more general and familiar kind of know-how. One difficulty that we can resolve in Davidson's account if we take seriously the virtue or skill-based model is how to understand a practice that is non-rule-based and yet rational and well-ordered. And the thing to say is that in both virtue and skills, we already have human practices that are well-regulated without the agents relying on rules. Take the skill-based model. Following this model, I am suggesting that knowing a language is much like knowing how to drive a car. In the beginning, the driver learns rules of thumb such as "shift up when the motor sounds like it is racing and down when it sounds like it is straining."¹¹ As Dreyfus and Dreyfus who have studied human skills in various domains of performance argued:

It seems that beginners make judgements using strict rules and features, but that with talent and a great deal of involved experience the beginner develops into an expert who sees intuitively what to do without applying rules and making judgements at all. (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1991, 235)

On this thinking, if one is following rules in a practice, that just shows one is not yet proficient in that practice. The same story applies to the virtuous agent. As Linda Zagzebski puts it: "Persons with practical wisdom learn how and when to trust certain feelings, and they develop habits of attitude and feeling that enable them to reliably make good judgments without being aware of following a procedure" (Zagzebski 1996, 226). Notice too the role of the virtues and skills here: they are dispositions that allow agents to act in a systematic and organised way and to do so well in a context where the relevant practice is not rule-governed. Plausibly, the reason this is so is because both skill and virtues have a kind of *logos*, in the sense that they have an intrinsic intellectual structure built into them (Bloomfield 2000). Mastering a skill, including language, is mastering this *logos*; and thus, possessing the practical

¹¹ Such rules of thumb are just heuristics or generalisations about language that hold for the most part.

intelligence to act and to sensibly follow the actions of others and to solve problems in the relevant domain or activity.

From this standpoint, we can appreciate another respect in which the skill or virtue-based account and Baz's view diverge. On Baz's account, the motive of the speaker plays an essential role in coming to see the point of the speaker. Notice that "motive" here does not mean intention. It means rather the "motivating factors", which are internal to the perspective of the speaker, namely, the cares, the commitments, the risks and the liabilities of the speaker. On the other hand, for the skill or virtue-based account, that component is not always essential even though it sometimes can form a part of the process of coming to see the point of the speaker's utterance. Indeed, I believe that that form of internalism about linguistic sense, or meaning, was part of the tradition of thought that Gilbert Ryle tries to wean analytic philosophy from (see also, Putnam (1975b)) when he argued that we should think of understanding as *knowing how* and linguistic understanding including, as an exercise of that *knowing how*. He writes:

Understanding a person's deeds and words is not, therefore, any kind of problematic divination of occult processes. For this divination does not and cannot occur, whereas understanding does occur. Of course, it is part of my general thesis that the supposed occult processes are themselves mythical; there exists nothing to be the object of the postulated diagnoses. But for the present purpose it is enough to prove that, if there were such inner states and operations, one person would not be able to make probable inferences to their occurrence in the inner life of another. (Ryle 2009, 41)

Let me elaborate more on what this rejection of the internalistic picture in the motivating sense means by commenting on what Ryle is getting at here. Suppose I am playing chess with Magnus Carlsen, the Norwegian grandmaster. He makes a particular opening move that seems initially surprising to me. But as a fellow grandmaster who is equally skilful or competent in the game and who has sufficient experience dealing with a move like that, I can know what that move is about without caring about what has made Carlsen make this move. I can know that a move like that in a context like this means that a particular form of attack on my king is imminent and that moving my pieces in a specified way is the best way to counter it. The same is true of "moves" in

linguistic performances, as Baz would like to call human utterances or the use of words in language. Hearers can tell that an utterance like this in a context like that means so and so without caring about what has moved the speaker to say so and so.

With this view of language and linguistic competence in mind, let us address two challenges in connection with the PMOC. The first challenge here is to explain how, as competent speakers, we are able to understand and answer the questions that philosophers often ask in the context of the PMOC, such as, does the protagonist in that scenario know so and so? And the second challenge is how to make the aim of using the PMOC intelligible in the light of the complexity of human language, that is, without glossing over that very complexity. I take each in turn.

On the skill or virtue-based view, competent speakers can understand and answer the questions of the sort “does *X* know *Y*?” not because they have latched onto the pattern of “knows” *pace* Jackson or because they possess stored exemplars of utterances and knowledge of the communicative motives of speakers *pace* Baz. On the contrary—when they do, that is in virtue of their having mastered a technique in the use of “knows” and its cognates. In fact, this suggestion finds its earliest expression in the later Wittgenstein when he says:

The grammar of the word “know” is evidently closely related to the grammar of the words “can”, “is able to.” But also closely related to that of the word “understand” (*To have ‘mastered’ a technique*). [Wittgenstein (1953), § 150-151, italics mine]¹²

- 12 Should we read Wittgenstein’s suggestion as the mastery of grammatical rules or relationships? There is abundant evidence in the text and elsewhere that that is not what Wittgenstein had in mind. To start with, in the paragraphs that followed this statement (i.e., Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 151–152), he says that it is conceivable that the relevant formula (or rule or grammatical relationship) might occur to the speaker and yet the speaker fails to understand. Further, in an unpublished manuscript, translated by Norman Malcolm (1989), Wittgenstein writes: “Often one can say: this pattern looked at so, must have this continuation. I want, however, to stipulate an ‘interpretation’ [*Auffassung*], (something like the old ‘Proposition’), which determines the series like an infallible machine through which a conveyor belt runs. So that only this continuation fits this interpretation. In reality, however, there are not two things that here fit together. But one can say: You are by your training, so adjusted [*eingestellt*], that always, without reflection, you declare some definite thing to be that which fits. Something that agrees with what others declare to be what fits” (Wittgenstein, Unpublished manuscript, 86-87; cited in Malcolm (1989)). On this view, it is by one’s training as a member of a shared community and practice that one is able to reliably employ terms like “knows” and extend the practice in similar situations. For Wittgenstein, that

Such skills or techniques are suitably grounded in experience in such a way that the agents exercising them can always be counted upon to answer such questions in a range of situations, not only in actual ones but in possible ones that bear similarity to the actual ones, where what is “similar” cannot be established in any rigid way, for example, through the claim of discontinuity between the context of the PMOC and everyday contexts. Indeed, as argued earlier, being competent users of “knows” and answering questions such as “does X know Y?” in a range of situations might be part of our evolutionary heritage. Also, a recent trend in cognitive science seems to lend support to this skill-based suggestion. Here is Lawrence Barsalou and colleagues summarising the emerging consensus here:

[C]onceptual knowledge is not a global description of a category that functions as a detached database about its instances. Instead, conceptual knowledge is the *ability* to construct situated conceptualizations of the category that serves agents in particular situations. [Barsalou et al. (2003), 89]¹³

picture of a skill or technique grounded in training replaces the picture of the grammatical rule acting like an infallible conveyor belt that determines its extension in novel situations.

- 13 As previously pointed out, Baz argues that the atomistic-compositional view seems to go side by side with the assumption that the primary purpose of language is to transmit information, that is, it seems to go side by side with the representational-referential view of language. Again, there is no need to hold on to that problematic assumption. All that is necessary for the philosophical method of cases to get off the ground once the atomistic-compositional view is set aside and the skill or virtue-based view is assumed is that among other things, language can be used to transmit information, where again given appropriate context agents can tell when this is the case. In fact, the empirical study that Baz analyses in support of his view does not presuppose otherwise. To see this, notice that although in Baz's discussion of this study, he cites the frequency with which children refer to their own mental states as clear vindication of his view of language, the data also show that this frequency diminishes as the children grow older. Bartsch and Wellman also note that “our data provide no evidence that a representational understanding of beliefs is a significantly later achievement, following only on the heels of an earlier ‘connections’ misconstrual of beliefs” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 57). Further, even in their first-person reference to mental states, the data do not contradict representational presuppositions. As the authors put it “[W]hen children first use *know* to refer to people's knowledge in our data, in their utterances coded as genuine psychological references, they primarily refer either to situations involving successful actions or to correct statements” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, 60). And lastly, in an earlier study of our everyday conception of knowledge as manifested in words like “knows” and “knew”, Perner (1991) shows that knowledge is associated with success and successful actions, with factual states of affairs and is formed by exposure to the relevant information or experience.

Now the second challenge. Using the PMOC, Edmund Gettier drew the attention of the philosophical community to an aspect of knowledge, namely, that the term is a success notion; the term does not apply to someone whose belief is chancy or accidental. Does that gloss over the complexities in our use of “knows” and its cognates? Baz thinks so (see Baz (2017, 122)). But there are good reasons to doubt that conclusion. To start with, notice that the idea that knowledge is a success term is implied in the result of the study of Bartsch and Wellman (1995). Further, imagine as we do in the analysis of knowing that we highlight “success” or “achievement” as a salient feature of the term “knows” and explain knowledge in terms of these notions (Greco 2010). I argue that doing so does not obscure the subject matter of philosophy as Baz implies. On the contrary, doing so advances our understanding of the subject matter. Indeed, this is closely related to scientific practice. Biologists know that the term “fish” picks out various kinds of properties such as having fins, having scales, having a tail, breathing underwater, being oviparous, not suckling one’s young, and being cold-blooded. But from the point of view of understanding, and classifying future unknown cases, they merely highlight a fewer set of properties rather than all of the above, especially those that are natural and explanatory so that the term “fish” is used to refer to a completely aquatic, water-breathing, cold-blooded craniate vertebrate (Slote 1966). I believe the same story applies here to the PMOC in the analysis of knowing. In highlighting the fact that knowledge is a success term, we are able to track something important, deep and explanatory about this phenomenon, something we can also use to understand other terms or concepts or issues. For example, knowledge firsters use the suggestion that knowledge is a success term to understand the notion of intellectual ability or competence (Kelp 2021).

Let us conclude this section by noting how the skill or virtue-based model of language and linguistic competence shares something positive with Baz’s social pragmatic account. Clearly, both recover the place of the speaking subject and reject the idea implied in the atomistic-compositional view that human words can speak for themselves, “over our heads as it were—and of language as a system of significant signs that does not depend on speakers (and listeners) for its ongoing maintenance” (Baz 2017, 96). Indeed, in evaluating Gettier cases, for example, we often need to tell whether or not and in what relevant sense the cases we are evaluating resemble clear instances where the property or term is clearly instantiated in a case. And “which way one goes depends on what one finds normal or natural, which partly depends


on the past course of one's sense experience" (Williamson 2007, 190). Notice that the capacity to tell that something is "normal or natural" is much in line with the capacity that comes with practical wisdom, which is shaped by experience, including sense experience, and expressed in habits of attitude and feeling that enable one to reliably make good judgements without being aware of following any rule. Moreover, in a non-actual instance of a Gettier case, readers often need to follow "in their own imaginative construction the lead of the author of the examples" (Sosa 2009, 107), and they have to fill out the details of the stories, which are often partial and incomplete. Here as elsewhere too, one needs to tell whether or not and in what relevant sense the case one is evaluating resembles clear instances where the property or term is clearly instantiated. Moreover, which way one goes depends on what one finds normal or natural. Notice also that if the kind of story that particularists such as Jonathan Dancy tell about the use of thought experiments in moral philosophy is true, namely, that no suitable supply of general principles can help the moral agent in picking out what is morally salient about a case (Dancy 1985), then we have good reason to believe that even here what the agent does is to recruit the kind of capacities that the skill or virtue-based model highlights. In any case, a theory of language and linguistic competence begins from the correct assumption that ordinary speakers already do well in linguistic performances and presents an explanation of how speakers are able to so perform. I have argued that once we reject the atomistic compositional view, it does not follow that we must embrace the social pragmatic story and all the problems it poses for the PMOC.¹⁴

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- 14 An anonymous reviewer for this journal pressed the following worries. The first worry is that "the proposed virtue-based account of linguistic understanding is perfectly compatible with there being cases/situations in which it doesn't make sense to ask about a certain subject and a certain fact 'Does *S* know that *p*?' Hence, it seems to me that further argument is needed in order to make the case for the meaningfulness of the theorist's questions about the philosophical thought experiments discussed in Baz." Reply: The worry that there are particular cases, say some very outlandish cases, where it does not make sense to ask about a certain subject and a certain fact 'Does *S* know that *p*?' does not licence the general or global worry about the PMOC as discussed in Baz. Even mainstream philosophers themselves have expressed concern that some cases are so outlandish that they are not theoretically useful because they do not resemble cases we face in everyday life (Weatherson 2003, 8). Here is another related worry pressed by the reviewer: "Davidson will also need some distinction (or demarcation) between situations in which the utterances of a certain sentence, e.g., of the form '*x* knows that *p*' makes sense and situations in which it doesn't (because obviously, you cannot meaningfully utter just any sentence in any context). And it is not obvious to me that according to Davidson the first kind of situations won't be exactly the ones in which the relevant utterance has a point." Reply: It is not exactly clear why

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued essentially that the philosophical method of cases does not need to presuppose the problematic view of language and linguistic competence Baz attributes to its practitioners or defenders—the atomistic compositional view. And neither do friends of the PMOC need to embrace the social pragmatic view that Baz presents with all its negative consequences for the PMOC. Let me end with where the Davidson-inspired skill or virtue-based view leaves us in terms of the epistemology of philosophy. In my opinion, it lends independent support to the view, now current in the epistemology of philosophy that the epistemology of philosophy is an application of social epistemology. Williamson (2007); Nagel (2012) and more recently Irikefe (2022) champion this epistemological thesis and it seems to me the right way to explain how philosophical knowledge is possible and how it can be defended against various challenges posed against it.*

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we need such a demarcation to start with since we can get along without it, and if a theory of language is an attempt to model what people already do, that is exactly the kind of story our theory should also be telling. Further, one might wonder whether such a demarcation does not imply by its very existence that there is a rigid boundary of what counts as meaningful linguistic occasions and what does not count as so. It does in my opinion. And it is why in the history of philosophy these kinds of projects, which seek to demarcate some regions of language as linguistically acceptable and others that are not on the basis of some criteria have had little or no success. In any case, the Davidson-inspired view shows us a way to proceed without it.

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