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*Published in:*  
Wittgenstein-Studien

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/witt-2018-0010](https://doi.org/10.1515/witt-2018-0010)

Published: 01/01/2018

[Link to publication](#)

*Please cite the original version:*

Giese Wetter, S. (2018). Wittgenstein's Criticism of the "Atmosphere" Conception of Meaning in PI §117: A Problem for Therapeutic Readings? *Wittgenstein-Studien*, 9(1), 203–225. <https://doi.org/10.1515/witt-2018-0010>

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# Wittgenstein's Criticism of the "Atmosphere" Conception of Meaning in *PI* 117: A Problem for Therapeutic Readings?

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In recent years, so-called "therapeutic" readings of the later Wittgenstein have centered on the claim that his treatment of questions involving 'meaning' should not be seen as playing a foundational role for his approach of treating philosophical problems by clarifying the *grammar* of expressions. As they argue, the treatment of problems involving 'meaning' should not be seen as playing a special role for this approach as such. Now in *Investigations* §117, Wittgenstein is bringing in his criticism of the "atmosphere" conception of meaning – which he links directly to his approach of clarifying the grammar of expressions figuring in philosophical problems. Assuming the widespread view that what should be pitted against this "atmosphere" conception are remarks clarifying the grammar of 'meaning', the problem apparently confronting therapeutic readings here is that the clarification of the grammar of this *particular word* might thus appear to assume yet a special relevance for Wittgenstein's clarificatory approach as a whole. My aim in this paper is to show that this dilemma is not a real one – by showing that there is actually a problem with the view that remarks clarifying the grammar of 'meaning' could play a privileged role in debunking the type of misconception Wittgenstein introduces in *PI* 117.

In recent years, so-called "therapeutic"<sup>1</sup> readings of Wittgenstein have centered on the claim that Wittgenstein should not be seen primarily as a *philosopher of language*. What these readings have rejected is the view that Wittgenstein's main concern – early or late – had been with providing answers to questions of the type "How does language hook on to the world?" or "What are the preconditions of meaningful language use?" As they take it, Wittgenstein's main concern had always been that of finding ways of dissolving philosophical problems – which ways do involve asking ourselves what we mean by our words. Moreover, these readings find in Wittgenstein a rejection of the view that these ways of dissolving philosophical problems were to *rely on* any answers to such questions. As they read him, also our asking questions like "What is the meaning of a word?" must be seen as a symptom of our being entangled in a philosophical problem, open to an attempt at dissolution by clarifying the grammar of the expressions involved. Against readings of Wittgenstein such as that of Peter Hacker and Hans-Johann Glock, philosophers like Cora Diamond and James Conant have insisted that grammatical remarks central to the dissolution of such particular problems – i.e. remarks like "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" or "rule-following is a practice" – can-

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<sup>1</sup> By "therapeutic readings" I here mean broadly the readings of James Conant and Cora Diamond, as well as readings inspired by or otherwise in some kind of agreement with these two authors. The term "therapeutic" for these kinds of readings has been used by Alice Crary in her introduction to *The New Wittgenstein* (2000: 1), and it has become more widespread since. For this reason, I have decided to use this term throughout this paper.

not be taken to have a special relevance for the dissolution of *any other* problem by means of grammatical clarification.

Now in *Philosophical Investigations* §117, Wittgenstein is criticizing a certain idea we might have about the meaning of words – namely, the idea that the meaning of a word “were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application”. And from the context of this remark one thing appears to be clear: that Wittgenstein thought his criticism of this idea to be directly relevant to the approach to philosophical problems which he had outlined just one section before – namely, that of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. Now it is a widespread view in Wittgenstein scholarship that what should be pitted against this “atmosphere” conception of meaning are remarks clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ – remarks like “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. However, therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein seem to be confronted with a problem here: If they were to follow this widespread view about the relation of Wittgenstein’s criticism of the “atmosphere” conception of meaning and his famous dictum that “meaning is use”, how could they still hold that the clarification of the grammar of this particular word is of no special relevance for grammatical clarification in general? In this paper, I wish to show that this dilemma apparently facing therapeutic readings is not a real one – by showing that there is actually a problem with the view that remarks clarifying the grammar of ‘meaning’ could play a privileged role in debunking the type of misconception Wittgenstein introduces in PI 117.<sup>2</sup>

I will begin by giving an introduction to therapeutic readings of later Wittgenstein – focusing on Cora Diamond’s rejection of the idea that the treatment of philosophical problems via the issuing of grammatical reminders relied on any answer to the question “What are the conditions of meaningful language use?”, as well as James Conant’s detailed reading of PI 43. Next, I will outline how Wittgenstein, in PI 116/117, makes a connection between his criticism of the “atmosphere” conception of meaning and grammatical clarification. I will then give a brief introduction into the standard view of the relation between this “atmosphere” conception and “meaning is use”, followed by an exposition of the dilemma which I see facing therapeutic readings if they were to follow this view. In order to further highlight the problem, I will then turn to Paul Horwich’s reading of Wittgenstein as an example of how difficult it can be for readings that wish to not assign any central role to the treatment of questions concerning “meaning” to avoid running into a dilemma of this sort. After this, I will go on to

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<sup>2</sup> In the following, “PI” will always refer to the 2001 edition of *Philosophical Investigations*.

show how to avoid the problem that Wittgenstein's grammatical remark "meaning is use" might appear to play a general role which on the other hand it shouldn't play. This, as I will argue, can be achieved by our realizing the following: that the idea that misconceptions about meaning assigned such a general role could be dispelled first and foremost by grammatical remarks about 'meaning' is actually not as coherent as it may appear.

### **"Therapeutic" Readings of Later Wittgenstein**

A central aspect of so-called "therapeutic" readings is their criticism of the reading of Wittgenstein which has been presented by Peter Hacker (originally presented jointly with Gordon Baker in their *Analytical Commentary on the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (1980/1985)). What authors like Cora Diamond and James Conant have been taking issue with is Hacker's claim that a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophical problems involves diagnosing ways of using language that are departing from the rules that "govern" the use of these words. Diamond and Conant are criticizing what they take to be the underlying idea of this reading: namely, the idea that we can find in later Wittgenstein an account of the conditions of sense which is then applied in our approach to specific philosophical problems. As they take it, any reading that extracts from later Wittgenstein a general account about when utterances are meaningful and when they are not is seriously misguided. According to them, approaching a philosophical confusion involves a much more delicate set of procedures. In their view, there can be no standard recipe for finding your way out of a philosophical confusion. Rather, this involves attention to the details of the particular case.

In her paper "Criss-Cross Philosophy" (2004), Cora Diamond offers a detailed critique of Hacker's view by supplying a series of cases of the resolution of philosophical problems which aim at calling into question the idea of extracting any *general account* of the conditions of sense from later Wittgenstein. The topic of her paper is how Wittgenstein, throughout his philosophical career, advocated an approach to philosophical problems that was not supposed to be based on an account of the nature of language or sense, and how in *Philosophical Investigations*, he attempts to improve on the approach of the *Tractatus* which he took to have been still in the hold of this question although he at that time thought to have overcome it. When it comes to an account such that of Hacker's, Diamond's main point of criticism is that, in claiming that the aim of philosophical clarification is to diagnose ways of using language

that depart from the rules that govern the use of these words, Hacker ties philosophical clarification and the issuing of grammatical reminders to a general account of language and to an account of the conditions of sense:

[W]e may say that Wittgenstein thought that in philosophy we need to remind the person who is confused of how we use words. [...] But if, in our understanding of Wittgenstein, we take it that the point of the reminders is tied to an idea that we speak nonsense when we depart from the ways of using language that are in accordance with the rules of our language-games, we are making use of a general conception of language, of sense and nonsense, of the conditions of sense which would seem to be highly disputable. (Diamond 2004: 210/1)

To Diamond, the idea that philosophical clarification for Wittgenstein was tied to any such account of the conditions of sense is seriously misguided. This means that Diamond is not taking issue with the specific account that Hacker finds in Wittgenstein, calling for replacing it with an alternative one. Rather, what Diamond wishes to show in her paper is that we can and must do without any general story about sense and meaning supposedly behind Wittgenstein's reminders of how we use words.

What Diamond furnishes in support of this view is a series of cases of the resolution of philosophical problems which aim at calling into question the idea of extracting any *general account* of the conditions of sense from later Wittgenstein. Diamond's first case is an example from Wittgenstein's practice with his students as related by Elizabeth Anscombe in the introduction to her *Collected Papers* (vol. II). The example concerns Anscombe's reaction to Lockean realism and its claim that colors as we see them are not really part of the external world. As Anscombe relates it, she felt dissatisfied with this, wanting to insist that the colors she perceived – *this* yellow, *this* blue – are “out there”. As a consequence, she felt drawn to phenomenalism: the claim that our world is made up of the very specific “thises” which we perceive. However, this phenomenalist account seemed equally dissatisfactory in the light of Wittgenstein's critical discussion of the idea of a private ostensive definition. When telling Wittgenstein about her philosophical troubles, his reaction was to ask her to imagine that we had the word ‘painy’ as a word for the property of some surfaces which cause us pain when we come into contact with them. According to Anscombe, this “medicine” helped her in overcoming her philosophical difficulties. How? The difficulty was that there seemed to be two equally unattractive alternatives: Either to accept that “blue” is not a property of the things we see but merely a purely internal sensation, or claim that *this* blue – my impression of it – must in some way be “out there”. According to Diamond, what was crucial about Wittgenstein's example is that it made Anscombe aware of an important contrast between our use of a word

like ‘blue’ and that of ‘pain’ / ‘painy’. It reminded her of the fact that all along, she had never thought of ‘blue’ as the name of *this* sensation she was having. Wittgenstein’s suggested object of comparison – ‘painy’ – together with ‘pain’ – works exactly like how Lockean realism conceives secondary quality words: ‘pain’ is the name of a purely internal sensation which is caused by ‘painy’ surfaces. What is crucial now is that when confronted with Wittgenstein’s example, we feel no need to insist that “painy (or pain) is out there!” – as we did in the case of ‘blue’. This is so because unlike ‘pain’, ‘blue’ is not the name of a purely internal sensation. Lockean realism views ‘blue’ along the model of ‘pain’, which is a purely internal sensation – however, the contrast in use between ‘blue’ and ‘pain’ leaves us wanting to insist that ‘blue’ must be “out there”. The difficulties then arise when we focus on our “internal impression” of blue (conceived along the lines of pain) and ask where in the world *it* is. However, the comparison with ‘pain’ / ‘painy’ can make us see that we are asking this question only because Lockean realism makes up an analogy between ‘blue’ and ‘pain’ which is ultimately unfitting. Diamond:

The clarity produced by Wittgenstein’s suggestion lay in the capacity of the example to make the Lockean question disappear, the question where blue, *this*, really is. The question arises out of a kind of unclarity. ‘Blue’ is not like ‘pain’/‘painy’, but Lockean realism gets its convincingness from that contrast being out of sight. (2004: 212)

For Diamond, this is a good example of what Wittgenstein meant by “seeing philosophy in cross-wise strips”: We had been taking the question “Where is *this* blue?” to be a “Big Question” – namely, a form of the question “How is thought able to connect to reality?” However, Wittgenstein’s reminder made possible the transformation of the question “Where is *this* blue?” into a question about the grammar of “blue”. In this way, the problem is *resolved* – we feel no inclination to find an *answer* to this question any more. As Diamond also puts it, the problem is reconceived as a *particular* problem: it is not about a question taken to be *the* fundamental question, but about the grammar of particular words. Another feature of this example that Diamond stresses is that Wittgenstein’s grammatical reminder was tailored directly at the confusion Anscombe felt, and therefore did not aim at a once-and-for-all resolution of the problem. As Diamond explains:

It is clear in Anscombe’s account of the “medicine” that it did not have to work. She ascribes to Wittgenstein the idea that it was the right medicine for her; it would not have been the appropriate medicine for someone who had taken ‘blue’ to be a word for a sensation, or who moved to that view in response to Wittgenstein’s suggestion. If I speak of the capacity of the example to make the Lockean problem lose its apparent inevitability, I don’t mean to suggest that it would do so for everyone. (2004: 212/3)

What is crucial now for Diamond's argument against Hacker is that she takes the things she had wanted to show in the Anscombe example to hold also of questions like "What are the conditions of sense?" As she wishes to show in her paper, also the focus on searching for an answer to this Big Question of philosophy makes us look away from the possibility of grammatical reminders to *transform* questions and *resolve* problems – namely, those associated with the topics of "sense" and "meaning". In her second example, she proceeds to show how this can be the case when one has derived an answer to this Big Question out of Wittgenstein's writings. In the case she discusses, this is an account of sense which holds that the sense of a term is constituted by the rules of grammar which govern its employment in a language game. What Diamond discusses is a philosophical problem which may arise out of this view. The example is this: When Jews and Christians dispute whether Jesus is or isn't the Messiah, we usually take them to contradict one another when the one side is saying "Jesus is not the Messiah" and the other saying "Jesus *is* the Messiah". After all, they are pointing to the same texts to settle the issue whether Jesus is the fulfillment of these texts, and seem to be talking about the same person. However, the view that sense is constituted by grammar entails that grammar is different in different language games, and that therefore, what it is said in one language game cannot mean the same as what is said in a language game with different rules of grammar. As it is obvious that Jews and Christians do not apply the same criteria to settle the question whether Jesus is the Messiah, and since these criteria belong to grammar, we must conclude that they cannot mean the same by "Messiah", and are therefore not literally contradicting one another. What Diamond sees as having gone wrong here is this: While the "sense is constituted by grammar" view takes from Wittgenstein the thought that we should look within particular language games to see the sense of what is said in them, it does not seem to want to apply this thought to terms like "meaning the same" or "contradict". The result, as Diamond states, is then this:

[T]he concepts of meaning and not meaning the same, and of contradicting someone, are given a comparatively simple grammar, so that whether or not two people are contradicting each other can be read off from the rules for the use of a word, here 'Messiah'. If the rules in the respective language-games are different, the two people don't mean the same, and aren't contradicting each other. But Wittgenstein thought that, in philosophy, we are frequently inclined to just that sort of simplification; we don't see how complicated the use of our words is. (2004: 214/5)

As Diamond insists, the grammar of our terms "meaning the same" and "contradict" is in fact much more complicated than what the "sense is constituted by grammar" view makes of it – by as it were *inferring* a use for these words rather than look and see what that use is actually like. As she points out, attending to the complex grammar of these terms may reveal that

cases like that of Jews and Christians disputing about whether Jesus is the Messiah are indeed the kind of cases that come up when we learn the use of “meaning the same” and “contradict”. If this is so, the puzzlement about Jews and Christian not really contradicting each other here may disappear. As Diamond wishes to show here, the philosophical question “Can Jews and Christians really contradict one another?” can be transformed into a question about the grammar of “contradict”, and thus the problem be resolved. Most importantly however, what Diamond wishes to show with this example is how searching in Wittgenstein for an answer to the Big Question “What are the conditions of sense?” may lead to obscuring the potential of grammatical reminders being able to transform problems involving “meaning” and “sense” into *particular* problems being concerned with the grammar of *particular* words.

Diamond’s third example is the debate among commentators of Wittgenstein whether a person isolated from birth could possibly have a language. The debate centers around the question whether Wittgenstein thought it sufficient for a language that the speaker used words the meanings of which are shareable in principle, or whether he thought that a precondition for language was the existence of a community of speakers actually engaged in using those words. What Diamond criticizes about this debate is that the focus is again on the Big Question “What are the conditions of sense?” – and on the *answer* to this question supposedly given by Wittgenstein. As Diamond wishes to show, however, also in this case does the focus on this question make us look away from the possibility of *transforming* a question like “Can an isolated speaker possibly have a language?”, and of resolving the philosophical problem. To show this, Diamond addresses the idea of the meanings of the words of the isolated speaker being “shareable in principle”. As she points out, in our life with language, the “shareableness” of what people do shows itself in certain characteristic ways – so regarding the example of the “isolated speaker”, questions would be arising such as: How are we to see the “shareableness” in the employment of a word if someone has not learned that word from others and never uses the word with others? What is the shareableness in such a case supposed to really come to? As Diamond wishes to show, this can help us see that our search for a *condition* which *enables* us to use language (in a shared way) is misguided – all there is to note is that the case we are imagining – the isolated speaker using her words – is in many ways quite unlike what we know as the shareableness of something showing itself (cf. 2004: 216, 1989: 16-20). Again, this is meant as an example how looking in Wittgenstein for an answer to the Big Question “What are the conditions of sense?” leads to our looking away from the potential of grammatical reminders being able to *transform* problems involving “meaning” and “sense” into *particular* problems about the grammar of *particular* words – in this case, the potential of



reminders of the grammar of “shareable” to transform the question “What would *enable* an isolated speaker to have a language?”, and thus resolve the problem behind it.

What Diamond wishes to show with these examples is that stretches from the *Philosophical Investigations*, like the remarks on a “private language”, or on rule-following, are misread when taken to point to an *answer* to the question “What are the conditions of sense?” To be sure, Wittgenstein, in the *Investigations*, was dealing with puzzles about the nature of language. However, as Diamond points out:

[T]here is a difference between seeing such a question as a Big Question and seeing it simply as a problem or rather a group of problems, philosophical problems that can be approached through the methods he had developed. (2004: 210)

As Diamond tried to show in her two examples of puzzles about sense and meaning, these methods – e.g. the method of attending to the grammar of the expressions involved – can effect the resolution of these problems and the disappearing of the questions. This means that in contrast to Hacker, for whom the attention to the grammar of particular words is mandated by Wittgenstein’s supposed answer to the question “What are the conditions of sense?”, for Diamond, the attention to grammar can help transform this question in the same way as other Big Questions, and to resolve the problems associated with them. Diamond:

[...] I am suggesting this way of thinking of clarification, as understood in Wittgenstein’s later thought: Wittgenstein clarified part of the grammar of ‘blue’, as a way of dealing with one particular problem, where the clarification itself included allowing the problem to be seen as a particular problem. So, too, parts of the grammar of ‘proposition’ (say) or ‘language’ may be clarified, in response to particular problems, where the clarification will include allowing us to see our problem as a particular problem, not as *the* problem, not as an infinitely long lengthwise strip. (2004: 213)

As she argues, only such a radically “piecemeal” understanding of Wittgenstein – which takes none of the problems which Wittgenstein addresses to be *the* problem on which the treatment of any other problem depended – can do justice to the therapeutic potential of grammatical reminders.

This view also shapes the understanding therapeutic readings have of Wittgenstein’s famous dictum “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI 43). This remark is sometimes read as if Wittgenstein aimed at supplying an answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come about?” In his “Comment on Diamond’s ‘Unfolding Truth and Reading Wittgenstein’” (1999), James Conant puts forward a reading of PI 43 intended to question this view. As an introduction, he there quotes a remark of Wittgenstein’s from *Zettel*:

The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in. (Z 16)

As Conant sees it, many of the widespread readings of PI 43 are at odds with this pronouncement of Wittgenstein's. Conant:

[Commentators] wind up, either implicitly or explicitly, taking Wittgenstein to be providing us with a general philosophical answer to the question "What does meaning something consist in?". Wittgenstein ends up being read as answering the question by declaring that the meaning of a word consists in its use in the language, or in its method of verification, or in the conditions under which we are justified in asserting it, etc. (Conant 1999: 1)

As Conant argues, a close look at the exact wording of PI 43 is apt to question this view. Conant is proposing an amended version of Anscombe's translation – because, as he takes it, her choice of "define" over other possible translations of "erklären" makes it look more as if this passage was about declaring what meaning something *consists in*. He suggests the following translation:

For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning' – though not for *all* cases of its employment – one can explicate the word thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (1999: 2)

Now apart from the oft-highlighted fact that "meaning is use" comes with the qualification "for a *large* class of cases – though not for *all* cases", what Conant sees as mainly speaking against reading this passage as an answer to the question "What does meaning something consist in?" is the two levels at which he sees the passage operating. Conant:

What the passage announces itself as doing is explicating the word "meaning"; and it explicates it, for a large class of cases of its employment, in terms of use – thereby apparently marking a distinction between employment (Benützung) and use (Gebrauch). [...] The distinct characterizations of the central notions figuring respectively in its question (concerning the *employment* of a particular word, the word "meaning") and its answer (which directs us to the *use* of a word, any word) signal the two different levels at which the passage operates. (1999: 2)

Conant furnishes the following paraphrase in order to bring out how he sees this two-level structure operating:

The word 'meaning' is a word of our language, [...] and if we look and see what *its* use (that is, the use of the word "meaning") [...] is then we will discover that, for a *large* class of cases of its employment, though not for all, what we mean, when we employ this word in, for example, speaking of 'the meaning of a word', is *the use* of *that* word (whose meaning we are asking after) in the language. (1999: 2)

What Conant is doing is breaking down this first paragraph of PI 43 into two major parts: (1) Wittgenstein is concerning himself with the question "How is the word 'meaning' being employed?" – which question is equivalent to "How is the word 'meaning' being *used*?" (2)

When now taking a look at this employment (*use*) of the word ‘meaning’, Wittgenstein discovers the following: when we employ (*use*) this word in the expression ‘the meaning of a word’, what we mean by ‘the meaning of the word X’ is, in a large class of cases, the *use* of the word X. This means that the two levels Conant insists we distinguish here are: (1) the level of a *question*: “How do we *employ* the word ‘meaning’?” – and (2) the level of the *answer* to that question: “In a large class of cases, we employ ‘meaning of a word’ so as to mean the *use* of that word”. Put differently: What we are starting out with in PI 43 is Wittgenstein’s typical question concerning the *use* of a word – in this case, ‘meaning’. And what we end with is a discovery that one use which we make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances is to use it in the sense of ‘the *use* of the word in the language’.

As Conant argues, this status of “meaning is use” in PI 43 of that of an answer to the question “How would you employ (use) the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances?” makes it far removed from an answer to the question “How does linguistic meaning come into being?” Conant:

What Cora Diamond tells us Wittgenstein seeks to do with “truth”, he also seeks to do with “meaning”. Wittgenstein’s aim (in this passage and elsewhere) is not to define, but to explicate – to unfold – what we mean by “meaning” by looking to the ways in which we talk about it. To unfold meaning is not to offer a theory or a definition of it. (1999: 2)

### **The “Atmosphere” Conception of Meaning in PI 117**

Let us now turn to *Philosophical Investigations* 116/117. In PI 116, Wittgenstein writes:

When philosophers use a word – “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition”, “sentence”, “name” – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?  
What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (PI 116)

And then, immediately afterwards, in PI 117, Wittgenstein continues:

You say to me: ‘You understand this expression, don’t you? Well then – I am using it with the meaning you’re familiar with.’ As if the meaning were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application.  
If, for example, someone says that the sentence ‘This is here’ (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense.  
(PI 117 – translation amended<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> I have amended the Anscombe translation by translating “Bedeutung” as “meaning” and “Sinn” as “sense” throughout.

In this section immediately following his programmatic statement of PI 116, Wittgenstein mentions an idea about the meaning of words and then goes on to criticize it. The idea is that the meaning of a word is something which the word carries with it like an atmosphere into every context of use. (This idea I will henceforth call the “atmosphere conception of meaning”.) Now from the context of this remark it appears to be clear that Wittgenstein thinks that his criticism of this idea is directly relevant to the approach to philosophical problems which he just outlined one section before – namely, that of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. One idea why it might be relevant that may suggest itself here is that philosophers’ adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning is *the reason behind* their not asking themselves how words are actually used in the language game which is their original home.<sup>4</sup>

Now it is a widespread view among commentators that what Wittgenstein thought should be pitted against misconceptions of this sort are remarks clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ – i.e., remarks such as “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. For example Peter Hacker, in his exegesis of PI 117 in *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, wraps up what I have called the “atmosphere conception” of meaning as the belief that the meaning of a word were something *attached* to it (cf. 2005b: 254/5). This same belief we then find in his list of the things which Wittgenstein’s grammatical remark of PI 43 is directed against (cf. 2005a: 149-52). Also, among the misconceptions listed by Hacker under the label of the “Augustinian conception of language” in the essays part of *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, we find the idea that “[t]he meaning of a sentence must be determined by, or be a function of, the meanings of its constituent words” (2005a: 12) – which includes the corollary idea that “one arrives at an interpretation of another person’s utterance by deriving the meaning of the sentence from one’s knowledge of the meanings of its constituents and

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting question here is that of the relation between the “atmosphere” conception of PI 117 and “the conception of thought as a gaseous medium” that Wittgenstein talks about in PI 109. In a paper entitled “The Pneumatic Conception of Thought”, Joachim Schulte questions the Anscombe translation of the German “die pneumatische Auffassung des Denkens” there. As Schulte attempts to show, Wittgenstein’s use of “pneumatic” is likely inspired by that of Oswald Spengler, according to whom *pneuma* is a sort of body (“Seelenkörper”) – however, as Schulte also shows, Wittgenstein’s use of the term underwent several changes throughout the 30s. Schulte argues that Anscombe’s choice of translation arbitrarily narrows “pneumatic” down to an earlier, “mentalist” conception of *pneuma*, captured in this manuscript remark of Wittgenstein’s: “The sentence, or its sense, is not a pneumatic being that has a life of its own and is going through adventures we need not know anything about. That would be as if we had breathed a spirit into it of the same kind of our own [...]” (MS 113, 85, cf. 44). Now while there obviously is a striking similarity between this criticism of the idea of the sense of a sentence being a “pneumatic being” and the criticism of the idea of the meaning of a word being an “atmosphere” which it carried with it into any kind of application, I do agree with Schulte that this “mentalist” sense cannot be the one in which “pneumatic” is to be understood in PI 109 (cf. 49). As Schulte takes it, “die pneumatische Auffassung” there should rather be taken as one “according to which the core of language contains a scaffolding of rules whose substance is the same as that of our thought: the logical structure of thought is identical with that of language and reality” (55). And such a conception, it would seem, is at most indirectly related to the “atmosphere” conception of PI 117.

their mode of combination” (14). Crucially, what Hacker takes Wittgenstein to primarily pit against this idea – an idea arguably closely related if not identical to the “atmosphere” conception of PI 117 – are (as against other elements of the Augustinian conception of language) “grammatical clarifications of the concepts and reticulations of concepts of name, word, meaning of a word, meaning something by a word, [...]” (14/5) – i.e. remarks such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” in PI 43 (cf. 15, also 74, 129, 174/5). Another example is Hans-Johann Glock, who in his *Wittgenstein Dictionary* takes a similar line: Wittgenstein’s criticism of “compositionalism” – i.e. the idea that “[t]he sense of a proposition is [...] determined exclusively by the meanings of its constituents and the mode of their combination”, 87 – is tied to his method of dissolving philosophical problems (in that metaphysical theories and questions are to be approached, not by “invok[ing] a canonical system of rules” (261) determining the bounds of sense, but rather in an “undogmatic procedure” of drawing attention to *circumstances* of use of words (cf. 261-2, 88)). And, like Hacker, Glock takes Wittgenstein’s grammatical remark of PI 43 to be a primary means of debunking compositionalism (cf. 88, 376-7, 44, 260).

Now widespread as this view about the relation between the atmosphere conception of meaning mentioned by Wittgenstein in PI 117 and “meaning is use” may be, it is not immediately clear that it could be endorsed by therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein. To be sure, also authors like Hacker and Glock want “meaning is use” to be taken as a mere remark clarifying the *use* of the word ‘meaning’. However, if Wittgenstein thought his criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning to be directly relevant to his approach of clarifying the *uses* of words – for instance because he took philosophers’ adherence to the atmosphere conception to be *the reason behind* their not asking themselves how words are *actually used* –, and a clarification of the grammar of ‘meaning’ were the thing to be pitted against this misconception, how could this not entail that when attending to the grammar of this particular word, rather than dealing with a *particular* problem, we are dealing with *the* problem on which the treatment of any other problem somehow depended? But claiming this, it appears, would be an outright denial of the sort of “piecemeal” account of Wittgenstein’s philosophy which therapeutic readings are championing.

On the other hand though, isn’t it a very straightforward idea that the atmosphere conception of meaning of PI 117 *should* be dispelled first and foremost by clarifying the use of the word ‘meaning’? What I wish to show in the following is that this idea is actually not as coherent as it might first appear, and that seeing this should shift our view on the dilemma which therapeutic readings appear to be facing here. But first, in order to highlight that this is

not merely a matter of a consistent reading of the *Investigations*, let me turn to an example of how difficult it can be for philosophers following Wittgenstein who wish to not assign any central role to the treatment of questions concerning “meaning” to avoid introducing something akin to the “atmosphere” conception of PI 117, and to then assign the grammatical statement “meaning is use” the apparently central role of countering such a misconception.

In his recent book *Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy* (2012), Paul Horwich has advanced a view of the philosophy of later Wittgenstein which centers on the claim that Wittgenstein’s discussion of *meaning* should be regarded as far less central than it usually is. What Horwich instead argues to be central is what he calls Wittgenstein’s “metaphilosophy” – his unique perspective on the source and possible dissolution of philosophical problems. Now the idea which Horwich wants to reject is this: that it is Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following and meaning which form the basis of his treatment of philosophical problems – an idea which he finds in much of contemporary Wittgenstein scholarship. As he argues, Wittgenstein’s therapeutic philosophical project does not rest on any particular account of meaning – especially not on a “use-account” of meaning – but has its origin in a “deflationary”, anti-theoretical *metaphilosophical* point of view. His view sees as the source of philosophical problems our unawareness of differences in *use* of the words involved – caused by linguistic analogies and scientific overgeneralizations. Horwich argues that Wittgenstein’s treatment of *meaning* in the *Investigations* should be seen as “simply one application” (2012: x) of this general therapeutic methodology.

What Horwich means by this comes out the clearest in Horwich’s paper “Wittgenstein’s Meta-Philosophical Development” (2004). There, he states with great clarity what he takes to be the import of viewing Wittgenstein’s metaphilosophical perspective as primary to his treatment of problems involving ‘meaning’. He writes:

From this metaphilosophical perspective the problems surrounding the phenomenon X must be treated by focusing on the special ways that the term ‘X’ is used. And applying that methodology to the phenomenon of meaning, we will see that words are said to have ‘the same meaning’ when their basic use is the same, and that a grasp of the meaning of a word is attributed to someone when he is able to use it appropriately. That is, we arrive at the identification of the meaning of a word with its use. (Horwich 2004: 171)

This passage makes clear, as I take it, that Horwich sees “meaning is use” – a shorthand for insights like “words are said to have ‘the same meaning’ when their basic use is the same” – as a result of attending to *actual uses* of the word ‘meaning’. For instance, it is clear that the

above insight is the result of having attended to *actual uses* of the phrase ‘having the same meaning’.

With this in mind, let us now take a look at a group of remarks of Horwich’s from the section “The Role of Language” in the beginning of *Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy*. In this section, Horwich – via examples – gives a first introduction into the idea that it is the exaggeration of linguistic analogies which is at the source of so many well-known philosophical problems. As a preparatory step for this, Horwich introduces the idea how simplistic ideas about the *use* of some words can produce the feeling of paradox. The first example he gives is a possible puzzlement over a mathematician’s assertion that “Every straight line intersects every circle – but sometimes only at imaginary points”. The second example is that of a psychologist announcing the discovery of ‘unconscious pain’. In the case of the psychologist, we are inclined to assume that she is using the word ‘pain’ in its basic ordinary sense, according to which we only apply it to what a person is *aware* of. This, Horwich continues, produces the dilemma of either accepting a perplexing new fact about pain, or having to reject this new theory – whatever explanatory value for the science of psychology it may have. However, as Horwich points out, this tension can be resolved through our realizing that by introducing this new feature of pain, the psychologist has actually changed the pattern of deployment of the word ‘pain’ in such a fundamental way that it would be wrong to assume that this is still the ordinary use of ‘pain’. Like in Horwich’s other examples, the dilemma dissolves when we realize that the psychologist has done nothing more than introduce a *different use* of the word ‘pain’ (cf. 2012: 10-11). Now it is in this context that Horwich makes the following two remarks:

But again, the source of confusion is not difficult to identify. As just illustrated, we tend to forget that the meaning of a word is something we bestow, not usually *explicitly* by means of a deliberate stipulation, but often *implicitly*, merely by using the word in certain ways; so that a change in its meaning does not require overt redefinition, but may come about through a shift in its fundamental pattern of deployment. (2012: 10)

The remedy, quite clearly, is not to be mesmerized by the *word*, but to appreciate how distinct uses of it, hence somewhat distinct meanings, may evolve and proliferate. (2012: 11)

What Horwich started out to show with his two examples was how the assumption that the same word must always be *used* in the same way can be at the source of philosophical puzzlement. To this end, he pointed out how in his examples, what we are dealing with are either overt or covert changes – i.e. differences – in use of the words involved. But, it appears, in the passages quoted, Horwich is going one step further than this: He names as a source of confusion, not only our unawareness of differences in use of the words figuring in the respective

problems, but our ignorance of a general relation between the *meaning* of words and their *use*. This ignorance appears what is meant to be in the state of being “mesmerized by the *word*” – which then, it seems, is a form of adherence to the “atmosphere” conception of meaning. So what Horwich appears to be bringing in as a source of confusion in his two examples is something similar if not identical to what Wittgenstein is mentioning in PI 117.

Here we clearly have an instance of the dilemma which therapeutic readings appeared to be facing when it came to reading PI 116/117: How can Horwich reconcile this with his concern of showing that Wittgenstein’s discussion of *meaning* should not be regarded as central to his philosophical outlook? For it appears that, given Horwich’s view that many traditional philosophical problems have their origin in our unawareness of differences in use of the words involved, there is no reason to think that what he names as “the source of confusion” (10) in his two examples – the state of “being mesmerized by the word” – shouldn’t be seen as the source of confusion in *any* problem of this kind. However it is also clear that what Horwich thinks should be pitted against this are remarks of the type “meaning is use” – which for Horwich, as we have seen, are remarks clarifying the grammar of “meaning”. Now, the clarification of the grammar of “meaning” would indeed assume a fundamental relevance for Wittgenstein’s philosophical perspective – since attending to the grammar of this particular word obviously were the remedy to the source of confusion in at least any of the problems that fit Horwich’s schema.

### **The “Atmosphere” Conception and “Meaning is Use”**

As I had said, it is a very straightforward idea to think that the atmosphere conception of meaning of PI 117 *should* be dispelled first and foremost by clarifying the use of the word ‘meaning’. However, as I wish to show next, this idea is actually not as coherent as it might first appear. As I would like to show now, if we take seriously the grammatical status of “meaning is use” – i.e. its status as a remark clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ –, the thought that it can be a chief instrument in moving us away from the atmosphere conception of meaning as introduced by Wittgenstein in PI 117 must appear questionable. This, as I will conclude, should shift our view on the dilemma which therapeutic readings appear to be facing here.

To get a first glimpse at the problem facing the idea that the “atmosphere” conception of PI 117 could be dispelled first and foremost by reminders clarifying the use of the word



‘meaning’, let us start with the reading of why the criticism of this misconception matters which I had briefly sketched when introducing PI 116/117. I had worked there with the following idea why this criticism might be relevant to Wittgenstein’s approach of bringing words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use: namely, the idea that philosophers’ adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning were *the reason behind* their not asking themselves how words are actually used in the language game which is their original home. However, if this were so, it would be hard to see how a reminder clarifying the use of the word ‘meaning’ should be able to shake anyone’s adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning. If someone thinks that the meaning of a word is like an atmosphere accompanying the word into every context of use, and *for this reason* thinks he needn’t mind actual uses of words such as ‘knowledge’ or ‘I’, why should this person think he now needed to mind actual uses of the word ‘meaning’? It appears that if we really were serious in targeting a conviction of his that is his *reason* for not minding actual uses of words, we should offer anything but the clarification of an *actual use* of a word.

So if we assume Wittgenstein to be criticizing the atmosphere conception of meaning because it is *the reason behind* philosophers’ not minding actual uses of words, the idea that it could be dispelled by reminders clarifying the use of the word ‘meaning’ actually appears quite questionable. But what if we did not assume this misconception to be *the reason behind* philosophers’ unwillingness to mind such actual uses? What if the belief that the meaning of a word is like an atmosphere accompanying the word into every context of use were merely the state of mind of someone to whom it has just never occurred to mind such uses? In this case, there surely wouldn’t be anything question-begging in trying to move someone away from this conception by reminding him of actual uses of words. (And isn’t this the way Wittgenstein appears to be taking it in PI 117, when he recommends to the person saying ‘This is here’ that “he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used”?)

Now one might ask: On this reading of the relation between adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning and philosophers’ not minding how words are actually used, why should there be a problem with the idea that what Wittgenstein intended to counter this misconception with were remarks clarifying the use of the word ‘meaning’? My reply would be that there is, in principle, nothing speaking against this any more – however that there is a problem now with the idea that clarifying the use of ‘meaning’ does play an *exclusive* role here. Let us remember that what we are imagining is that Wittgenstein intended to counter the atmosphere conception of meaning with remarks of the type “meaning is use” – in other

words, by issuing a reminder that one use we would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word’. This means that we are imagining the following case: someone who is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning of PI 117 is moving away from it as a result of minding *this particular use of ‘meaning of a word’* (namely, the one where he is using this expression in the sense of ‘the use of the word’).

However, as I wish to show now, there is actually a problem with the conceivability of such a case. To see why, let us try to spell out such a case. Let us imagine someone whom we are engaged with in a philosophical discussion and who is not minding the uses in actual circumstances of a word he is employing – let us say the word ‘to know’. And let us also imagine that when we tell him that we think it to be questionable whether this word as employed by him still has the sense which we all know, he responds in the same way as Wittgenstein’s interlocutor in PI 117: “You understand this expression, don’t you? Well then – I am using it in the meaning you are familiar with.” And from this, we conclude – like Wittgenstein – that he is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning. Now let us further imagine that we tell him this: “You seem to think that the meaning of a word is something like an atmosphere which the word carries with it into every kind of application. But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances! Then you will see that this conception of meaning is not truly yours at all.” Let us now imagine that he responds: “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should really take into account actual uses which I would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’. What uses were you thinking of?” Now at first glance, what this seems to lead up to is just the case which we had wanted to spell out: Someone who is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning is now ready to take into account the uses which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances.

Now, it seems, there is no obstacle – given that he sees that one use which he would make of this expression is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word in the language’ – that he will move away from the atmosphere conception of meaning. But this is only at first glance. Because the question is: Is he – in this moment – still adhering to the atmosphere conception? Put differently: Would we, in this moment where he is willing to consider the *uses* which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances, still say that he is adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning? It seems we would not – since we had taken Wittgenstein to think of this conception as the state of mind of someone who doesn’t mind the uses which he would make of words in actual circumstances. So how could we say of someone who now *is* ready to mind such uses that he is still adhering to this conception? But *if* we say of him already in this moment – where he is willing to *consider* such uses of

‘meaning of a word’ – that he is not adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, then this is not a case of someone moving away from it *as a result of minding a particular use which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’*. For he had already moved away from the atmosphere conception of meaning *before* minding just *which* uses he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’. It was the openness to minding actual uses of an expression (namely, ‘meaning of a word’) that made us say that he was not any more adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, not his minding *what exactly* these uses are (that is, not his minding that one of these uses of ‘meaning of a word’ would be to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word’).<sup>5</sup>

What this consideration points to, as I take it, is that the case which the view under discussion needs to conceive – namely, that of someone moving away from the atmosphere conception of meaning as a result of minding a particular use which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ (i.e. the one where he is using this expression in the sense of ‘the use of the word’) – is actually not so conceivable once we make an attempt to get it into clear focus. This is so, it appears to me, because there is a question-begging structure involved in what we are trying to conceive here: The reminder that one use which he would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word in the language’ can effect the result which we had imagined for it to effect – freeing him from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning – only if this result has already been achieved. One may want to ask now: If the idea that someone can be removed from the grip of the atmosphere conception by making him mind *one or more specific uses* which he would make of the word ‘meaning’ lacks the coherence that we thought it had, how can this goal at all *be* achieved?

For an answer, we need just go back to my argument. In the exchange with the person adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning, there was a point where we said to him: “But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances!” Of course, in that scenario, this was just a preparatory step for making him mind that one use he would make of this expression is to use it in the sense of ‘the use of the word’. However, as I had then tried to show, there is something incoherent about the idea that it must be his minding *this specific use* of ‘meaning’ which does the trick in removing him from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning. Still yet, this moment in my argument contains the answer to our question: Because if we had to name something which – in

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<sup>5</sup> Put in terms of Conant’s distinction of levels in PI 43, it is already someone’s reaching the level of the *question* (i.e. the level of “employment”) rather than his reaching the level of the *answer* to that question (i.e. the level of “use”) which makes us say that he is no longer adhering to the atmosphere conception of meaning.

the scenario of this argument – in effect *did* remove our interlocutor from the grip of this conception, that must have been our saying to him: “But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ in actual circumstances!” For after all, it was *that* which prompted him to respond: “Maybe I should really take into account actual uses which I would make of the expression ‘meaning of a word’ – What uses were you thinking of?” In other words, it was this “But think of uses ...!” which prompted him to express the readiness to *consider* such uses – which, in turn, made us say that he was no longer in the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning.

So one of the things that *can* move someone away from the atmosphere conception of meaning is asking him to consider actual uses of the word ‘meaning’. But what should be clear now is that it need not be actual uses of the word ‘*meaning*’ which he would have to consider. For of course, we would also say of him that he had freed himself from the grip of the atmosphere conception of meaning if he were to express his readiness to consider actual uses of the word ‘to know’, the word ‘I’, or the word ‘being’. In other words, even if in the scenario of my argument, the trick in moving our interlocutor away from the atmosphere conception of meaning had been done by our saying to him “But think of uses which you would make of the expression ‘*meaning of a word*’ in actual circumstances!”, the same thing could equally well have been achieved by saying to him: “But think of uses which you would make of the word ‘*to know*’ in actual circumstances!” And is it not actually the latter which we had wanted him to do all along? After all, it was an employment of the word ‘*to know*’ which he made in a philosophical discussion that had struck us as strange – prompting us to think that he should mind uses which he would make of this word in *actual circumstances* (in order to see if he really thought that ‘to know’ as employed by him in his philosophical example still had the sense which we all know). Issuing a reminder of a particular use which he would make of the word ‘*meaning*’ was an idea which we had only hit upon because of this manifest adherence to the atmosphere conception of meaning. But, as I have tried to show, this reminder cannot do anything for the purpose of countering this conception which a reminder of actual uses of ‘to know’ could not do.

The upshot from my argument, as I take it, is then this: *Any* grammatical remark – through its issuing an invitation to mind a *use* we would make of a word in *actual circumstances* (“But think of uses...!”) – must be thought of as being equally able to counter the atmosphere conception of meaning mentioned by Wittgenstein in PI 117. That is, invitations to mind uses which we would make of the word ‘to know’, the word ‘I’, or the word ‘being’ in actual circumstances must all be thought of as being able to move someone away from the at-

mosphere conception of meaning in the same way as remarks on the grammar of the word ‘meaning’. Remarks on the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ – such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” – cannot be thought of as playing a *privileged role* in doing this.<sup>6</sup>

If this is right, then the dilemma which therapeutic readings appeared to be facing is not a real one. The dilemma was this: Given the role that Wittgenstein assigns the “atmosphere” conception of meaning in PI 116/117, and given that what should be pitted against this misconception are remarks clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’, how can we avoid concluding that these kind of remarks – remarks of the type “meaning is use” – must be taken as having some kind of foundational role for Wittgenstein’s later philosophy? However, if remarks clarifying the grammar of ‘meaning’ indeed have no privileged role to play in debunking the atmosphere conception of meaning, then the dilemma that they must play a general role which on the other hand they shouldn’t play is avoided. We are again free to view problems involving ‘meaning’ as *particular* problems, as therapeutic readings have been arguing all along.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have dealt with a challenge I saw as facing so-called “therapeutic” readings of later Wittgenstein. The challenge arises if we take the following two elements together. The first element is this: In *Investigations* 117, Wittgenstein brings in what I had called the “*atmosphere conception of meaning*” – the thought that the meaning of a word were like an atmosphere accompanying the word into every context of application. Crucially, from the context of this remark it appears clear that Wittgenstein thought his criticism of the atmosphere conception of meaning to be directly relevant to his approach of clarifying the uses of words – in that it addresses a belief he took to be held by those philosophers who are

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<sup>6</sup> I say “privileged role” here because – as we have seen in my argument – it is not that remarks on the grammar of ‘meaning’ cannot play *any* role. Since they too are invitations to mind a use we would make of a word in *actual circumstances*, they also must be thought of as being capable of moving someone away from the atmosphere conception of meaning in the same way as reminders of actual uses of ‘to know’, ‘I’, or ‘being’.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to deny that e.g. the problems Wittgenstein addresses in the *Investigations* involving ‘meaning’ (‘Bedeutung’ / ‘meinen’) might all be closely related, and that hence a grammatical reminder such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” might play a role in the treatment of several different problems. It is just to deny that this clarification of the grammar of ‘meaning’ is of special relevance for the treatment of *any* problem via the clarification of the grammar of the terms involved – i.e. to deny that the treatment of *any other* problem somehow depended on the treatment of problems involving ‘meaning’.

not minding such uses. The second element is the widespread view in Wittgenstein scholarship that what should be pitted against the “atmosphere” conception of meaning are remarks clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ – remarks like “the meaning of a word is its use in the language”. Taking these two elements together, we get the thought that clarifying the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ is directly relevant to Wittgenstein’s approach of clarifying the uses of words in that it addresses a belief held by philosophers who are not minding such uses. And this, I had held, appears wholly incompatible with therapeutic readings holding that problems involving ‘meaning’ are to be seen as *particular* problems, not *the* problem that the treatment of all other problems depended upon.

The aim of this paper was to show that this dilemma apparently facing therapeutic readings here is not a real one. To this end, I presented an argument questioning the widespread view that remarks clarifying the grammar of ‘meaning’ – remarks such as “The meaning of a word is its use in the language” – play a *privileged role* in debunking the atmosphere conception of meaning that Wittgenstein mentions in PI 117. The upshot of my argument was that remarks clarifying the grammar of *any* word – through their issuing an invitation to mind a *use* we would make of a word in *actual circumstances* – must be thought of as being equally able to counter the “atmosphere” conception of meaning of PI 117. Switching within the treatment of a particular problem – say, a treatment involving clarification of the grammar of ‘to know’ – to a clarification of the grammar of ‘meaning’ in order to debunk a misconception of meaning which appears to be in the way of someone minding uses of ‘to know’ cannot play the role that it is commonly assigned. Coming to see this, I held, is an essential part of grasping the thought – championed by therapeutic readings – that the treatment of problems involving ‘meaning’ cannot be thought of as playing some sort of special role for Wittgenstein later philosophy. It is also essential to a full appreciation of the fact – highlighted by most serious readings of Wittgenstein – that “meaning is use” is a remark about *how we would use the word ‘meaning’* in actual circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank the participants of the Philosophy Department’s Research Seminar at Åbo Akademi University – and particularly Lars Hertzberg – for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. The paper has also greatly benefited from discussions with Martin Gustafsson and James Conant, as well as from Martin Gustafsson’s and Yrsa Neuman’s comments on the final version of the paper. I would like to thank all of them.

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