How a Social Theory of Meaning
can be connected with Realism

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Abstract

Contrary to what is claimed in the literature, a social theory of meaning is committed neither to a social relativism, nor does it have any sort of an idealistic implication. Such a theory of meaning can be seen as being about our epistemic access to a world that is causally and ontologically independent of the social practices which determine meaning. If these social practices are conceived in terms of open-ended I-thou relations between individuals, we avoid any reduction of what is correct in our thoughts about the world to social facts. We are committed to a sort of response-dependence of our concepts, but one which does not infringe upon realism. The upshot is a pragmatic realism: pragmatic, because the meaning of our thoughts is determined by social practices; a realism, because whether or not our thoughts about the world are true supervenes on the way the world is.

1.   Introduction

A social theory of meaning is often linked with a social relativism: it is claimed that there is no standard of correctness beyond communal agreement. Even if social relativism is repudiated, conclusions are often drawn that amount to some sort of an idealism. Thus, Brandom (1994), for instance, argues that a social theory of meaning can admit an objectivity that does not reduce to communal agreement. But he endorses some sort of a Hegelian idealism; for he conceives the world as being composed of facts in the sense of the contents of true thoughts.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to argue for the following thesis: *A social theory of meaning can be seen as being entirely about the way in which we gain epistemic access to a world that is causally and ontologically independent of the contents of our thoughts including the social practices that determine these contents.*[1] The epistemic access is the access which we have to the world by having thoughts about it. I first recall the motivation for a social theory of meaning (section 2). The argument for the thesis of this paper then proceeds in three steps.

The first step is to argue that socially determined inferential relations among thoughts are necessary for relations between thoughts and the world such as representation and reference. I hereby rely on the account of Brandom (1994) (section 3). The second step is to explain how we can avoid a reduction of what is correct in our thoughts about the world to social facts. The key to circumvent such a reduction is to conceive social practices in terms of open-ended, symmetric I-thou relations. I concede that this account implies a sort of response-dependence of our concepts; but I claim that this sort of response-dependence is not a constraint on the meaning of our concepts (section 4). The third step is to show that a [112] social theory of meaning can accommodate a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts. I try to meet the

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challenge that McDowell (1994) poses to such a theory of meaning by arguing for a pragmatic conception of rationality (section 5).

2. *The motivation for a social theory of meaning*

A social theory of meaning claims that insofar as our thoughts have a determinate meaning at all, their meaning is determined by social practices, normatively described. Such a theory is opposed to the programme of naturalizing semantics in the sense that the physiological make-up of a person including her dispositions to behaviour and the causal relations between a person and her environment, described in the vocabulary of the natural sciences, are sufficient to determine meaning. The main argument against such a programme is that meaning is more fine-grained than reference. To recall the famous example of Frege (1892), the thought "The evening star is *F*" and the thought "The morning star is *F*" are about the same thing, namely the planet Venus; but they differ in meaning.

Consider furthermore the indeterminacies of meaning on which Quine (1960), Chapter 2, elaborates. Quine imagines a field anthropologist encountering a native with whom she does not share a language. Quine argues that on the basis of the behaviour of the native in her environment including all the causal relations between the environment and the native, it is indeterminate what the thoughts that the native utters mean. For instance, whenever a rabbit passes by, the native utters the one-word sentence "gavagai". Quine (1960) shows that it is indeterminate whether "gavagai" means "This is a rabbit", "This is a temporal stage of a rabbit", "This is an undetached part of a rabbit", "This is an instantiation of rabbithood", etc. (in particular pp. 51-53).

One may regard the indeterminacies which Quine points out as refuting the programme to reduce the description of meaning to a description in the vocabulary of the natural sciences; but one may argue that mental items (such as Cartesian or Lockean ideas or the grasp of Fregean senses), instead of social practices, determine the meaning of our thoughts. However, in that case, one faces another, even more serious problem of indeterminacy, namely the problem of rule-following. We assume that if one masters a concept, one follows a rule that tells one what is correct and what is incorrect in employing the concept in question. Kripke (1982) brings the problem how we can follow a rule into focus in his interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations* of Wittgenstein (1953). Kripke starts from the observation that any finite sequence of whatever items satisfies [113] infinitely many logically possible rules. On this basis, he develops two aspects of what is known as the problem of rule-following:

- the *infinity problem*: How can a finite sequence instantiate only one rule rather than infinitely many rules? The challenge is: *There are infinitely many possible ways of continuing any finite sequence in any new situation. Each of these ways is in accordance with the rule which the sequence instantiates under some interpretation of what the rule is*.
- the *normativity problem*: What determines which is the correct manner to continue a finite sequence in such a way that a person can follow a rule (so that for her there is a distinction between following the rule correctly and following it incorrectly)? The challenge is: *For any finite sequence and for any new situation of continuing the sequence in question, it is not determined what is the correct way to go on*.

Quine and Kripke agree that dispositions to behaviour on the basis of causal relations with the environment are not sufficient to determine meaning for the thoughts of a person. Kripke (1982), Chapter 2, makes a more general point than Quine by explicitly arguing that mental items cannot determine meaning for the thoughts of a person either. The main motivation for a social theory of meaning is the idea that by focussing on social practices, normatively described, we can avoid the indeterminacies that Quine and Kripke reveal. Kripke (1982), Chapter 3, can be read as arguing that social practices are necessary and sufficient in order to (a) determine a meaning for the thoughts of a person given the infinitely many logically possible meanings of any finite sequence and (b) enable a person to have a distinction between correct and incorrect rule-following at her disposal.

What does a social solution to the problem of rule-following look like? Consider the reply of Crispin Wright to Kripke's problem of rule-following in his book *Realism, Meaning and Truth* (1987). He says:

> Understanding cannot be always achieved via uniquely rational extrapolation from sample uses and explanations; and is not usually. Rather the path to understanding exploits certain *natural* propensities which we have, propensities to react and judge in particular ways. The concepts which we 'exhibit' by what we count as correct, or incorrect, use of a term need not be salient to a witness who is, if I may so put it, merely rational … (Wright (1993), p. 28)

The point that Wright makes can serve as a point of departure for a social account of meaning: we have to start with certain natural dispositions. A merely rational being simply perceives all the infinitely many logically possible rules which any finite sequence satisfies. For such a being there never is any motivation to follow a certain path. Let us therefore assume [114] the following: Although any finite sequence can be continued in infinitely many different ways, for any finite thinking being there usually is one specific way in which this being is disposed to continue a given finite sequence. Invoking such a biological disposition does not solve the problem of rule-following. All the indeterminacies that Quine and Kripke raise apply to the description of any such disposition. Nevertheless, we have to employ the notion of certain biological dispositions to get a social account of rule-following off the ground.

Let the dispositions of persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment furthermore include a disposition to cooperation. On this basis, we can say the following: Owing to the disposition to cooperation persons react to each other's actions by applying sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or punishments. Sanctions make available for a person a distinction between what a person takes to be correct or incorrect and what is correct or incorrect in the light of others. Over and above that, sanctions are a means to come to conditions under which persons agree in their ways of continuing a given sequence of examples, i.e., normal conditions. In the case of agreement, sanctions reinforce the dispositions of persons in the way in which they react to their environment. In the case of disagreement, sanctions in the form of punishments trigger a process of finding out in practice the obstacles in the persons or in the environment that prevent agreement. Sanctions thus induce a process of mutual adjustment that leads to convergence. Once conditions under which persons agree are filtered out, the rule is that in which the convergence of persons in their ways of continuing a given finite sequence of examples consists.

Social practices do not determine a meaning for single types of thoughts in isolation. They determine a meaning for a thought of one type together with determining a meaning for thoughts of other types. It is therefore reasonable to elaborate on a social solution to the problem of rule-following in such a way that this solution results in an inferential semantics: the meaning of a thought of the type *p* are inferential relations to thoughts of the types *q, r, s*, etc. as determined in social practices. Brandom (1994) shows how such inferential relations can be conceived as being determined by a normative pragmatics that works in terms of taking persons to be committed, to be entitled, or to be precluded from being entitled to certain claims in a social practice of giving and asking for reasons (Chapters 1 to 4).

A social, inferential semantics avoids the indeterminacies that Quine points out: The inferences that a thought of the type "This is a rabbit" licenses are different from the inferences that a thought of the type "This [115] is a temporal stage of a rabbit" licenses. From "This is a temporal stage of a rabbit", but not from "This is a rabbit", one can infer "This is has temporal parts", whereby one can explain what it is to have temporal parts without mentioning rabbits. Let these sketchy remarks suffice to explain the motivation for a social theory of meaning. I elaborate on that matter in Esfeld (2000).

3.   *Social inference as a necessary condition for representation*

The task for a social theory of meaning is to explain relations between thoughts and the world - such as representing and referring to - on the basis of socially determined inferential relations among thoughts (or their expression in a language). The motivation for starting with inference and trying to get to representation on the basis of inference can be summed up in this way: Causal relations including a reliable and differentiating response mechanism are not sufficient for something to be a representation with a determinate conceptual content and to have a determinate reference. All the indeterminacies with which Quine and Kripke are concerned arise in this case. Epistemic relations such as inferential ones are therefore necessary for something to be a representation with a determinate conceptual content and to have a determinate reference.

Brandom (1994) develops a detailed account of how sub-sentential elements such as singular terms and predicates contribute to the inferential role of a sentence by means of relations of substitution and anaphora. He then puts forward an explanation of representation and reference in terms of these latter relations (Chapters 5 to 7). I do not have the space here to consider this account. I simply wish to indicate that there is a concrete proposal available of how relations between thoughts or sentences and the world - such as representation and reference - can be explained on the basis of inferential relations among thoughts or sentences and their components.

The problem for a social theory of meaning is not to establish that inferential relations are necessary for something to be a representation with a determinate conceptual content. The problem is that inferential relations as such are not sufficient to get to a representation of and reference to particular, contingent features (or things) of our world. The pragmatics on which an inferential semantics is based according to the mentioned account in the sense that inferential relations are determined by social practices has to establish the connection between specific features of our world and conceptual content that is individuated by inferential relations. That is to say: it has to be shown on the level of this pragmatics how the [116]

social practices that determine meaning (a) avoid an identifaction of what is correct with what is taken to be correct and (b) answer to the way the world is. To give an account of representation in terms of inferences is a first step in a reconstruction of how thoughts whose content consists in inferences relate to the world. I shall sketch out two further steps: the second step is to argue that the way the world is, and not social agreement, is the measure for the norms on which inferences are based. The third step is to regard social practices as being anchored in a physical environment in such a way that there is a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts.

4. From social meaning to realistic truth

4.1 Open-ended I-thou relations

The thesis which this section is to make plausible is this one: *A theory of meaning in terms of social practices can be conceived as being about the way in which we gain epistemic access to a world that is independent of these practices*. A social theory of meaning can thus be combined with realism. A realism with respect to the physical world is any position according to which (a) there is a physical world that is ontologically and causally independent of our thoughts and (b) whether or not our thoughts about the physical world are true depends on the way the physical world is. I shall not argue for realism about the physical world. My strategy will be to refute arguments which may be taken to imply that a social theory of meaning is incompatible with realism. For realism, as described by (a) and (b), is part and parcel of common sense. The problem is to give a philosophical account of how we can have epistemic access to an independent reality (see Willaschek (1999)).

There are two main possibilities for conceiving the social relations that determine meaning. One possibility is to employ the notion of I-we relations between an individual and a community: the community assesses the actions of the individual according to what it takes to be fit and proper. In this case, a consequence ensues which Crispin Wright once stated explicitly in his *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1980), but which he no longer defends as his own position:

> None of us unilaterally can make sense of the idea of correct employment of language save by reference to the authority of securable communal assent on the matter; and for the community itself there is no authority, so no standard to meet. (Wright (1980), p. 220)

This is social relativism: the standard for what is correct and incorrect in socially determined inferential relations is communal approval. A social [117] relativism as a social solution to the problem of rule-following is vigorously defended by David Bloor (1997).

A systematic reconstruction of how social practices can determine meaning for the thoughts of a person is distinct from an ontogenetic account of how a person acquires a language. When it comes to such a systematic reconstruction, we do not have to base ourselves on asymmetric I-we relations between an individual and a community. Instead, we can conceive symmetric I-thou relations among individuals who are on an equal footing. Meaning is determined in I-thou relations of employing sanctions to negotiate conditions in which there is convergence in the assessments of each other's actions. On such a basis, both Robert Brandom and Philip Pettit seek to combine a social account of meaning with a realism. (I adopt the terms "I-we relations" and "I-thou relations" from Brandom (1994). Pettit (1993), Chapter 4, speaks of a holistic individualism.)

The purpose of I-thou relations is not to integrate individuals into a community by achieving communal agreement. These relations do not stop at any communal agreement. They are open-ended. It is always possible for a further person to join in and challenge received assessments. Over and above that, any person can come back to her former assessments and correct them from a new perspective. Conceiving a social account of meaning in terms of symmetric I-thou relations thus enables us to say the following: a person can criticize from her perspective not only thoughts of another person, but also thoughts that are shared by all the members of a community. She can claim that some of these thoughts fail to be an appropriate conceptualization of the physical environment. From the perspective of new experience in particular, thoughts that are shared by all the members of a linguistic community can turn out to be incorrect. Consequently, the attitudes of taking something to be correct or incorrect are themselves subject to an assessment as to whether or not they are in fact correct. Setting a social theory of meaning out in terms of open-ended I-thou relations therefore prevents us from having to identify at some stage what is correct with social facts in the sense of what a community takes to be correct. For any one claim that a whole community takes to be correct, it is possible that the process of determining meaning has to go on or has to be taken up again, because someone challenges that claim by giving a reason.

Hence, if a social theory of meaning is conceived in terms of symmetric I-thou relations, such a theory can be a philosophical account of how we have epistemic access to an independent world. Since I-thou relations are open-ended instead of having communal agreement as their purpose and thus terminating in communal agreement, we are free to conceive these [118] relations as nothing but a *means* - and, if the rule-following considerations are correct, the *only* means - to gain epistemic access to the world; it then depends on the way the world is which ones of our thoughts about the world are correct and which ones are incorrect. We can of course discover that correctness or incorrectness only within these social practices by means of the described open-ended process of assessing each other's normative attitudes. Nonetheless, we now have a conceptual distinction at our disposal between the social process of finding out whether something is correct or incorrect and its being correct or incorrect.

However, one may have reservations whether these social practices really show how we can have epistemic access to an independent physical world. Including a distinction between what is taken to be correct and what is correct may not be sufficient to show that we can grasp in our social practices what is correct. In other words, one may have the concern that in this account a gap arises between what we take to be correct in our social practices and what is in fact correct. I shall address that concern in a third step by proposing a pragmatic conception of rationality. The link between a social theory of meaning and realism will not be complete until that third step is taken into account. Let us, however, first continue with the exposition of how a social theory of meaning can avoid a reduction of norms of correctness to social facts.

Conceiving a social theory of meaning in terms of symmetric I-thou relations enables us to provide for commitments that go beyond the commitments which people acknowledge. Brandom (1994) traces the distinction between thoughts *de dicto* and thoughts *de re* back to the different perspectives from which the same conceptual content can be specified in social practices, in particular the difference between acknowledging a commitment to a claim

oneself and ascribing a commitment to a claim to another person (Chapter 8). He employs this distinction to establish a difference between subjective normative attitude and objective normative status (in particular pp. 593-597; compare pp. 52-55, 632-633). According to Brandom, in translating thoughts *de dicto* into thoughts *de re*, an interpreter brings out which are the objects that the thoughts of a person refer to in the interpreter's perspective. This conception implies that referring to objects depends on social interactions; but this is unproblematic against the background of the proposed solution to the problem of rule-following that requires social practices for thoughts to have meaning.

The ascription of thoughts *de re* to a person can go beyond the commitments which that person is prepared to acknowledge. For instance, if Judith believes in 2000 that the president of the United States is the [119] most powerful person in the world, an interpreter can ascribe to her to believe of Bill Clinton that he is the most powerful person in the world - even though it may be the case that Judith does not believe that Bill Clinton is the most powerful person in the world, because she does not know that Bill Clinton is the president of the United States. Nonetheless, by believing that the president of the United States is the most powerful person in the world, Judith is committed to believing of Bill Clinton that he is the most powerful person in the world. What is more, even if no one realized that Bill Clinton were the president of the United States, anyone who claims that the president of the United States is the most powerful person in the world would be committed to believing of Bill Clinton that he is the most powerful person in the world.

This objectivity notwithstanding, Brandom (1994) claims that according to his account, normative statuses supervene on normative attitudes (pp. 46-52, 291-297). That is to say: the statuses of a person of being correct or incorrect supervene on attitudes of taking the person in question to be correct or incorrect in certain of her claims. However, Brandom adds that these statuses do not supervene on the actual attitudes of the members of a community at a given time:

> What follows from *p* cannot be identified with how I or anyone *actually* keeps score; it is rather
> to be identified with a feature of *correct* scorekeeping (for it depends on what else is true, not on
> what anyone *takes* to be true). (p. 627)

That is to say: normative statuses supervene on normative attitudes *insofar as these attitudes are correct*. Brandom speaks of a *normative phenomenalism* about normative statuses in distinction to a phenomenalism *tout court* (p. 627; see pp. 626-628). This position is a phenomenalism about norms insofar as it takes norms to originate in social practices.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to characterize such a position as a phenomenalism: saying that normative statuses supervene on the *correct* normative attitudes is not a substantive supervenience claim, unless the correct normative attitudes are at some stage identified with what is taken to be correct. However, the point of conceiving a social theory of meaning in terms of I-thou relations is to avoid a commitment to such an identification. If the *correct* normative attitudes depend on what *is true* in distinction to what is *taken to be true*, the substantive supervenience claim goes the other way round: the attitude of taking something to be true, if correct, supervenes on what is true. Such a supervenience is, of course, what we need in order to gain objectivity. This position thus amounts to the following: there are no norms in the world prior to and independently of our social practices.

But, once there [120] are social practices, what is true - and thus what are the correct normative attitudes - supervenes on the way the world is.

Brandom (1994) is reluctant to commit himself to a supervenience claim such as the one that truth supervenes on being, because he combines his social theory of meaning with an ontology according to which (1) the world is composed of facts and (2) facts are identical with the contents of true thoughts (in particular pp. 330-333, 622). This is an idealism, but one of the Hegelian, objective sort: the world itself is made up of conceptual items, namely the contents of true thoughts (compare Habermas (1999), pp. 161-169). By contrast, my intention in this section is to show the following: We can take up the conceptual tools of Brandom's social account of meaning and employ them in such a way that they are only about our epistemic access to a world that is ontologically independent of the contents of our thoughts. Thus, we can link up a social theory of meaning with a realism that is not committed to any idealistic consequences.

To sum this section up, I have tried to vindicate the thesis that a social account of meaning can be conceived as being about the way in which we gain epistemic access to the world in the following manner: (a) Construing such an account in terms of I-thou relations shows that even thoughts which are shared by a whole community are subject to an assessment as being correct or incorrect. Consequently, as regards our thoughts about the world, we never have to identify what is correct with what is taken to be correct. (b) Construing such an account in terms of I-thou relations enables us to maintain that whether a thought about the world is correct or incorrect supervenes on the way the world is. In other words, the world is the measure for what is correct and incorrect in our thoughts about the world and their inferential relations. We thereby make room for commitments that go beyond the commitments which people acknowledge.

4.2   Response-dependence

Let us grant that a social theory of meaning in terms of I-thou relations avoids any identification of what is correct in our thoughts about the world with a social fact of communal agreement. Nonetheless, there is a challenge to the thesis that such a theory of meaning is about the way in which we gain epistemic access to a world that is independent of our practices. As Philip Pettit makes clear, we have to concede that an account of rule-following in terms of social practices commits us to regarding conceptual content as being *response-dependent* (Pettit (1991), in particular p. 606, and Pettit (1993), pp. 91, 193-213. In the latter publication, Pettit uses the [121] term "response-authorising"). The term "response-dependent" goes back to Johnston (1989), pp. 144-146. The issue receives considerable attention in recent literature: both Volume 81.1 (1998) of *The Monist* and Volume 3 (1998) of the *European Review of Philosophy* are dedicated to a discussion of response-dependence. I shall be concerned with response-dependence only insofar as it is a consequence of a theory of meaning in terms of social practices. I intend to argue in this section that the sort of response-dependence which a social theory of meaning implies does not compromise the link with realism.

The way in which concepts of so-called secondary qualities are commonly treated in epistemology is an example of response-dependence: for instance, something is red if and only if it looks red to normal observers in normal conditions. If all concepts are response-

dependent or derived from concepts that are response-dependent, then such a biconditional holds directly or indirectly for all concepts. We thus get to the thesis of *global response-dependence*. Global response-dependence applies to concepts that relate to things and events in the world in the first place. When I use the term "every concept" in the following without further qualification, I mean empirical concepts in the first place; for my purpose is only to link up a social theory of meaning with a realism as regards the physical realm (but not to defend a realism about, for instance, mathematical objects). Let us formulate the notion of global response-dependence in the following way:

> *Global response-dependence*
>
> For every concept *F* which is not derived from other concepts, something is *F* if and only if it appears *F* to the members of a social community in normal conditions.

This formulation is intended to make clear that in the context of the link between a social theory of meaning and response-dependence, the claim is not an ontological one. There may be things which are *F* in a world in which there are no persons. With respect to its being *F*, a thing is not *ontologically* dependent on there being persons to whom it appears *F*. But when it comes to an account of persons following the rule *F*, then we have to bring in appearing *F*. Global response-dependence is implied by a theory of conceptual content in terms of social practices; for it is by appearing *F* to the members of a social community in normal conditions that the content of the rule *F* is fixed.

If concepts in general are response-dependent, this seems to compromise our epistemic access to a world that is independent of our practices; for it seems to imply that we can know merely the way in which [122] things behave relative to us in eliciting certain responses in us, but not what it is in the things themselves that makes them elicit these responses. Smith and Stoljar (1998) claim that global response-dependence entails what they call *noumenal realism*, namely the thesis that "there is an independent reality, but the intrinsic nature of that reality is unknowable" (p. 86). This thesis again is a sort of idealism, although this time of a Kantian type: we only know the way in which reality appears to us; but we cannot know what it is like in itself.

Smith and Stoljar (1998) begin with the statement that "According to Global Response-Dependence, the only claims we can ever make about the world are claims about the dispositions it possesses to elicit certain responses in us" (p. 87). They introduce the further premise that every disposition has a non-dispositional explanatory ground. They then conclude that global response-dependence has the following consequence: "the world must be a certain way in and of itself - that is, non-dispositionally - quite irrespective of the fact that we are in no position to make claims about this way it is" (p. 87; compare also Price (1998), pp. 123-124). As Smith and Stoljar (1998) show, there are good reasons for the assumption that every disposition has a non-dispositional explanatory ground (pp. 88-108). Given this assumption, their argument from the epistemic condition that we know only the way in which things behave relative to us to noumenal realism is sound.

Note that global response-dependence and the reasoning which leads to noumenal realism do not imply that all the properties which we know are dispositional or relational. The properties may be non-dispositional and non-relational, i.e., intrinsic. The point is that the meaning of the concepts of these properties is conceived in terms of the relation to us, namely

the disposition to elicit certain responses in us. The argument from response-dependence to a position according to which we cannot know the intrinsic nature of things is based upon a reading of response-dependence as a *constraint on the meaning of any concept F*. Thus, Smith and Stoljar (1998) say that "Fness can be *defined* in terms of a response … which suitable people are caused to have in suitable circumstances" (p. 86, my emphasis). Let us formulate this reading in this way:

Global response-dependence as a constraint on the meaning of concepts

> For every concept *F* which is not derived from other concepts, it is part of the meaning of the concept *F* that something is *F* if and only if it appears *F* to the members of a social community in normal conditions.

[123] The cautious formulation "part of the meaning" is intended to express that we do not have to commit ourselves to a reductive analysis of "being *F*" in terms of "appearing *F*".

Consider the paradigmatic example of response-dependence, secondary qualities. Take the concept "red". If the concept "red" is response-dependent in the sense just defined, then the following biconditional is a constraint on the meaning of "red": something is red if and only if it appears red to normal observers in normal conditions. This biconditional leaves open the possibility that the property of being red is an intrinsic property, as long as being red includes the disposition to appear red. What this biconditional can be taken to imply is that we grasp the property of being red only under the aspect of the appearance relation to us; and this leaves open what it is in the thing itself that makes it appear red. To put the matter in functional terms, it leaves open what it is that realizes the function or the role of appearing red (compare Pettit (1998a), in particular pp. 115-118, and Pettit (1998b), pp. 59-62). On this basis, one can then argue for noumenal realism.

However, my claim is that a social theory of meaning does not require us to conceive response-dependence as a constraint on the meaning of concepts. For such a theory to work it is sufficient to conceive *response-dependence as a constraint on the acquisition of any concept F* that is not derived from other concepts. Pettit himself speaks of possession conditions in the sense in which Peacocke (1992) employs that term in his book on concepts (Pettit (1991), p. 602, and Pettit (1993), pp. 103, 199-201). Furthermore, in a later paper, Pettit (1998a) explicitly distinguishes possession conditions from claims about the content of a concept (p. 114). However, I avoid using the notion of a possession condition, because, in the sense of Peacocke (1992), a possession condition individuates a concept and states what is required for full mastery of a concept (Chapter 1, in particular p. 29). Consequently, to satisfy a possession condition in this sense, one has to know the meaning of the concept in question. Nonetheless, in another recent paper, Pettit (1998b) comes close to the position which I shall endorse below (pp. 62-65), although he accepts the commitment to noumenal realism (Pettit (1998a); but see the reservation on pp. 123-126). Over and above that, the distinction which I propose is related to a distinction which Huw Price (1998) makes between response-dependence as a content condition, i.e., a constraint on meaning, and response-dependence as a usage condition, i.e., a constraint on assertibility (in particular p. 112), though what I have in mind is not assertibility, but acquisition:

Global response-dependence as a constraint on the acquisition of concepts

> For every concept *F* which is not derived from other concepts, it is a necessary condition for the acquisition of the concept *F* that something is *F* if and only if being *F* includes the disposition to appear *F* to the members of a social community in normal conditions.

The formulation "includes the disposition to appear *F*" is to prevent the misunderstanding that the property of being *F* has to be dispositional.

Global response-dependence in this sense is all that an account of meaning in terms of social practices is committed to. In order for us to acquire the concept *F*, there must be some things which are *F* in such a way that their being *F* enables a response by persons - namely the response that persons in their practices of determining a content for a rule are disposed to classify these things as being *F*. Response-dependence in this sense is a prerequisite for circumstances of the application of the concept *F* becoming determined. However, the meaning of the concept *F* does not have to say anything about appearing *F*. The meaning can be determined by the inferences which a sentence such as "This is *F*" entails and supports - inferences such that if one claims "This is *F*", one is committed to the claim "This is *G*" and entitled to the claim "This is *H*".

To illustrate the difference between a constraint on acquisition and a constraint on meaning, consider the following analogy: In order to possess a house, a condition of acquisition is that one follows a certain legal procedure, e.g., appears before a notary. However, what it means to possess a house is not such a procedure, but a certain legal status - other people must not enter the house without one's permission, etc. In the same manner, in order for a person to acquire a concept in a non-inferential way, the condition of response-dependence has to be satisfied according to the view under consideration; but the meaning of a concept consists in its relations to other concepts. Consequently, the relation to us does not have to enter into the meaning of the sentences in which the concept *F* is employed. The move to noumenal realism as an implication of a social theory of meaning thus is blocked.

Note a further consequence of this distinction between meaning and acquisition conditions: It is not necessary that all the things which belong to the extension of the concept *F* are such that they actually elicit the disposition to classify them as being *F*. In other words, we do not have to assume that our responses are sufficient to fix the extension of a concept *F*. Once the meaning of the concept *F* is determined, owing to the meaning of the concept *F* it may be determined for some things that [125] they are *F*, although these things do not elicit the response to classify them as being *F*.

Imagine the following scenario: there are some particular things that are covered by darkness throughout their existence. This condition notwithstanding, the meaning of "red" determines that these things are red (e.g. because they have the appropriate surface quality). However, these things do not elicit the response to classify them as being red. Nevertheless, being red includes the disposition to appear red in normal conditions: if these things were brought into daylight and thus brought into the same environment as those things to which we respond by classifying them as being red, these things would elicit in people the response to classify them as being red. (Even if bringing them into daylight would destroy these things, insofar as they are red, they have the disposition to appear red; for the factor which makes

them fall under the concept "red" is not the factor that causes them to be destroyed when brought into daylight).

Construing response-dependence as a general constraint on the acquisition of concepts does not prevent us from introducing the category of secondary quality concepts: secondary quality concepts are all and only those concepts for which response-dependence is not only a constraint on acquisition, but also a constraint on meaning. For instance, the concept "comfortable" may be such that it is part of the meaning of "comfortable" that things appear comfortable to persons.

It may be objected that the shift from a constraint on meaning to a constraint on acquisition notwithstanding, all that we know is the effect which a thing has on us in appearing F to us; consequently, there is no reason for assuming that we know the nature of the thing itself. This objection has a point insofar as a constraint on the acquisition of a concept F in terms of appearing F can be construed in such a way that appearing F blocks epistemic access to the thing itself. For instance, one can claim that our epistemic access to the world is mediated by appearances in the sense of mental representations (such as sense data). However, a social theory of meaning does not commit us to any such claim. "Appearing F" in the formulation of response-dependence does not mean that there is an F-appearance in persons which mediates in an epistemic sense their access to things that are F; it merely means that for any concept F which is not derived from other concepts, there are things that fall under this concept in such a way that their being F elicits a response in persons, namely the response that persons classify these things as being F. That response may be elicited in a very indirect way: we may need sophisticated measuring instruments to gain access to the property F. Think of quarks [126] and their properties. This point makes clear: the disposition to appear F does not have to be anything that is included in the property as such, but may depend on the means which we develop in order to gain access to the property.

In my argument that response-dependence as a constraint on the acquisition of concepts is sufficient to get an account of meaning in terms of social practices off the ground, I have read the biconditional of response-dependence from left to right: in short, for any concept F, if something is F, it appears F in normal conditions (so that we can acquire the concept F). But this biconditional can also be read from right to left: in short, for any concept F, if something appears F in normal conditions, it is F. Reading the biconditional from right to left, one can object that response-dependence compromises realism by making our practices determine the truth of thoughts of the type "This is F", even if response-dependence is restricted to a constraint on the acquisition of concepts. For it seems that thoughts of the type "This is F" are true owing to the way in which the content of the concept F is determined in our practices.

Whether or not this charge is justified depends on the way in which we construe the notion of normal conditions. When sketching out main features of a social theory of meaning in section 2 above, I said that through assessing our actions as correct or incorrect by means of sanctions, we enter into a process of finding out conditions under which our dispositions on what constitutes continuing a given sequence of examples in the same way converge. Thus, this process determines normal conditions. Nonetheless, we do not have to identify normal conditions with the conditions under which suitable persons agree in their judgements at a certain time (compare also Spohn (1997), in particular pp. 357, 376, who talks in terms of normal conditions having a hidden nature). Disagreements which call for a process of

negotiating a convergence do not only arise among people at the same time, but also with respect to their former judgements. In the light of new evidence - and that is in the light of a further specification of what normal conditions for judgements of a certain type are - we correct our former judgements. Since, according to the account of social practices in terms of I-thou relations, the process of challenging claims with reasons is open-ended, the process of determining normal conditions is open-ended as well. Hence, in finding out conditions under which our judgements converge at a time as well as across time, we determine not only meaning, but we can also see ourselves as aiming at a determination of those conditions in which we gain access to things as they are (compare Pettit (1999)). Consequently, this account of response-dependence does not compromise realism: The truth of thoughts of the [127] type "This is *F*" is not determined by our practices, because we do not have to identify the conditions under which we agree at a time with the normal conditions.

5.   *Social practices in a physical environment*

One can grant that (1) an inferential semantics has the means to account for representation at its disposal and that (2) a social theory of meaning in terms of I-thou relations is about our epistemic access to the world without having to identify thoughts that are taken to be correct with their being correct. Nevertheless, one can claim that (1) and (2) come too late to ensure that our thoughts are not a spinning in the void, because the social practices as described so far do not provide for a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts. John McDowell (1994) can be seen as voicing such an objection in his influential John Locke lectures on *Mind and World*. To account for the relation between our thoughts and the world within a social theory of meaning and to meet the challenge which McDowell poses, we therefore need a third step which shows how the social practices that determine meaning answer to the way the world is.

In order to conceive a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts, McDowell (1994) proposes to regard the conceptual realm as having no boundaries: the conceptual realm does not end where persons and their interactions end; instead, it encompasses the whole world - all what our thoughts can be about. The contents of our thoughts, if true, are the very facts that make up the world (in particular lectures 2 and 4). The point of McDowell thus is not only that experience has to be conceptual in order to exercise a rational constraint on a system of thoughts. This could be interpreted as merely shifting the boundary between what is conceptual and the world in such a way that the conceptual includes experience; but the relation between experience and the world could still be a mere causal one instead of a rational constraint. By contrast, when McDowell claims that experience is conceptual, his point is that the world itself has to be conceived as being conceptual if there is to be a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts (compare Wright (1996), pp. 240-242). This, again, is an objective idealism of a Hegelian sort (compare Sedgwick (1997)): the world in itself is made up of facts in the sense of the contents of true thoughts. Do we have to accept such an idealism in order to conceive a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts?

The challenge to show how the proposed conception can admit a rational constraint of the world on our thoughts has to be met on the level of the social practices that determine meaning. It has to be shown that the [128] world exerts a constraint on these practices which is not only causal, but which can also be regarded as rational in a sense to be explained. Such

a constraint is necessary to ensure that the items whose conceptual content consists in inferential relations are thoughts about things in the world with a truth value that depends on the way the world is. My thesis is: *The physical world is not part of the conceptual content of our thoughts. But it is part of the social practices in which that content is determined.*

As argued in section 2 by quoting Wright, for someone who is merely rational there never is any meaning, because any finite sequence of whatever items runs into the infinity problem and the normativity problem. The solution to the problem of rule-following which I mentioned in section 2 consists in conceiving social practices that are not conceptual themselves, but that determine a conceptual content. These practices are the origin of rationality. The sketched social theory of meaning thereby includes a *pragmatic conception of rationality*: in order to avoid a rationality that is a spinning in the void and never gets to any meaning, we have to see rationality as being tied to these practices.

To get off the ground, these practices presuppose (a) natural dispositions of the persons who take part in them as well as (b) a shared physical environment and (c) a cognitive access to this environment; that cognitive access consists in response-mechanisms which humans share with other animals. The physical environment exerts a causal constraint on these social practices. That constraint is not a constraint from outside these practices, because (a) the physical environment is part of these practices and (b) the position that conceptual content is determined by these practices includes a pragmatic conception of rationality. On the basis of this pragmatic view of rationality, we can say the following: that very causal constraint can be regarded as rational from within these practices, because when it comes to rule-following, rationality has to open up itself in such a way that it includes the physical environment via these practices. Consequently, the proposed account provides for a constraint of the world on our thoughts that is rational if seen from within the practices which determine the content of our thoughts.

One may go as far as maintaining the following: the causal constraint from the environment ensures that our thoughts refer to certain items in the environment and thus that the truth value of our thoughts supervenes on the way the world is. But note that this position does not imply any dualism between reference as determined by causal relations and conceptual content as consisting in inferential relations. Instead, the conceptual content of our thoughts as consisting in inferential relations makes up for specific reference to items in the world owing to the way [129] in which this content is determined by social practices in a physical environment.

Although the constraint from the physical environment can be regarded as rational from within these practices, it does not provide for logical relations between the physical and the content of our thoughts. Consequently, there is no rational relation between the world and our thoughts in the sense of a relation of justification. Furthermore, the constraint from the physical environment does not go as far as ensuring that *specific* practices are ontologically dependent on *specific* features of the environment. For instance, practices of classifying things as trees are not ontologically dependent on being in touch with trees. For inferential relations may provide a content for thoughts of the type "This is a tree" even if there are no trees in the environment. But this conception makes having thoughts as a whole ontologically dependent on being embedded in a physical environment. This position thus is a social externalism in that it regards the specific content of our thoughts as being ontologically

dependent on social practices; it is a physical externalism in that it considers our thoughts having content at all as being ontologically dependent on our being embedded in a physical environment.

It is not objectionable that this account of conceptual content presupposes the existence of a physical world, including a cognitive access to the environment that man shares with lower animals. Instead, this account offers something which may be construed as a transcendental argument for that presupposition: we start with rule-following. The sceptic cannot deny rule-following if her claims are to have meaning. The argument then is that having natural dispositions and sharing a physical environment with other people to which one has a cognitive access is a metaphysically necessary condition for the possibility of rule-following.

The considerations which I have put forward in this paper do not only amount to a pragmatic conception of rationality, but also to a pragmatic realism. The resulting position is a *pragmatic* realism, because the meaning of our thoughts is determined by social practices. It is a *realism*, because it is not a pragmatic account of truth: whether or not a thought about the world is true supervenes on the way the world is. A social theory of meaning explains meaning without employing the concept of truth - although, of course, such a theory of meaning puts a constraint on the theory of truth in the sense that not any theory of truth is compatible with a social theory of meaning. (The same goes the other way round: the claim that the truth of our thoughts depends on the way the world is cannot go with just any theory of meaning). Advancing an account of meaning, but not an account of truth in terms of social practices is a coherent position: once social [130] practices have established a determinate meaning for thoughts of a certain type, we are free to say that the truth value of a thought with that determinate meaning depends on the way the world is.

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