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Meaning, Understanding and Normativity

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I defend the normativity of meaning against recent objections by arguing for a new interpretation of the “ought” relevant to meaning. Both critics and defenders of the normativity thesis have understood statements about how an expression ought to be used as either prescriptive (indicating that speakers have reason to use the expression in a certain way) or semantic (designating certain uses as correct in a sense explicable in terms of truth) I propose an alternative view of the “ought” as conveying the “primitively” normative attitudes speakers must adopt towards their uses if they are to use the expression with understanding.

1. Introduction

Since the publication in 1982 of Kripke’s *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, the question of the “normativity of meaning” has been widely debated. Kripke takes it as intuitively obvious that there is a normative relation between meaning and use, and he takes this supposed fact to constitute a decisive objection to dispositionalist and other reductively naturalistic theories of meaning. But this view has come under considerable criticism, and a number of philosophers have argued recently that meaning — and more generally content — are not normative, at least not in a sense which threatens dispositionalist and other naturalistic accounts.¹ In this paper I shall offer a defence of the normativity of meaning which draws on

¹ See for example Bilgrami 1993, Horwich 1998b (especially ch. 8) and 2005 (especially ch. 5), Papineau 1999, Glüer 1999, Wikforss 2001, Hattiangadi 2006 and 2007 and Glüer and Wikforss 2009. Except where otherwise indicated, the thesis that “meaning is normative” should be understood as implying that it is normative in a way which challenges dispositionalism and other naturalistic views, and I shall refer to the critics of this view as “anti-normativists” even though some of them ascribe to meaning a kind of normativity which is compatible with

the connection between meaning and understanding.² I shall argue that reflection on what is involved in using an expression with understanding, or intelligently, suggests a conception of the normativity of meaning which has been overlooked by the anti-normativists, and which avoids their objections.

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The *locus classicus* of Kripke's thesis that meaning is normative is a passage in which he describes the relation between the meaning of an expression (in his example, '+') and its use (responding to the question '68+57?' with '125') as normative rather than descriptive:

The dispositionalist gives a descriptive account of this relation: if '+' meant addition, then I will answer '125.' But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is normative, not descriptive. The point is not that, if I meant addition by '+' I will answer '125,' but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I should answer '125.' (p.37)

Now there is unquestionably a difference between the claim that, if I mean addition by '+' I will (or am disposed) to answer '125' and the claim that, if I mean addition by '+', I should or ought to answer '125.' But why is Kripke so sure that the dispositionalist cannot accommodate the second claim as well as the first? The reason appears to lie in a *prima facie* stronger claim about the relation between meaning and use, namely that when a person means something by an expression there is something she grasps which guides her use, in the sense of telling her or instructing her in how to use it. "Ordinarily," Kripke says, "I suppose that, in computing '68+57' as I do, I do not simply make an unjustified leap in the dark. I follow directions I

naturalism; for example Horwich argues that meaning is not "intrinsically normative" but still has "normative import" (1998b, pp. 184ff). My discussion focusses on the meaning of expressions in a public language, but I believe that it is applicable to content more generally construed.

² The importance of this connection is emphasized throughout Stroud 2000, to which this paper is substantially indebted. However, unlike Stroud I do not endorse a thoroughgoing nonreductionism about meaning, holding instead that semantic properties can be reduced to normative ones. My disagreements with Stroud are made explicit in Ginsborg 2011b.

previously gave myself that uniquely determine that in this new instance I should say '125' (p. 10). These directions "must somehow be 'contained' in any candidate for the fact as to what I meant" (p.11). The dispositionalist account is unsatisfactory because, "as a candidate for a 'fact' that determines what I mean, it fails to satisfy the basic condition on such a candidate... that it should *tell* me what I ought to do in each new instance" (p. 24). It is apparently this idea of guidance — its being the case not merely that I ought to say '125', but also that something tells me that I ought to say '125' — which underlies Kripke's assurance that the dispositionalist view is inadequate.

Kripke's claim that meaning involves guidance, in the sense brought out in these quotations, is problematic for two reasons. First, the idea that using a term meaningfully is a matter of being guided or directed in its use seems not to be a part of our intuitive conception of meaning, but rather to constitute, at least embryonically, a philosophical account of meaning. To say that it constitutes a pretheoretical constraint on accounts of meaning seems thus to beg the question against the dispositionalist.³ Second, as Wittgenstein emphasizes, the idea would seem to commit us to a regress of explanation, since it is hard to see how anything can "tell" a speaker what to say on a given occasion unless that thing is itself meaningful.⁴ And although that is a consequence which Kripke himself appears to accept, at least on behalf of his skeptic, anyone interested in providing a constructive account of meaning will take it as a *prima facie* reason to reject the requirement.

It is perhaps for charitable reasons, then, that both critics and defenders of the normativity thesis have tended to understand it in a way which abstracts from the idea of guidance, leaving

³ For a related point regarding the intendedly pretheoretical character of Kripke's normativity thesis, see Boghossian 2003, p.32 and Glüer and Wikforss 2009, p.34.

⁴ See e.g. Stroud 2000, p.185; Wikforss 2001, pp.216-217. The problem is helpfully spelled out in Bridges forthcoming.

only the embedded “oughts.” So understood, the thesis can be captured by formulations like “if subject S means *green* by ‘green’, then S ought to apply ‘green’ (only) to green things” or “if the word ‘green’ means *green* then it ought to be applied (only) to green things.”⁵ The debate has largely focussed on the question of how to understand the “ought” in these formulations and in particular whether there is a way of understanding it on which the formulations are not merely true, but true in a way which threatens dispositionalist and other naturalistic views.⁶ An approach common to many of the anti-normativists is to identify two possible interpretations and to argue that neither constitutes a problem for dispositionalism.

On the first interpretation, the “ought” is, as it is sometimes put, “prescriptive.”⁷ Adopting this interpretation amounts to understanding the “ought” as expressing practical rationality: roughly, to say that S ought to F is to say that she has good or conclusive reason to F. Anti-normativists have differed on the question of whether the thesis that meaning is normative, understood according to the first sense of “ought,” is true. If “green” means *green*, does S have reason to apply “green” to green things? It can be argued that she does, on a number of different grounds. One is that if “green” means green then “green” is true of green things, and agents have either moral or pragmatic reasons to say, or assent to, what is true. Another is that we have pragmatic reasons to use words in the same way that other people in our linguistic community do, so that if a community generally applies “green” to green things, then S has reason to do that too. But even if it is granted that we ought, in this sense, to apply “green” to green things, this norm is, as Bilgrami 1993 puts it, “extrinsic” to meaning rather than “constitutive” of it (p.136):

⁵ See e.g. Horwich 1998b, pp.185ff, Hattiangadi 2007 pp.180ff, Whiting 2007 pp.136ff. Here I will not be concerned with the detail of these formulations, but I compare and evaluate various alternatives in Ginsborg 2010.

⁶ For Glüer and Wikforss the question is whether such formulations are incompatible with a broader view of meaning which Wikforss calls “descriptivism” (Wikforss 2001, p.218) and which includes Fregean anti-psychologism as well as naturalism (Glüer and Wikforss 2009, p.65). The view I go on to present is compatible with a Fregean conception of meaning, at least as I understand it, but I still think that my disagreement with Glüer and Wikforss is a substantive one.

it has no bearing on what it is for “green” to mean green. The alleged facts that we have reason to speak the truth and that we have reason to conform our use of words to that of others make it the case that, if “green” means green, we ought to apply “green” to green things. But this is compatible with any number of accounts of what it is for “green” to mean green, including that offered by the dispositionalist.

This leaves, according to the anti-normativists, the other interpretation: that for “green” to mean green is for it to be correctly applied to green things, where correct application in turn amounts to truth.⁸ This interpretation of the normativity of meaning is implicit in Blackburn’s early characterization of the main issue raised by Kripke’s book:

The topic is that there is such a thing as the correct and incorrect application of a term, and to say that there is such a thing is no more than to say that there is truth or falsity. I shall talk indifferently of there being correctness and incorrectness, of words being rule-governed, and of their obeying principles of application. Whatever this is, it is the fact that distinguishes the production of a term from mere noise, and turns utterance into assertion — into the making of judgment. (Blackburn 1984, p.281)

Boghossian’s influential 1989 discussion of the rule-following considerations adopts a similar view:

The normativity of meaning turns out to be...simply a new name for the familiar fact that, regardless of whether one thinks of meaning in truth-theoretic or assertion-theoretic terms, meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use.... on the one construal, correctness consists in true use, on the other in warranted use. (1989, p.513)

Does this entail that meaning is normative in a way which presents at least a prima facie challenge to dispositionalism? Blackburn seems to think that it does (1984, 289); and so does Boghossian in the article from which I quoted. The fact that an expression means something implies, he says, “a whole set of normative truths about my behaviour with that expression: namely that my use of it is correct in application to certain objects and not in application to

⁷ Wikforss 2001, p.204; Hattiangadi 2007, p.37; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, p.32

others” and this offers, he says, at least a prima facie objection to dispositionalism, since “to be disposed to use a word in a certain way implies at most that one will, not that one *should*” use it that way (1989, p.513). But the anti-normativists, including Boghossian himself in more recent work⁹, have denied that the relevant notion of correctness is normative in any sense which threatens naturalism.¹⁰ As Papineau puts it, truth is “a descriptive property, like car-speed or celibacy” (1999, p.20), and the same may be said both for other semantic properties like reference, and for such notions as justification and warranted assertibility. So if correctness is understood simply as a stand-in for one or other of these notions, then a dispositionalist can easily accommodate it. If “green” means *green*, then it is (say) truly, that is to say correctly, applied to green things; and this is something that holds on any account of what constitutes meaning, including a dispositionalist account.

I agree with the anti-normativists that meaning is not intrinsically normative in the sense associated with practical rationality: that “green” means green, in and of itself, gives us no reason (not even an easily defeasible one) to utter or to refrain from uttering it on any particular occasion.¹¹ And I have no objection to replacing talk of how an expression “ought” to be applied with talk of its “correct” application. However, as I shall argue, it is not obligatory to interpret “correctly applied” in this context as standing in for “true.”¹² I shall try to show in the next section that, in order to understand the expressions she uses, a language-user must regard

⁸ Or to related semantic notions like reference or satisfaction; or to the notion of warranted assertibility. But, following the trend of most recent discussion of the normativity of meaning, I shall focus on truth.

⁹ Boghossian 2003, p.39

¹⁰ This point is implicitly accepted by all the critics mentioned in note 1: for explicit statements see for example Wikforss 2001, pp.204-207; Hattiangadi 2007, p.52; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, p.36.

¹¹ Here I disagree with Whiting, who defends the normativity of meaning on the grounds that “what an expression means provides one with *some* (not necessarily conclusive) reason to employ it in a certain way” (2009, p.546).

¹² Perhaps it is not even possible. Even if we take applications of a term to be correct in virtue of being true (which is not the case on the conception of correctness I will propose), it still does not follow that “correct” is synonymous with “true”: as Rosen puts it, we may “distinguish correctness itself from the correct-making feature” (2001, p. 619). But that point is not relevant to the overall argument of this paper.

her uses as correct in a sense which cannot be explicated in terms of truth. Although truth is indeed a descriptive property, the items it describes are not utterances or expressions as such, but utterances and expressions *qua* meaningful, or the propositions which are their meanings.¹³ And, on the position I shall defend, expressions have meanings only in virtue of there being ways in which they ought to be applied. To relate my position to Blackburn's, as expressed in the passage quoted above: I agree that the debate concerns "whatever...fact [it is] that distinguishes the production of a term from mere noise" and I agree that this fact has something to do with the term's having conditions of correct application. But I reject the identification of that fact with the fact of "there [being] truth or falsity."¹⁴ The correctness I shall identify as essential to meaning does indeed "distinguish the production of a term from mere noise." But, as we shall see, it contrasts not with incorrectness, but with the mere absence of correctness; and it cannot be equated with truth in contrast to falsity. Rather, it is required in order that a mere noise can become a candidate for truth or falsity in the first place.

3

To bring out the sense of correctness I have in mind, I want to consider a very simple example of (putatively) linguistic behaviour. The example I will use is based on Wittgenstein's "language-game (2)", in which a builder calls out "Slab!" "Block!" "Pillar!" or "Beam!" to his assistant, whereupon the assistant responds by bringing a corresponding building-stone. But in order to make room for (putative) assertions as well as (putative) orders, I am expanding it to include a further kind of behaviour: sometimes the builder points to newly delivered building-

¹³ Here I am broadly in agreement with Horwich (1998a, pp.16-17).

¹⁴ Boghossian rejects this identification too, but on different and less fundamental grounds, namely that correctness conditions might be identified with justification conditions instead of truth conditions (1989, p.517n.18). On the

stones covered by tarpaulins, whereupon the assistant lifts the tarpaulin and says “Slab”, “Block,” “Pillar,” or “Beam” depending on which kind of building-stone is underneath. We will assume that the assistant is reliably disposed to bring a slab when, and only when, he hears “Slab!” and to say “Slab” when, and only when, the stone he uncovers is a slab (and similarly for the other utterance-types), although he may occasionally respond to slabs and calls of “Slab!” otherwise than as disposed.¹⁵ For convenience, I will sometimes refer to the behaviour to which he is disposed simply as “applying ‘slab’ to slabs.”

Can we infer, merely from this description, that the builder’s and assistant’s utterances are meaningful: for example, that when the assistant says “Slab” he means something like *this is a slab*, or that the expression (or, more neutrally, sound) “slab” which features in both the builder’s and the assistant’s utterances means *slab*? We certainly can infer that the assistant’s utterances of “Slab” mean, in the sense of serving as an indication, that the thing he has uncovered is a slab, and that the builder’s shouts of “Slab!” mean, in the same sense, that the assistant will shortly bring a slab. But this does not, at least on the face of it, amount to saying that the builder and assistant mean *slab* by the sound “slab”, or that the sound “slab” means *slab*. And intuitively, the fact that the builder and his assistant are disposed to produce and respond to the sounds in the ways described is not sufficient to endow these sounds with meaning in this stronger sense.¹⁶ A simple way to bring out this intuition is to imagine the same behaviour carried out by automata, or by human beings under hypnosis or subject to a brute process of conditioning. The assistant is compelled — and perhaps even consciously feels himself

view I go on to sketch, the correctness essential to meaning cannot be equated with justification any more than it can with truth.

¹⁵ Talk of “saying” here, even when this is followed by an expression in quotes rather than a that-clause, already builds more into the description than I intend. Strictly speaking, if we are neutral about whether the builders’ noises amount to meaningful discourse we should avoid talk of “saying” and relatedly of “expressions,” “utterances” and so on, since these imply that they are speaking a language. But I retain such talk for convenience.

¹⁶ Here I have in mind Grice’s (1957) distinction between natural and non-natural meaning.

compelled — to bring a slab when he hears the sound “slab” and to say “Slab” when he sees a slab. But this does not make it the case that he comes to mean slab (or anything else) by “slab”, or that his utterances of “Slab” have the meaning this is a slab as opposed to meaning, in the sense of indicating, that the stone he has uncovered is a slab. So far, this is simply to articulate an intuition. It is not to rule out that there might be theoretical grounds for holding that, intuitions notwithstanding, the assistant’s behavioural dispositions are sufficient to constitute him as meaning slab by “slab”, or, relatedly, that linguistic (or, as it might be called, semantic) meaning is not different in kind from meaning in the sense of indication.¹⁷ But it is to suggest a prima facie intuitive obstacle which dispositionalism has to surmount.¹⁸

A natural way to describe the obstacle is to say that the dispositionalist account fails to accommodate the idea that meaning, in the relevant sense, requires understanding. The reason why the automaton and the hypnotized agent, fail to mean anything by “slab” is that they fail to understand “slab”. They respond to it, so to speak, blindly, or, as Kripke puts it, in a “jack-in-the-box” way (1982, p.23). But in order for users of an expression to mean something by an expression, or for the expression itself to mean something in the semantic sense rather than the sense of indicating, the expression must be understood by its users. They must not merely produce and respond to it, they must use it intelligently. And this understanding, or intelligent use, seems — again, at an intuitive level — to go missing on the dispositionalist view. We can sharpen the intuition by noting that understanding an expression is in turn, at least on the face of it, a matter of grasping its meaning. In order, say, for the assistant to mean slab by “slab” there

¹⁷ As suggested by Horwich (1998b, p. 20n.6). Horwich claims that this identification corresponds to the “naïve” view of meaning, but I think that the considerations I am presenting suggest otherwise.

¹⁸What if the example were supplemented with further behavioural dispositions, for example a disposition on the assistant's part to utter the sound "Sorry, I meant block" after having responded to the sight of a block with "Slab" and then looked more closely at the block? Intuitively, if the dispositions in the simpler example are insufficient to constitute meaning, it is hard to see how the mere addition of dispositions to produce and respond to utterances, even

must be a sense in which he understands “slab” to mean slab, which is to say, grasps or recognizes that it means slab.¹⁹ But on the dispositionalist view, the fact that “slab” means slab (here, to take the simplest case, in the assistant’s idiolect) just is the fact that the assistant is disposed to apply “slab” to slabs. It is this dispositional fact, on the face of it, which the assistant must grasp if he is to grasp that “slab” means slab and hence to understand “slab” to mean slab. And it is not clear how, for the dispositionalist, this requirement can be satisfied. How can the mere fact of being disposed to apply “slab” to slabs put the assistant in a position to recognize that he is so disposed?²⁰ Perhaps, the dispositionalist might reply, he does not need to recognize that very fact. Perhaps, even though the fact that “slab” means slab is constituted by, or holds in virtue of, the assistant’s disposition to apply “slab” to slabs, the assistant does not need to recognize himself as having that disposition in order to recognize that “slab” means slab, any more than someone needs to recognize that something is H₂O in order to recognize that it is water. Even so, something puzzling remains. For, in contrast to standardly accepted cases of one fact’s holding in virtue of another (such as the case of something’s being water and its being H₂O), the fact which plays the constituting role is supposed to account not only for the fact that “slab” has a certain property but also for the *prima facie* additional fact that it is recognized to have that property. So if it is problematic to suppose that the mere possession of a disposition to apply “slab” to slabs could be sufficient for the assistant’s recognizing that he has that

including dispositions to respond to one’s own behaviour and utterances with further utterances, could make a difference.

¹⁹ Here and elsewhere I am sliding over the important distinction between the (non-factive) taking or understanding “slab” to mean slab, and the (factive) grasping that “slab” means slab. We can legitimately identify these only if we ourselves legitimately take “slab” to mean slab. I am assuming throughout that “slab” *does* mean slab, which is why I am sliding over the distinction, but this raises large issues which I do not have space to address here.

²⁰ My argument here is related to Stroud’s argument against “hybrid” dispositional views of colour (2000b, pp.141-142).

disposition, it is also problematic to suppose that it is sufficient for his recognizing a fact which holds in virtue of his having that disposition.²¹

Here the dispositionalist's most promising strategy is to take the offensive. How else, he or she might ask, can the understanding requirement be satisfied? It cannot be a matter of the assistant's explicitly grasping the proposition that "slab" means *slab*, for that would require his understanding some sentence (for example the German sentence " 'Slab' bedeutet *Platte*", or a corresponding Mentalese sentence) with that proposition as its content, and the question of what it is for him to understand "slab" would simply have been replaced with the question of what it is for him to understand that sentence. So it must be some kind of implicit grasp of the fact that "slab" means *slab*, something which the assistant need not be capable of putting into words, even words in a language of thought. But what could this implicit grasp consist in? One option is Kripke's guidance view, on which the assistant has access to some inner item which puts him in a position to apply "slab" to *slabs* by "telling" him, when (for example) he uncovers a slab, that "Slab" is what he ought to say. But as we saw in section I, this leads to an unacceptable regress; in effect, it puts us in no better a position for explaining meaning than the hypothesis that we have explicit grasp of the proposition that "slab" means *slab*. A far more attractive option, the dispositionalist will say, is to identify this implicit grasp of meaning simply with the capacity or disposition to apply "slab" to slabs.²² We may have to accept the seemingly counterintuitive consequence that a mere disposition to use "slab" in a certain way can amount to knowledge of a fact about "slab," and, moreover, a fact which holds in virtue of that very

²¹ But if part of what it is for "slab" to mean *slab* in the assistant's idiolect is for the assistant to recognize "slab" as meaning *slab*, then doesn't it follow trivially from the dispositional account of what it is for "slab" to mean *slab* that the assistant's disposition is also sufficient for him to recognize that "slab" means *slab*? Yes, but the question is whether the peculiar feature of meaning facts which distinguishes them from the usual candidates for reduction — namely, that their holding implies that they are recognized to hold — doesn't preclude us from accepting the dispositional account in the first place.

²² Something like this is suggested in Horwich 1998b, pp.16-18.

disposition, but this is a small price to pay for the achievement of a substantive account of what meaning consist in.

However, I want to suggest that this overlooks an alternative way of satisfying the understanding requirement. What if we suppose that the assistant is disposed not only to apply “slab” to slabs, as on the dispositionalist view, but also, in each case of producing or responding to a “slab”- utterance, to take what he does to fit or be appropriate to the sound “slab”: that is, to take what he does with the sound “slab” to represent a correct use of “slab”, or a way in which “slab” *ought* to be used? We might suppose, to take one kind of application, that when the builder shouts “Slab!” the assistant not only brings a slab, but, in so doing, takes himself to be responding appropriately to the builder’s shout, or in other words, takes the builder’s shout to make appropriate, or in some sense to “call for,” just the response he is making. Or, to take the other kind of application, that when he uncovers a slab he not only says “Slab”, but also takes this to be an appropriate thing to say in the circumstances, or to be what he ought to say: this time it is the slab which he takes to “call for” the response (saying “Slab”) which he in fact provides. If this is what he disposed to do, I want to suggest, he counts as using “slab” with understanding, or intelligently. He is not producing what we might call a “blind” or “jack-in-the-box” response because he, as it were, sees (or perhaps better, hears) the expression “slab” as either making his behaviour appropriate, or as made appropriate by his circumstances. Moreover, I suggest, he qualifies more specifically as understanding that “slab” means *slab*. But he does not do so by virtue of explicitly grasping the proposition that “slab” means *slab*, nor of having access to some inner item which tells him, when he uncovers a slab, that “slab” is what he ought to say. Rather, he understands that “slab” means *slab* in virtue of taking it that “slab” ought to be applied to slabs, where his taking it that “slab” ought to be applied to slabs in turn consists in his

being disposed, when he applies “slab” to a slab, to take his use of “slab” to be appropriate or correct or as it ought to be.

What kind of an “ought” is this, and how — if not through being guided à la Kripke — might the assistant come to take it that he is using “slab” as he ought in the relevant sense? I have discussed this issue elsewhere²³; here I will be brief. The “ought” is not that of practical rationality, nor can it be understood as the kind of “semantic correctness” which can be explicated in terms of truth. Rather, it is what I have called elsewhere a “primitive” ought, whose recognition does not depend on an antecedent grasp of meanings and concepts but which instead makes it possible for sounds and marks — what would otherwise be what Blackburn calls “mere noise” — to amount to meaningful discourse. Such an “ought”, I have suggested elsewhere, informs our most basic sorting inclinations, or what we might call our “ways of going on” from initial samples. A child who sees an adult sorting green beads into a box, and who is encouraged, verbally or otherwise, to join in, may be disposed to add green beads, in preference to beads of other colours, even if she does not meet the usual standards for mastery of the concept *green* (for example, having some understanding of the word “green”). Yet if she does have that disposition, she will add each bead with the (at least potential) awareness that what she is doing is appropriate, for example that the green bead “belongs” in the box in a way that the blue beads do not. And this awareness of normativity is primitive in the sense that it does not rest on her recognition that she is according with a rule or concept which she has antecedently grasped. Training in the use of language, as I have suggested, exploits our basic sorting inclinations, and with them, the disposition to take instances of sorting behaviour to be appropriate in this primitive way.²⁴ The assistant comes to take the sound “slab” to be appropriate to slabs — that

²³ Ginsborg 2011a and 2011b.

²⁴ See especially section V of Ginsborg 2011b.

is, comes to be disposed, in each case of applying “slab” to a slab, to take his utterance or response to be appropriate — simply because his training accustoms him to associate the sound “slab” with slabs, and the awareness of appropriateness which pervades the exercise of his sorting inclinations attaches itself to his behaviour with the sound “slab.” That is why he comes to see slabs as calling for the sound “slab” (as opposed, say, to “beam”), and conversely the sound “slab” as calling for a slab (as opposed, say, to a beam).

If we allow this sense of “ought”, and the corresponding construal of the understanding requirement, then we can retain much of what is attractive about the dispositional view while avoiding the intuitive obstacle described above. On the one hand, we can retain the idea that the particular meaning that a language-user attaches to an expression — *slab* as opposed to *beam*, say — is determined by how she is disposed to use the expression, and not by some hypothesized item which guides her in its use. But, on the other, we also recognize it as a condition for the meaningfulness of expressions *überhaupt* that their users are disposed to adopt a certain attitude — the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate — toward a certain set of possible uses (namely, the set of uses to which they are disposed, and which can retrospectively be identified as the extension of the expression). And this allows for the intuitive idea that language use is a matter not just of behaviour, but of intelligent behaviour, and in turn for the idea that for an expression to be used with a certain meaning is *eo ipso* for its users to understand it as having that meaning.

We saw in section I that the supposed intuition motivating Kripke’s own endorsement of the normativity of meaning is unacceptably strong. It is not part of our intuitive conception of the meaningful use of an expression that the user must grasp instructions telling her how the expression ought to be used. I am proposing something weaker, although not as weak as the conception proposed by the anti-normativist, which omits all reference to what the user grasps.

Meaningful use requires that the user grasp how the expression ought to be used, but without requiring that she grasp something which tells her how it ought to be used. This proposal captures more of Kripke's conception than the anti-normativist version, but it is not so strong that it cannot be recognized, on reflection, as part of our intuitive conception of meaning. What the intuition has in common with Kripke's is that meaningful use of an expression requires more than "jack-in-the-box" responses on the part of the language-user. But rather than holding, with Kripke, that she has in each case to regard her use of the expression as "justified," I rest with the thought, implicit in, but weaker than, the idea of justification, that she has to — at least potentially — regard each use as correct or appropriate.²⁵

Moreover — and I take this to be another point of divergence from Kripke — I take the relevant "ought" to contrast, not with "ought not" but rather, as it is sometimes put, with "not ought." When the assistant takes his bringing of a slab to be appropriate to the builder's shout of "Slab!", his attitude is not that other responses would or might be inappropriate or wrong, but simply that they would lack the quality of appropriateness which belongs, under those circumstances, to his bringing a slab. For in order for him to suppose that a response could be inappropriate, as opposed to merely lacking appropriateness, he must already regard "slab" as a meaningful term and not just (as Blackburn puts it in the passage quoted in section I) "mere noise." And that is something he can do, on the proposal I am presenting, only if he can invoke the sense of appropriateness under discussion here.

Could the dispositionalist respond, at this point, by accepting the intuition that meaningful use of an expression requires the disposition to be aware that one is using it as one

²⁵ Of course this thought is implicit in the idea of justification only on an internalist construal of justification; for the suggestion that Kripke's justification requirement could be externalistically construed, see Zalabardo 1997 and Miller 2000. My defence of the normativity of meaning differs from those of Gampel 1997 and Verheggen (forthcoming) in that, unlike theirs, it wholeheartedly rejects the idea that meaning guides or justifies use.

ought, but denying that the sense of “ought” has to be made out in a way which does not in turn depend on the notion of meaning? All that is needed to do justice to the intuition, on this line of response, is that the meaningful use of language be understood to imply that the user take her uses to be correct, without any further requirement that this normative attitude be understood as somehow constitutive of, and thus in a strong sense antecedently presupposed by, the possibility of meaning. And this weaker requirement can be satisfied by identifying the relevant sense of correctness with truth. The response, in more detail, might go as follows. The assistant’s dispositions with respect to the sound “slab” can be regarded as sufficient to qualify him as satisfying the understanding requirement, even if we interpret that requirement as demanding that he recognize his uses as correct, as long as we stipulate at the outset that his dispositions make it the case that he means *slab* by “slab.” It can then be claimed, as a trivial consequence of that stipulation, that he understands “slab” to mean *slab*, and consequently grasps the fact that “slab” means *slab*. Now suppose that he uncovers a slab and says “Slab”. Since, by hypothesis, he means *slab* by “slab”, it follows that he is saying of the slab that it is a slab, and thus accepting or grasping that it is a slab. But if he grasps both that “slab” means *slab*, and that the stone is a slab, he is in a position to make the inference that what he has said is true. And that explains why he is disposed to take his utterance of “slab” to be correct or appropriate.²⁶ Of course, this line of argument can be blocked at the outset by rejecting the initial stipulation, that the assistant’s dispositions are sufficient to constitute him as meaning *slab* by “slab.” But to do that, the dispositionalist can claim, is simply to beg the question.

The initial difficulty with this line of argument is that it is not at all clear how the assistant, simply by virtue of having the dispositions he does, could be in a position to make the

²⁶ I believe that this is in the spirit of Horwich 1998b, pp.188-190, although for Horwich the move from truth to “oughts” depends on considerations about the pragmatic value of truth.

required inference. Suppose we concede to the dispositionalist that the assistant not only means *slab* by “slab” but also grasps that “slab” means *slab*. The dispositionalist has to allow that this grasp is merely implicit: the assistant grasps that “slab” means *slab* in virtue of being disposed to apply “slab” to slabs, not in virtue of being able to produce or understand a meaningful utterance such as “‘slab’ means *slab*.” So even if he grasps, further, that the building-stone he has uncovered is a slab, it is hard to see how he can make an inference to the conclusion that what he has said is true. For that would presumably require that he is able to form an explicit representation of what he means by “slab”: that is, that he understands and accepts a sentence like “‘slab’ means *slab*.” The dispositionalist might reply by pointing out that the inference can be implicit. The assistant (implicitly) grasps the truth, and hence, correctness of what he has said as a causal result of his both grasping (implicitly) that “slab” means *slab* and grasping (implicitly) that the stone is a slab. At no point does this require that he be able to produce or understand utterances which express what he implicitly grasps.

But now the difficulty arises that, once we conceive his grasp on the premises as implicit, they no longer seem to be independent of one another in way which would license the idea that the inference is a result of combining them. For the fact that the assistant means *slab* by “slab” already implies that he is disposed, if he uncovers a slab and says “Slab”, to say something by which he means that the thing is a slab and hence to accept that it is a slab. And if his grasp of the conclusion is also implicit (as it has to be, unless we are willing to accept that no-one can understand any word unless they also understand the word “true”), then there is no gap, in turn, between the assistant’s saying “Slab” and his accepting that what he says is true. We thus lose the idea that there is any kind of a transition — even a causal transition — between his uttering “Slab” and his taking “Slab” to be true. The dispositionalist can indeed continue to maintain that

the assistant's being disposed to apply "slab" to slabs amounts to his being in a position to grasp that his applications of "slab" to slabs are true, and, in turn, that he is applying "slab" correctly, or as he ought. But if we cannot give content to the idea that this involves an inferential transition, then the idea that the assistant, in saying "Slab", takes himself to be applying "slab" correctly simply collapses into the idea that he says "Slab." So the intuition which this line of response was intended to defend has gone by the board.

4

Let us return now to the formulations on which the debate has typically focussed, in particular: "if the word 'green' means *green* then it ought to be applied (only) to green things." The anti-normativist argues that there is no way of interpreting this formulation such that it is not only true, but true in a way which threatens dispositionalism and other naturalist views. The considerations raised in the previous section suggest that this is not the case. If the "ought" is understood along the lines suggested in the previous section, as expressing the content of the attitude adopted by the language-user towards the sounds and marks of her language — specifically the attitude in virtue of which she can recognize them as meaningful as opposed to mere noise — then the formulation captures what the normativist needs.²⁷

It is important to note that this construal requires us to understand the formulation from the point of view occupied by the user of the expression it mentions. Both "'green' means *green*," in the antecedent position, and "'green' ought to be applied to green things," in the consequent position, capture what it is that someone grasps when she is disposed to apply

²⁷ What about the formulation in terms of speaker meaning: "'if subject S means *green* by 'green', then S ought to apply 'green' (only) to green things"? On the understanding of "ought" I propose, formulations of this kind are not in general true. If S means *green* by 'green', then she takes it that she ought to apply 'green' to green things, in virtue of being disposed to apply 'green' to green things and to take it, in each case of so doing, that she is doing as she ought.

“green” to green things and to take it, in each of those applications, that her application — her utterance of “green” or her response to “green” — is appropriate. If she has mastery of expressions like “ought” and “green”, then she may express what she grasps by saying things like “‘green’ means *green*” and “‘green’ ought to be applied to green things.” And if she is philosophically reflective, she might grasp that the contents of these two expressions of hers stand in a certain relation of implication, and she might go on to express this relation by saying “if ‘green’ means *green* then ‘green’ ought to be applied to green things.” Both the left-hand and the right-hand side of the formulation, and the formulation as a whole, express how things are from her point of view as someone who has mastered the use of the word ‘green.’ I am suggesting that the formulation captures the intuition behind the normativity of meaning only if it is understood, similarly, as capturing how things are from our point of view, as philosophically reflective users of the expression ‘green.’ For only then can we understand the “ought” as normative in a way which cuts against the dispositionalist account.

Now it is also possible to understand expressions of the form “‘green’ means green” from an external perspective, for example as used to describe how things are in a language other than one’s own. I might say, for example, discussing the German language, that “rot” means red, intending to convey that German speakers mean *red* by it. And I might also, citing an expression which looks and sounds roughly the same in German as it does in English, say the words “‘Happy’ means *happy*,” intending to convey that German speakers use the word “happy” to mean *happy*. (The point might be to distinguish it from a words like “hell” or “proper”, which

The relevant "ought" thus applies only from her point of view, which is more generally the point of view of anyone who shares her dispositions, including (in this example) ourselves.

are used in both English and German but have different meanings in each.)²⁸ But when I produce those words in that context, I am saying something quite different from what I say when I use those same words, or (perhaps better) make those same sounds, to express my own understanding of the English word “happy.” I am not expressing something which I grasp in virtue of being myself a user of the expression I am mentioning, but rather a fact about how things are from the perspective of the German users of that expression.

What if, in that same context of discussing the German language, I utter the words ““Happy” ought to be applied to things which are happy?” Again this does not express what I myself grasp when I understand, as a user of the English word “happy”, that “happy” ought to be applied to things which are happy. Rather, it expresses, from a third-person perspective, something about the German use of the expression “happy.” And here, in contrast to my use of those words to express my own attitude to the word “happy,” the “ought” is not plausibly understood as normative in a sense which undermines a dispositional account of meaning. It can be understood as conveying that German speakers have reason to apply “happy” to happy things, which might be true on the grounds that they will otherwise fail to be understood by other German speakers (which is on the face of it a bad thing), or find themselves accepting false sentences (which might also be a bad thing). Or, more minimally, it can be understood simply as conveying that “happy” in German is correctly applied to happy things, where this in turn is understood as meaning that applications of it to happy things are true. But it does not convey any attitude on my own part towards the appropriateness or correctness *simpliciter* of this or that uses of “happy” because, since I am not considering “happy” as a term in my own language, I am abstracting from the normative attitudes which inform my own uses of it.

²⁸My treatment of word individuation here is loose; by most accounts "hell" in German and "hell" in English would be regarded as two different words, and the same is probably true of "happy" in the two languages. But I do not

This discussion suggests a more general characterization than that I have offered so far of how the anti-normativists go wrong in their understanding of the “normativity of meaning.” We saw in section I that — for very good reasons — they try to separate the thesis that meaning is normative, that is, that there is such a thing as how a meaningful expression ought to be used, from the thesis that meaning plays a guiding role, that is, that the meaning of an expression tells speakers how it ought to be used. This results in their taking the normativity of meaning to be expressed in the kind of formulation we have just been discussing. But in abstracting from the idea of guidance they abstract also from the weaker implication that the ‘oughts’ in these formulations must be acknowledged by the language user herself. So they understand the formulations, and more specifically the occurrences of “mean” and “ought” within those formulations, as if they expressed the attitude of an outsider to the language, not of someone who herself uses the expressions which the formulations mention. The formulation “if “green” means green then “green” ought to be applied to green things” is taken by them to express a condition, recognizable from an external perspective, on “green”’s being used by a certain person or community with the meaning *green*.

Now from this external perspective we can certainly single out a class of uses which result in a speaker’s saying something true: they will be the ones in which ‘green’ is applied to a green thing. And we also, at least in some circumstances, characterize these uses in normative terms, saying that a speaker who applies “green” to a green thing is using “green” correctly or as she ought. But to conclude from this that the normativity of meaning is merely a matter of truth or falsity is to miss the real insight underlying Kripke’s thesis that meaning is essentially normative. For the “ought” which is intrinsic to meaning is one which can be recognized only from the perspective of the speaker herself, as expressing her own attitude to the uses which she

think that this affects the point I am making.

makes of the expression. Kripke seems to have thought that this insight could be accommodated only within a framework in which the speaker not only takes a normative attitude to her own uses of an expression, but does so because there is something which tells her how the expression ought to be used. I have tried to show that the insight is independent of this limiting commitment. We may reject the assumption of guidance, and accept with the dispositionalist that the meaning of a word for an individual or for a community is determined by the ways in which it is used. But we still have to recognize that meaningful use — in particular the use which we ourselves make of our expressions — commits us to the ascription of “oughts” which resist naturalistic reduction.²⁹

²⁹ I am grateful to Paul Horwich, Mike Martin, Janum Sethi and Daniel Warren for comments and discussion.

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