Allan Gibbard *Meaning and Normativity*, Oxford University Press, 2012, xiv + 310 pp.,

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In *Meaning and Normativity*, Gibbard develops an account of the concept of meaning (and

related concepts like reference and synonymy). He takes these to be normative, in two senses.

Not only do claims like 'John means WATER by 'water'' *entail* ought claims, but the concept

of meaning is also 'fully definable in normative and naturalistic terms' (p. 12).

As is well known, Gibbard is an expressivist about normative language. Expres-

sivists deny that normative terms like 'good' and 'ought' can themselves be defined by provi-

ding synonyms. Instead, they give an account of the state of mind such terms conventionally

express. In the case of 'ought', Gibbard thinks it expresses states of planning. So when I say

'John means WATER by 'water'', I express my commitment to certain plans. These plans

concern the conditions under which to accept sentences involving 'water' (in this case, if one

were John).

However, Gibbard's expressivist account of 'ought' is not supposed to be part of

the account of the concept of meaning itself (the 'metatheory' of meaning). Instead, it is part

of a *substantive* theory about what constitutes meaning OUGHT, say, by a term. Even a non-

naturalist, who denies that normative beliefs are a matter of planning, could accept that mea-

ning is normative in either of Gibbard's senses.

Gibbard's attempts to explicate the kind of ought involved in the concept of me-

aning are somewhat unclear. We learn that the ought is *primitive*, or undefinable in other

terms. But he often makes it seem as if the ought is epistemic (in the sense that it governs what we ought to believe):

> 'in this primitive sense, one ought always to disbelieve contradictions, and in matters *a posteriori*, one ought always to believe in accord with the evidence. This notion is tied to how reasons to believe combine and weigh together and against each other, what we *ought* to believe, in the sense I have in mind, is the resultant.' (p. 14)

This sounds as if Gibbard's primitive ought is the ought of epistemology, but it is not clear that this is right. For he also suggests that we can define other kinds of ought in terms of the primitive notion (p. 14). It presumably make no sense to define the ought of prudence or etiquette in terms of the epistemic ought.

Perhaps the crucial idea is that the relevant ought is the result of *weighing reasons* against each other (rather than weighing *epistemic* reasons in particular). That would suggest that the ought is the all things considered one. But how can that be right? Why would it always be all things considered best to disbelieve contradictions?

Perhaps Gibbard simply means that there is *some* sense of ought (a semantic one?) such that ought claims in this sense are entailed by claims about meaning. This brings us to the question why we should accept that the concept of meaning is normative in the first place. Gibbard gives two reasons. One is that it would explain why certain oughts follow 'invariably' from claims about meaning. The other is that attempts to explain in non-normative terms what meaning consists in have failed.

With respect to the first point, Gibbard says that I ought not to believe that 58 + 67 = 5 and that this 'ties in with the meaning of '+''. Similarly, 'I ought not to believe, all at once, that snow is white and that nothing is white' and this 'ties in with the meaning of nothing' (p. 13). This seems somewhat underspecified. Does Gibbard think it follows invariably from ''Snow is white' means SNOW IS WHITE' that one ought not to accept simultaneously that snow is white and that nothing is white? Or does he think it follows invariably from the fact that 'Nothing' means NOTHING? Or both? Or perhaps neither. Perhaps it only follows from the combination of ''Snow is white' means SNOW IS WHITE' and ''Nothing' means NOTHING'. The latter seems more plausible.

It is not entirely clear what Gibbard means to explain. He probably means to explain why certain oughts follow logically from claims about meaning. But this seems question-begging as an explanandum (if we are not already convinced that meaning is normative, we are unlikely to accept that oughts follow logically from claims about meaning in the first place). He might instead mean to explain why most people are inclined to accept that one ought not to believe simultaneously that snow is white and that nothing is white upon learning that 'Snow is white' and 'Nothing' have the meanings that they do. Gibbard's explanation of this fact would then be that the prohibition on believing the contradiction is a logical consequence of the claims about meaning. This in turn is explained either by the fact that norms are built into the concepts MEANING *SNOW IS WHITE* and MEANING *NOTHING* or into the concepts SNOW, IS, WHITE and NOTHING themselves. I'm not sure whether Gibbard thinks the second, but he sometimes writes as if all concepts *consist* in norms concerning the acceptance of sentences. If so, then it seems the explanation could go directly via SNOW, IS, WHITE and NOTHING.

Gibbard's explanation is intriguing, but there seem to be alternatives. For example, we may invariably think that contradictions are unlikely to be true and that we ought not to believe things that are unlikely to be true. This would explain why we invariably think that one ought not to believe that snow is white and that nothing is white. Perhaps, though, Gibbard wants to explain *why* we are committed to this epistemic norm in terms of our knowledge of meaning. That looks like an interesting project. However, if he is engaged in it, I think it could have been developed more explicitly.

Gibbard's second motivation for the claim that meaning is normative is that attempts to explain in non-normative terms what meaning consists in have failed. The problem is (presumably) that the conditions these theories identify for meaning something by a term either make the wrong predictions about a term's meaning, or underdetermine exactly what its meaning is. Gibbard illustrates this by means of an example. Paul Horwich (1998) thinks the meaning of a term is determined by a law describing its usage. This law is an idealization of our actual dispositions. Against this, Gibbard argues that actual dispositions need not dictate one uniquely correct idealization.

Hartry Field (1973) noted that Einstein's theory of relativity does not countenance one physical quantity that satisfies all of Newton's claims about mass. Instead, it involves two quantities (relativistic mass and proper mass), each of which satisfies only some of the claims. Furthermore, each of them satisfies *different* claims. Did Newton refer to relativistic mass or proper mass? Gibbard argues that facts about Newton's dispositions do not allow us to determine which of his claims about mass were more fundamental to its reference. In other words: Newton's dispositions approximate more than one ideal law. Facts about his dispositions therefore underdetermine whether he was talking about relativistic mass or proper mass.

In order for this to persuade us that Horwich (or anyone else) is wrong, it seems we first need to be persuaded that it would be a *mistake* to say that Newton did not unambiguously refer to a single thing, or that he didn't refer to anything at all. Gibbard does not do this. He simply suggests that the (purported) problem of underdetermination can be solved by taking Horwich's account normative. Instead of saying that the meaning of a term consists in the non-normative, descriptive fact that it *is* used in a certain way, we should say that the meaning of a term consists (roughly) in the fact that it *ought* to be used in a certain way (or, more precisely, that sentences containing the term ought to be accepted in certain conditions and not others). Saying that Newton meant RELATIVISTIC MASS by his term 'mass' is then (roughly) saying that he *ought* to have used it in various ways. This explains why it does not follow from any naturalistic facts about Newton that he meant one thing rather than another: after all, *ought*s do not follow from *is*s. So, if meaning is a normative concept, then no claims about meaning logically follow from naturalistic claims about dispositions and other aspects of the world. Gibbard takes this to be the truth in Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein.

The foregoing does not mean, however, that Gibbard accepts Kripkenstein's assertion that there *is* no descriptive property that constitutes meaning something by a term (in fact, Gibbard spends some time arguing against it in chapter 3). It's just that what property it is depends on norms. According to Gibbard, it depends on one's plans concerning how to use a term.

We are led, then, to the surprising conclusion that debates about whether meaning something is constituted by individual dispositions or communal dispositions, whether it is a matter of standing in causal relations to the environment or (indeed) a matter of planning, are really *normative* debates: which of these theories is correct depends not on the facts, but on our norms.

Gibbard thinks this explains 'what is at stake' between different substantive theories of meaning (where a substantive theory is one which identifies the non-normative properties that constitute meaning): at stake in these debates is which sentences to accept under what conditions. For example, if you think that the meaning of a term is a matter of the speaker's individual dispositions, you will say that she ought to accept certain sentences even if her surrounding community would not. If you think that meanings ain't in the head, you will say that she ought to reject them.

Gibbard's diagnosis is not obviously right. It is not clear that substantive theories of meaning *need* to disagree about which sentences to accept under what conditions. This is also true in metaethics: different metaethical theories about the nature of goodness (natural or otherwise) need not entail different conclusions about *which* things are good. Their differences are primarily metaphysical. I suspect the same is true in the philosophy of language.

Furthermore, there is something uncomfortable about combining the second motivation for the claim that meaning is normative with the claim that there *is* a naturalistic property that constitutes meaning something by a term. Remember that Gibbard argued that Newton's dispositions underdetermined whether he meant RELATIVISTIC MASS or PROPER MASS by 'mass'. He also thought this was a problem for naturalistic conceptions of meaning something by a term. So how can Gibbard consistently accept norms that identify a naturalistic property that is supposed to constitute Newton's meaning one thing rather than another? It seems Gibbard faces a dilemma: either there are naturalistic properties that distinguish Newton's meaning one thing rather than another by 'mass', or there are not. If there are, then the second motivation for going normative is undermined (there is no underdetermination after all). But if there aren't, then whatever norms Gibbard accepts, they will identify a naturalistic property that cannot constitute meaning in his own opinion.

So Gibbard's views seem paradoxical. However, the book does contain a highly integrated, far-reaching and original vision. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to read. Gibbard hardly engages with other work and fails to represent his own views clearly. It may be a stimulating book for experts on the topic, but it is not recommended as a guide.

References

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