The Normativity of Meaning (Draft)

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1. Meaning, Action, and Norms

Whether symbols are meaningful and, if so, what they mean, is linked to our actions. New parents can bestow their child with a name by declaration, and philosophers can bestow a new “ism” with content by stipulation. The relationship between action and meaning is more complex in less familiar cases, but few doubt that there is one. Those who endorse the normativity of meaning think that, in some important way, meaning is linked not only to what we do, but also to what we *ought* to do, or what is *rational*, or some other normative fact.[[1]](#footnote-0)

The slogan “meaning is normative” is imprecise, and it has been used to capture a number of distinct connections between meaning and normativity. In this discussion, I’ll focus on two.[[2]](#footnote-1) The first comes from Kripke’s book on Wittgenstein. There, the slogan is captured by the claim that facts about meaning justify speech acts.[[3]](#footnote-2) For instance, the fact that “+” means plus justifies a particular response (“125”) to the question “What is 68+57?”. The second comes from Davidson’s work on interpretation. According to Davidson, linguistic interpretation is partly constrained by rationality.

After explicating and evaluating each purported link between meaning and normativity, I’ll step back and discuss metasemantics more generally. My aim is constructive: I want to understand the various sorts of connections there are between meaning and normativity, and how those connections may bear on our investigations into the nature of meaning. This contrasts with Kripke’s skeptical aim to undermine belief in the existence of facts about meaning. (The views espoused in Kripke’s book on Wittgenstein don’t clearly belong to either Kripke or Wittgenstein.[[4]](#footnote-3) To avoid clumsiness, I’ll henceforth use “Kripke” to designate the fictional philosopher that holds the views attributed to Wittgenstein in the book.)

Before diving in, it is worth lingering on the slogan. “Meaning”, in the slogan, does not pick out meanings understood as the sorts of entities assigned to expressions in order to formulate a compositional semantic theory. On many semantic theories, sentences are assigned propositions. If we read “meaning” in the slogan as applying to propositions, it would entail that propositions are normative. Neither Kripke nor Davidson argue that propositions are themselves normative, so I will set this reading of “meaning” aside. Furthermore, Speaks (2009) modifies the Frege-Geach point to argue that meanings (in this sense) are not normative. Rather, by “meaning”, we will designate facts that correlate meaningful expressions with their meanings. A better term here would be “meaning-fact”. Disquotation provides familiar examples: “ “dog” means dog”.[[5]](#footnote-4) So understood, evaluating Kripke’s and Davidson’s claims belongs to the more general study of meaning-facts: metasemantics.

Next, consider “normative”. Exactly what property does it ascribe? This is a particularly difficult question given that “normative” is, at least in large part, a term of art. I’ll explicate by example rather than definition. Normative facts include facts about what we *ought* to do, what is *right*, what is *rational* and what is *justified*. In its primary sense, I’ll take “normative” to apply to facts, and use it to apply to any facts in the aforementioned family.[[6]](#footnote-5) Here I differ with some in the literature who stipulate that “normative” applies only to action-guiding facts. Importantly, note that, for all I’ve said thus far, my sense of normative could be co-extensive with “action-guiding”. However, I’ll argue in section 3.1 that, in the relevant sense of “normative” there are normative facts that aren’t action-guiding.

Finally, what is it to ascribe normativity to meaning-facts?[[7]](#footnote-6) On the most obvious reading of the slogan, meaning-facts are themselves normative facts: they belong to the same family as ought-facts, rationality-facts, justification-facts, and their normative ken. Few endorse the slogan in this strong form. Rather, most who endorse the slogan take meaning-facts to bear some sort of intimate relation to normative facts. Candidates for the relation include entailment, supervenience, determination, and grounding.

Though meaning facts aren’t usually taken to be normative facts, the relationship between meaning and normativity can’t be too distant if the slogan is to be vindicated. Hattiangadi’s analogy (2007: 182) drives this point home:

…whether or not I take a leisurely stroll depends on the weather, but that does not make facts about the weather irreducibly normative. A theory of rain would not have to accommodate the fact that I ought to carry an umbrella in the rain.

Setting aside her use of “irreducibly”, Hattiangadi’s analogy brings to light the fact that theorists are only interested in the normativity of meaning insofar as it would have to be accounted for by a theory of meaning-facts. (I’ve set aside “irreducibly” because we don’t want to rule out by fiat that meaning facts are *reducibly* normative in a way that our theory must accommodate.)

As we’ll see in section 4, there are numerous distinct ways to theorize about meaning facts—metasemantic projects. Whether these projects must accommodate normativity will depend on their details. Even before making such distinctions we can identify two projects that make the relevant links explicit. One metasemantic project is to give the facts in virtue of which meaning facts obtain, in recently popularized terminology the grounds of meaning facts. Even if meaning-facts aren’t themselves paradigmatic normative facts, it could be that paradigmatic normative facts ground (perhaps partly) meaning-facts. Another metasemantic project is to identify the facts that are grounded by meaning-facts: the facts that hold in virtue of meaning facts.[[8]](#footnote-7) Again, even if meaning facts aren’t themselves paradigmatically normative, they may ground normative facts.[[9]](#footnote-8)

Putting all of this together, we can gloss the slogan “meaning is normative” as follows: meaning-facts are either themselves paradigmatically normative, or they are related to normative facts in a way that a metasemantic theory must accommodate.

This gloss of the slogan is deliberately imprecise. There are multiple types of metasemantic theories, as well as multiple senses of “must accommodate”. It makes sense to leave the slogan imprecise for now. Our next step will be to look at two purported ways to vindicate the slogan. Having examined the details of these attempts, we’ll be in a better position to see what sorts of metasemantic projects are relevant, as well as whether (and in what sense) they’ll need to accommodate normativity.

Our two routes to vindication differ in two crucial ways: (1) what they take to be the relevant connection between meaning-facts and normative facts, and (2) what they take to be the relevant normative facts that stand in that connection.

2. Kripke’s Wittgenstein

Kripke focuses on myriad different normative facts in his discussion. He writes, for example, about what we *should* answer (11), what we’re *justified* in answering (11), what we *should* do (15), *must* write (20), *ought* to do (22), in addition to numerous variants. Given the freedom with which he moves between these different facts, it is clear he places little weight on the choice between them. Following many commentators, I will focus on facts about what we *ought* to do.

Kripke also invokes several different relations between meaning facts and normative facts. He writes about what meaning facts *show* (11) and *mandate* (15). Sometimes he uses conditionals: if x means y, then I should speak in a certain way (37). Following several commentators, I’ll use “determine” as a name for the relation between meaning facts and normative facts on Kripke’s view.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Combining our choices, Kripke’s version of the normativity of meaning can be articulated as follows: meaning facts determine facts about what we ought to do. Better understanding this articulation requires understanding its role in Kripke’s argument for skepticism about meaning.

2.1 Semantic Skepticism and the Role of Normativity

The skeptic begins by considering our symbol “+”. We take “+” to designate a familiar arithmetic function: addition. However, the skeptic challenges us to provide an acceptable account of why “+” expresses addition, rather than a bizarre variant: quaddition. The skeptic, of course, is unsatisfied with all attempts.[[11]](#footnote-10)

Semantic skepticism receives a number of distinct formulations. On one gloss, the skeptic “questions whether there is any fact that I meant plus, not quus, that will answer his skeptical challenge” (11). On another, “he questions whether I should be so confident that now I should answer ‘125’ rather than ‘5’” (11). Shortly thereafter, Kripke writes “Of course, ultimately, if the skeptic is right, the concepts of meaning and of intending one function rather than another will make no sense” (13).

These three formulations differ in emphasis; they are metaphysical, epistemic, and semantic, respectively. Following Kripke (21), we will set aside the epistemic formulation for now. The metaphysical challenge is to identify facts that determine that I mean plus rather than quus. The semantic conclusion is that my concepts of meaning and intending make no sense.[[12]](#footnote-11) If we read take determination to require both entailment and relative fundamentality (so determination is asymmetric), we can connect the two with the following conditional: *if my concept of meaning is to make sense, there must be some facts that both entail meaning facts and are more fundamental than meaning facts*. If the metaphysical challenge of identifying such facts can’t be met, then, by *modus tollens*, we can establish the conclusion that our semantic concepts makes no sense.

One can question the conditional. Boghossian (1989) influentially defended for a non-reductive account of meaning. On Boghossian’s view, combating skepticism does not require identifying relatively fundamental facts in virtue of which meaning-facts hold: meaning-facts are irreducible. Furthermore, many think that a concept can “make sense” even if it has no extension. The following reformulated conditional (RC), which omits reference to concepts, suits the skeptic’s purposes:

(RC) If there is a fact of the matter about whether I mean one function rather than another, there must be some more fundamental fact that entails that I mean one function rather than another.

RC best captures the connection between the skeptic’s metaphysical challenge, and their skeptical conclusion. Of course, a major obstacle remains: the skeptic must argue against the consequent RC. Here, the normativity of meaning plays a starring role: Kripke wields normativity against likely candidates for relatively fundamental meaning-determining facts.

In particular, Kripke focuses most of his attention on one familiar attempt to provide relatively fundamental meaning-determining facts: a dispositional account. On such a view, dispositional facts about, e.g. what are disposed to say in various circumstances, provide the more fundamental basis for meaning-facts. Over and over, Kripke insists that the dispositionalist cannot account for the normativity of meaning, i.e. the fact that meaning facts determine facts about what we ought to say. Despite his insistence, Kripke says relatively little about just why the dispositionalist cannot account for the normativity of meaning.

2.2 The Underdetermination Argument

Kripke’s clearest argument that the dispositionalist cannot account for the normativity of meaning comes on pg. 24:

Is not the dispositionalist view simply an equation of performance and correctness? Assuming determinism, even if I mean to denote no number theoretic function in particular by the sign ‘\*’, then to the same extent as it is true for ‘+’, it is true here that for any two arguments *m* and *n*, there is a uniquely determined answer *p* that I would give…The difference between this case and the case of the ‘+’ function is that in the former case, but not in the latter, my uniquely determined answer can properly be called ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

As I understand this passage, Kripke provides us with a thought experiment intended to undermine the claim that dispositional facts determine normative facts about use.[[13]](#footnote-12) The idea is that, given determinism, I am disposed to give answers to the question “what is x\*y?”, for any x and y. However, such answers cannot be properly called “right” or “wrong” unlike my answers to corresponding questions about addition.

In this formulation, the argument is suspect for a straightforward reason: determinism doesn’t entail that I will answer questions of the form “what is x\*y?” It may be that I am disposed not to answer them at all.

We could attempt to repair the argument by considering the following possibility: that I am disposed to use “\*” exactly as I use “+”, without there being any necessitated normative facts. We can imagine, for instance, that my usage of “\*” is a mere tick (though a comprehensive and consistent one!) or the result of Pavlovian training.

Set aside for a moment whether either the initial argument or the suggested repair succeeds. It does reveal that Kripke assumes that, in order for dispositionalism to succeed, the dispositionalist must establish a connection between normative facts and dispositional facts. This may seem odd: the dispositionalist’s primary aim is to connect dispositional facts with *meaning-facts,* not other facts in the neighborhood. To repair this defect, we can construct a Kripke-inspired argument as follows.[[14]](#footnote-13) According to Kripke’s dispositionalist, dispositional facts entail meaning facts. According to Kripke, meaning facts entail normative facts. Given that entailment is transitive, the dispositionalist is committed to the claim that dispositional facts entail normative facts. However, the ‘\*’ example shows that this is not the case.

Does this argument succeed? At the very least, it is highly suspect. One possible response for the dispositionalist is to claim that if I have a mere tick to blurt “\*” (however it is pronounced), it is not the same as a disposition to *use* a symbol in the sense that the dispositionalist invokes. The skeptic may reply that the only way to make that sense of “use” more precise is to invoke intensional notions, which would rob dispositionalism of its reductive nature, disqualifying it as a theory on which more fundamental facts determine meaning. Adjudicating this dispute would take us too far afield, given that the proper characterization of reductively-adequate dispositions is subject to better understanding of both reductive adequacy and dispositions. A second possible response for the dispositionalist is to simply deny that the entailment fails, at least when we take into account all of the relevant dispositional facts.

2.3 Hattiangadi’s Argument

Let’s assume for a moment that the skeptic wins the battle against the dispositionalist: the “\*” example shows that dispositionalism is an inadequate view about which facts determine meaning-facts. Does this victory establish that there are no more fundamental facts that entail meaning-facts (the falsity of RC’s consequent)? It doesn’t: dispositionalism is just one theory about exactly which relatively fundamental facts determine meaning. It remains to be seen whether we can circumvent the arguments against dispositionalism by shifting to other facts, or simply including more. In order for there to be a route from the normativity of meaning to the falsity of RC’s consequent, we need an argument that the normativity of meaning rules out any reductive theory of meaning.

In her recent book, Hattiangadi (2007: Ch. 3), notices this lacunae and attempts to fill it. Taking her cue from independently familiar arguments against moral realism, Hattiangadi give an argument that—if sound—purports to lead directly from the normativity of meaning to the inadequacy of any reductive account.

Hattiangadi claims that we can transpose Moore’s open question argument to the semantic realm, if meaning-facts are normative. Here, briefly, is the transposition. Assume that Moore’s open question argument shows that there can be no reduction of normative facts to natural facts. Given that meaning-facts are normative, it follows that there can be no reduction of meaning-facts to natural facts. Since any adequate reduction of meaning-facts would reduce them to natural facts, there can be no reduction of meaning-facts. So, on Hattiangadi’s view, Moore provides us with the material to give a general argument from the normativity of meaning to semantic skepticism. What should we make of this?

First, note that Hattiangadi’s semantic version of the open-question argument is no more compelling than that argument is in the moral realm. Given that it is suspect in the moral realm, its semantic version is suspect as well. We can make this criticism more precise. In presenting the argument, Hattiangadi’s (2007: 45) usual gloss of the conclusion concerns concepts. She states that the argument makes “it intuitive that evaluative concepts are fundamentally different from natural concepts”. Assume, for a moment, that the open-question argument works as does its transposition, in other words, the argument establishes that the concept of *meaning* is not analytically equivalent with descriptive concepts. It is not clear that this shows anything about the normativity of meaning, as we understand it. The claim that meaning is normative was a claim about meaning-facts: that they bear an intimate connection with normative facts. This connection is not straightforwardly undermined by any claim about concepts.

Second, note that even if one could move from the distinctness of concepts to distinctness of facts, we must remember that *identity* is not the only relation between meaning-facts and normative facts that would vindicate the normativity of meaning.[[15]](#footnote-14) Grounding, entailment, and determination are the relations that I mentioned in explaining the thesis, though there are other relations that would vindicate the slogan. Assume, for instance, that meaning facts entail normative facts. Even the assumption that we cannot naturalistically account for normative facts wouldn’t immediately cast doubt on the naturalistic acceptability of the facts that entail them. The upshot is that even if the transposition of Moore’s argument works, which is dubious, it wouldn’t suffice to undermine the normativity of meaning.

2.4 Correctness Conditions

One way to doubt that the normativity of meaning undermines reductive theories of meaning is to hold that even if meaning is normative in some sense or other, we could still give a reductive theory. Another way is to deny that meaning is normative in the first place. The normativity of meaning, in roughly Kripke’s sense, has recently been the object of a number of objections. Many of these objections focus on the most straightforward route from meaning to normativity. This route proceeds through correctness conditions.

Assuming that “dog” means dog, the following fact about correctness conditions follows:

(CC) “Dog” correctly applies to x iff x is a dog.[[16]](#footnote-15)

CC, and other similar facts, are common ground in the literature. There are two main ways that we could use facts like CC to attempt to vindicate the thesis that meaning is normative.

According to the first, CC entails normative facts, e.g. facts about what we ought to assert, or how we ought to apply terms. According to the second, CC is itself a normative fact. This is given some initial support by the familial-resemblance between paradigmatic normative terms like “ought, and the term “correct”. I will consider these in turn.

Vindicating the normativity of meaning by linking CC to uncontroversially normative facts requires, first, identifying such facts. This has proven problematic. For instance, one may be tempted to claim that OD follows from CC.

(OD) Speakers ought to apply “dog” to x iff x is a dog.

As several theorists have noted, OD plausibly runs afoul of the principle that ought implies can, assuming that in the relevant sense of “can”, speakers cannot apply “dog” to all dogs.[[17]](#footnote-16) The usual next step is to construct an alternative to OD that weakens normative demands for the sake of achievability. One may proceed by attempting to find alternative prescriptive demands, i.e. demands about what we ought to do. However, given that normative-facts aren’t all prescriptive, one could try to find other sorts of normative facts. This is exactly what Whiting (2009: 542-547) has recently attempted. He identifies a *proscriptive* fact—a fact about what we *may* do—that he takes to follow from CC.

(MD) Speakers may (apply “dog” to x) iff x is a dog.

MD is achievable, so it avoids the objection from the principle that ought implies can. However, substantial worries remain about the utilization of MD in a defense of the normativity of meaning. These come in two categories. In the first category, one may worry that MD isn’t true. In the second category, one may worry that even if MD is true it fails to vindicate the normativity of meaning.

Those who doubt the truth of MD invoke situations in which, for whatever reason, we ought to lie, mislead, or use the word “dog” in some other way that seems to violate MD. It doesn’t take too much ingenuity to see that there are such situations. (A supervillain will press the genocide button if I don’t apply “dog” to Fluffy the cat.) Opponents of MD will argue that the possibility of such situations show that I don’t violate any normative restriction on usage by violating MD. Defenders of MD will admit that there are situations in which I ought not to apply “dog” in accordance with MD, but they will argue that such situations fail to undermine MD because they fail to recognize that it states a *prima facie* proscription, rather than an all-things-considered one. Whether or not this defense of MD is plausible depends on the plausibility of the claim that MD is even a *prima facie* proscription, an issue that is open and can only be settled by investigating the nature of *prima facie* proscriptions.

Even assuming that MD is true, in whatever sense one likes, it is not obvious that it vindicates the normativity of meaning. Recall our characterization of the normativity of meaning: meaning-facts are either themselves paradigmatically normative, or they are related to normative facts in a way that a metasemantic theory must accommodate. The truth of MD, and even the fact that it is entailed by CC, which is entailed by the fact that “dog” means dog, doesn’t suffice to establish that a metasemantic theory must accommodate MD. After all, a theory need not explicitly accommodate all of its entailments. (Though “accommodate” is purposely cagey, take it to require some sort of explanation.)

To emphasize this point, note that mere fact that CC follows from meaning-facts, and MD follows from CC is not enough to establish that there is a particularly close connection between meaning-facts and MD. As many have noted, the route from CC to MD may very well require invoking some general pragmatic principles, e.g. that one ought to assert only truths. Since this principle belongs to a theory of communication, the link between MD and meaning-facts may be too distant. Recall Hattiangadi’s analogy. It may follow from the fact that it is raining that I ought to use an umbrella. However, the route from the former to the latter requires invoking a non-meterological fact: the fact that I don’t want to get wet. Given this, no weather theory must explain why I ought to use an umbrella. The relationship between MD and meaning-facts has been thought to be similar: the route from the latter to the former requires non-semantic facts.

So, there are numerous reasons to doubt that MD can be utilized to vindicate the normativity of meaning. However, perhaps invoking MD was unnecessary in the first place. One could argue that CC itself is a normative fact and this vindicates the normativity of meaning. How would this work? Well, one way to make the case would be to expand the notion of meaning-facts to include CC. In introducing the notion I was fairly conservative: I used “meaning-fact” to designate facts of the form “x means y”. However, one may reasonably hold that such correlations of meaning belong to a more general class of facts that are relevant to semantics: facts about reference, ascription, denotation, and correctness conditions. If that’s right, then vindicating our slogan will merely require arguing that CC is either itself a paradigmatic normative fact, or is closely enough related to normative facts that any account of CC must explain this relationship.

In the case of CC, it is tempting to claim that it simply is a paradigmatic normative fact. After all, its articulation contains the term “correct”, which is often used to express paradigmatic normative facts. This straightforward route from CC to the normativity of meaning has come under fire. The first objection is that “correct” in CC is a mere placeholder: it stands for whatever relevant semantic relation “dog” stands to the members of its extension. On one way of understanding this objection “correct” in CC designates that semantic relation, which entails that it fails to co-designate with obviously normative uses of “correct”. As Wedgwood (2007) and Whiting (2009) argue, this is implausible given that the two uses of “correct” can be used to jointly ground inferences. Whiting (2009: 538) provides an example:

(1) Sophie behaved correctly when she returned the wallet she found to its owner.

(2) Sophie correctly applied ‘red’ to the red object.

(3) So, Sophie behaved correctly twice.

Given that (1) and (2) entail (3), we seem forced to claim that their occurrences of “correctly” co-designate. Assuming that “correctly” in (2) co-designates with “correct” in CC, it follows that “correct” in CC co-designates with “correctly” in (1). Since “correctly” in (1) expresses a normative property, so does “correct” in CC. This undermines the first version of the placeholder objection.

There is, however, a more subtle version of the objection. On this version, “correct” in CC designates the same property as “correctly” in (1). Furthermore, (1) is taken to be a normative fact. However, it is denied that CC is normative. This denial is buttressed by a thesis about the nature of correctness: it is a determinable, and some of its determinates are normative, while others aren’t.

How can we assess this subtle response? Our assessment would consist of two tasks. First, we’d assess whether it is plausible that “correct” expresses a determinable with some non-normative determinates. Second, we’d assess whether “correct” in CC expresses one of those non-normative determinates.

In order to make a convincing case that correctness has some non-normative determinates, one needs to supply a sentence containing “correct” that is clearly non-normative. Several examples have been discussed in the literature, the general idea is that some sentences containing “correct” merely express standards without being normative in any relevant sense. Consider, for instance, old-fashioned grammarians who insist that sentences shouldn’t end with prepositions. One may be tempted to claim that there is a sense in which it is incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition. However, the sense of “incorrect” here, the thought goes, may merely express the standards of the stodgy grammarians rather than being genuinely normative.

Such examples are controversial. Here are two major issues. First, one could deny that the sentence “it is incorrect to end a sentence with a preposition” has any true reading (Whiting 2009). If the sentence is false, then we need not identify a non-normative determinate of correctness. Second, it is reasonable to feel that the debate has become unhinged at this point: we need an independent test for ‘genuine’ normativity. Here is a suggestion: we look at the various roles that normativity is supposed to play in discussions about the normativity of meaning and examine whether CC is the sort of fact suited to playing such roles. For instance, one role normative-facts are supposed to play is that they are naturalistically suspect. If CC is as naturalistically suspect as other uncontroversially normative facts, then it hardly matters whether is it ‘genuinely’ normative: it will play the relevant role regardless. None of this is to say that normative facts are genuinely suspect, it is just to suggest a way in which we may settle the debate about the status of CC.

2.5 Less Dramatic Theses

I’ve raised doubts as to whether meaning is normative in a sense that would serve the skeptic’s purposes. However, stepping back, one may reasonably ask whether the connections between normativity and meaning that we’ve uncovered are theoretically important even if they don’t entail skepticism. Seeing the glass as half-full, I’ll argue in section 4 that the connections between meaning and normativity brought out in discussion of Kripke are plausibly important for some metasemantic projects. Before getting to this, though, I’ll turn my attention to a distinct route to vindication of the slogan: the view that interpretation is constrained by facts about rationality.

3. Rationality and Meaning

Assume, *pace* Boghossian (1989), that meaning-facts are not primitive. It is reasonable to wonder what more fundamental facts explain them. “Explain”, here, could take at least two relevant senses. A metaphysical explanation would provide the grounds for meaning-facts while an epistemic explanation would provide a method for coming to know them.

The difficulty of providing such explanations will depend on what more fundamental facts can be invoked. We could, for instance, limit ourselves to purely observable facts. Alternately, we could allow facts, about, e.g. phenomenal states. One popular constraint is to exclude intensional facts from the explanans, the thought being that they are too close to the explanandum.

A familiar problem arises. Given any limited set of relatively fundamental facts, it seems as if there is a multitude of sets of compatible meaning-facts. Calling a set of meaning-facts for a particular language “an interpretation”, the idea is that the relatively fundamental facts are compatible with a multitude of interpretations.

Assume that “dog” is uttered whenever there are clearly visible canines. A sensible hypothesis is that “dog” means dog. An insensible hypothesis is that “dog” means cat. Note that we can preserve sentence-level truth conditions, even while varying sub-sentential meanings, by further complicating our interpretations. This is a lesson of Putnam’s (1981).

We need general principles that rule out the insensible hypothesis, thereby partly explaining why the sensible hypothesis is true. One principle that is commonly invoked connects interpretation with rationality. In Davidson’s words:

Successful interpretation necessarily invests the person interpreted with basic rationality (1991: 158).

There are a number of different ways to understand this slogan. We can distinguish, first, between metaphysical and epistemic readings, and second between various epistemic and metaphysical statuses that (either version of) the slogan may have. The first distinction can be captured with MC and EC.

MC: Meaning-facts are (at least partly) determined by facts about rationality.

EC: We can come to know meaning-facts by learning facts about rationality.

In articulating MC I’ve deliberately used the cagey term “determines”. As in our discussion of Kripke, this can stand in for a number of more specific relationships between meaning-facts and facts about rationality. (Note that MC is one version of what has been called “the principle of charity”. However, this name has been used for many different principles—even by Davidson himself—and some have nothing to do with normativity. Given this, I’ll avoid the term “charity”, familiar as it may be.)

In his own work, Davidson moves back and forth between MC and EC. One reason for this is that he often discusses meaning from the point of view of the radical interpreter, who, given some basic physical information, attempts to come to know meaning-facts. However, following Lewis (1974), one can view the radical interpretation as sufficiently idealized that it merely serves as an illustrative device for considering the metaphysical basis of meaning.

MC and EC can be attributed varying metaphysical and epistemic statuses. One could, for instance, hold that MC is metaphysically necessary and *a priori*, or even analytic. The same goes for EC.

Recall that there are two main choices in any attempt to vindicate the slogan “meaning is normative”. First, we must choose the relevant normative facts. Second, we must explain the relationship between the normative facts and the meaning-facts.

Focusing on MC, I’ve already made (or perhaps sidestepped) the second choice by labeling the relationship “determination”. However, I have yet to say anything substantial about the first choice. Just what rationality facts determine content, according to MC?

The idea is that if certain interpretations were correct, speakers would be irrational. In the quote above, Davidson takes such irrationality to be a non-starter: a basic constraint on interpretation is regarding the interpreted speakers as rational. Let’s make this a bit more precise by considering a set of speech acts S in which the speakers of L engage. The language to be interpreted is L. The relevant facts, then, evaluate the rationality of the members of S, given candidate interpretations of L. Conditional facts of the following form serve this purpose:

(F) If we interpret L with I then s1…sn ∈ S are rational.

Given myriad facts of form F, we can then compare interpretations.[[18]](#footnote-17) The successful interpretation, the thought is, must satisfy the constraint of investing the speakers of L with basic rationality, which, in turn, will be guaranteed by the truth of the relevant F-type fact.

3.1 Is MC Normative?

It is tempting, at this point, to claim that the articulated version of MC doesn’t vindicate the normativity of meaning. F-facts, the thought proceeds, aren’t such that connecting them to meaning teaches us anything interesting about the relationship between meaning and normativity.

This line is tempting because F-facts are significantly more complex than more familiar normative facts about, e.g., what we ought to do. However, the best argument for this conclusion of which I am aware fails. The argument (adapted from Glüer and Wikforss 2009), proceeds as follows.[[19]](#footnote-18) First, the relevant sense of normativity to the normativity debate is “action-guiding”. This contrasts with the sense I’m using it in which any fact from a family involving normative notions is classified as normative. (Though, to stress again, for all I’ve said so far, the uses are extensionally equivalent.) Second, no fact can be both meaning-constitutive, in the way that F-facts purport to be on MC, and action-guiding at the same time. We can then conclude that F-facts, insofar as they play the envisioned role in interpretation, cannot be action-guiding. So they are of no help in vindicating the normativity of meaning.

My target is the first premise of this argument. Before arguing against it, I’ll review the support for the second.

The argument for the second premise poses a dilemma for any view on which normative facts both determine content and guide action. One the one hand, if such facts are action-guiding they give rise to a vicious regress. On the other hand, if such facts are not genuinely action-guiding, they are idle. This is intended to be a version of the “dilemma of regress and idleness” from Quine (1935). Very briefly, the idea is that if meaning-constitutive normative facts guide action, they do so because the agent has a prior intensional state that references them. However, this prior intensional state must have its contents determined as well, so there must be normative facts that both determine its contents and guide action, so on *ad infinitum.* One can escape this regress by denying that action-guidance must proceed by prior intensional states but then we face the problem of distinguishing between merely according with a normative prescription and genuinely following it.

I have been extremely quick in presenting this reasoning, obscuring a number of relevant distinctions between sorts of regresses (Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 55-57), as well as potential options for blocking the regress by understanding action- guidance in a different manner (Boghossian 2003). The reason for my inattention is that I will now argue that even assuming that the regress shows that facts cannot be both meaning-constitutive and action-guiding, it does not follow that there is no interesting sense in which a proponent of MC could vindicate the normativity of meaning.

Perhaps the primary reason that people have been interested in the normativity of meaning is for the trouble it is thought to create for naturalistic theories of meaning. Normative properties, the thought is, aren’t naturalistically acceptable, so, if we need them to make sense of meaning-facts, then the latter aren’t naturalistically acceptable either. The suspect nature of normative properties, in turn, is thought to flow from their connection to action-guidance. For instance, if a state has a normative property S with a positive valence, it seems to follow that we have some reason to act to bring it about that the state obtains.

Now imagine two options for those suspicious of normative properties: (i) they think normative properties are naturalistically unacceptable because *every* fact involving a normative property is action-guiding, (ii) they think that normative properties are naturalistically unacceptable because *some* facts involving normative properties are action-guiding.

Whatever one thinks about naturalistic scruples in general, (ii) is the better option. If links between property-instantiation and action-guidance are naturalistically unacceptable, then a property will be naturalistically unacceptable if it *ever* exemplifies such a link.

Why would (i) be tempting? Perhaps the thought is that for the connection between action and normative properties to be puzzling, it must be necessary. Even granting this, however, does not motivate (i). Even if only some facts involving normative properties are action-guiding, the connection between those facts and action-guidance may be necessary.

Now return to our understanding of MC. The thought was that the normative facts that determine content according to MC have the form F. These seem like bad candidates to guide action, even if rationality is linked to action in other cases. However, given other links between rationality and action, the naturalistic worry would apply to *any* fact involving rationality, even those that don’t guide action.

The upshot is this. We may be suspicious of a meaning-theory of broadly naturalistic grounds solely because it invokes properties that *sometimes* guide action, even if these properties don’t play an action-guiding role in the context of the theory. So, insofar as one was interested in the normativity of meaning because it bears on the possibility of a naturalistic theory, the restriction that meaning-determining facts be genuinely action-guiding is too narrow.

The goal of this section was modest. I’ve argued merely that MC, understood as above, would vindicate the slogan that meaning is normative. We have yet to see why anyone would hold that MC is true. I’ll now turn to such arguments.

3.2 Arguing for MC from Patterns of Belief

Davidson takes MC to follow from necessary connection on having beliefs. Here is one relevant passage:

If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything (2001 (1974): 137).

Though this particular passage has an epistemic flavor, we can reasonably interpret Davidson as giving a necessary condition on having beliefs, rather than a necessary condition on our interpreting a creature as having beliefs. Let’s call a version of this principle NCB (for “necessary condition on believing”).

NCB: A necessary condition on a creature’s having beliefs at all is that they have a set of beliefs that is largely rational.

NCB, then, is intended to support MC. An argument from NCB to MC may proceed as follows. Assume that a language is meaningful, and that its speakers use utterances to communicate beliefs. Given that their beliefs are largely rational, their utterances will be as well. The fact that their utterances are rational constrains the way in which we interpret the words employed in those utterances. Thus, meaning-facts depend on facts about rationality.

As argued by Ludwig and Lepore (2005: 200-202) and Glüer (2006), there are a number of problems in arguing for MC from a principle like NCB. One reason to doubt the argument is that NCB is controversial. Another is that even if a principle like NCB is true, it is doubtful that it supports anything as strong as MC.

First, consider doubts about NCB. We may worry about it for a number of reasons. As Glüer emphasizes, NCB seems susceptible to counterexamples. Even if we cannot identify actual believers that violate NCB, surely it is epistemically possible for there to be such believers. Consider a distant planet full of believers (with very short life-spans) that systematically adopt only false beliefs. Acknowledging the epistemic possibility of counterexamples of NCB, of course, need not undermine its necessity: it may be an *a posteriori* necessity. However, Glüer emphasizes that it is hard to see what would motivate this. Even setting aside counterexamples, NCB may seem doubtful because no particular belief seems required in order to hold another one. Williamson (2008) has recently supplied us with a set of examples of competent believers that seem to lack the best candidates for belief requirements. Davidson states in a number of places that there is no particular set of beliefs required, but Williamson’s examples may convince us that no beliefs whatsoever are required.

Second, it is worth noting that even if something like NCB is true, it will not provide us with a very substantial constraint on interpretation. Insofar as there is such a constraint on belief, it must be fairly minimal. This much is entailed by the fact that, there are lots of irrational actual believers. Call a would-be believer that violates the purported constraint on belief, a “near-believer”. What NCB, if true, would allow us to do is rule out interpretations on which speakers are taken to be mere near-believers. However, there will be a large number and variety of interpretations consistent with this weak constraint.

Third, note that the route from NCB to MC was mediated by the assumption that speakers generally express their beliefs. As we all know, this is false in a variety of conversational contexts. Given the existence of these contexts, NCB will fail to support MC: the mere fact that a believer must exhibit massive and systematic agreement among their beliefs does not entail that their speech acts exhibit the same massive and systematic agreement.

3.3 Lewis and The Rationalization Principle

To vindicate a defense of MC from NCB (or a nearby principle), we need to do two things: (1) make NCB plausible and (2) make it plausible that MC follows from NCB (perhaps with auxiliary assumptions).

In his “Radical Interpretation” (1974), Lewis addresses nearly the same problem faced by Davidson’s radical interpreter. We’re provided with a rich set of physical facts about Karl, and from those facts we attempt to learn three things: Karl’s beliefs and desires as expressed in his language, Karl’s beliefs and desires as expressed in our language, and the meanings of Karl’s sentences.[[20]](#footnote-19) In Lewis’ colorful language, we want to know Karl as a person.

Lewis’ method for coming to know Karl is consonant with some of his other positions in philosophy of language and mind. In particular, in his (1970) Lewis gives us a recipe for defining theoretical terms that allows us to explicitly introduce them using only antecedently understood vocabulary. In numerous other places, Lewis claims that this model of theoretical terms can be generalized to ordinary terms such as “pain”, “red”, and “good”. The idea is that a term like “pain” is implicitly defined by the platitudes that ordinary speakers associate with the term—the folk platitudes.

Implicit definition can be made explicit by reflecting on usage and eliciting folk platitudes. We can then identify pain *via* a simple process. First, we elicit the folk pain platitudes and conjoin them, resulting on a single long sentence expressing the folk theory of pain. Second, we remove each occurrence of “pain” in that sentence and, uniformly replace it with a variable. Third, we prefix the resultant open sentence with an existential quantifier that binds each occurrence of the variable. Fourth, we look into the world and discover the satisfier of the long existentially quantified formula. Fifth, we identify that satisfier with pain.

We can use this same method to define multiple terms at once by constructing a joint folk theory and replacing each term with a different variable. So, for instance, we could give a theory of pleasure and pain partly in terms of the way they interact with one another.

Lewis uses this method to come to know Karl. His idea is that there are a number of constraints on any acceptable theory of belief, desire, and meaning that play the role of the folk platitudes in the theory of pain. Of the constraints on belief, desire, and meaning, several relate them to one another, and several relate them to physical facts. Using this method, and beginning with the physical facts, we can come to know Karl as a person by constructing a theory that satisfies the constraints.

Crucially, one of the constraints that Lewis invokes connects rationality and belief. Lewis calls this “The Rationalization Principle”. As Lewis puts it “the beliefs and desires ascribed to him…should be such to provide good reason for his behavior, as given in physical terms…” (1974: 337). The Rationalization Principle is one of the constraints on a theory of beliefs Lewis takes to implicitly define “belief”. In fact, he even goes so far to claim that The Rationalization Principle is analytic (1974: 335), though this position may be overly strong since in other work he takes it that implicit definitions need not be true in order for them to endow a term with meaning. (It suffices that there is a close-enough satisfier of them.)

However, even guaranteeing the rationality of Karl in accordance with The Rationality Principle doesn’t get us to MC, which states that rationality-facts determine meaning-facts. In order to take this extra step, recall that Lewis co-defines “belief”, “meaning”, and “desire”. Meaning, then, will be constrained by its connection to rationality facts. This is guaranteed by other constraints that Lewis introduces into the joint theory. (In particular, The Manifestation Principle.) Putting all of this together, whether an interpretation is adequate will be partially determined by an overall theory on which the behavior (including speech-acts) of speakers is rational.

So, if we were to accept Lewis’ theory, it looks as if we vindicate an intimate connection between meaning-facts and rationality-facts. Furthermore, this vindication is a close cousin of Davidson’s suggestion that some basic coherence is necessary for belief.

However, all of this still may not vindicate MC for an interesting reason. MC, as I noted, uses the deliberately cagey term “determines”. However one reads “determines”, is it natural to take it as asymmetric. If rationality facts determine meaning-facts, then, it seems, they bear some asymmetric relation to meaning-facts. More contentiously, we might say that rationality facts are more fundamental than meaning-facts. However, nothing in Lewis’ view (as I’ve sketched it) guarantees this asymmetric relationship. Meaning and belief are co-defined, and the former constrains the latter just as much as the latter constrains the former. This points to a more general distinction between ways we can theorize about meaning-facts. Ambitiously, we may wish to identify the facts that are more fundamental than meaning-facts: the facts that determine meaning-facts. Less ambitiously, we may look to ways in which meaning-facts interact with other facts. These interactions, while not providing a relatively fundamental base, can provide us with potentially interesting constraints on a theory of meaning.

Setting aside whether Lewis’ view gets us all the way to MC, the view itself is highly controversial. This isn’t the context to seriously examine Lewis’ method, so, instead, I’ll focus on just two contentious features

First, many find suspect Lewis’ commitment to definitional status of the tenets of the folk theories. Their elevated status is generated from the intimate connection between use and meaning: the idea being that the folk platitudes explicitly articulate the implicit factors that determine meaning. However, even if one agrees that use—in some way or other—determines meaning, one may well disagree that the folk platitudes play a particularly central role, or that they are definitional.

Second, even if one were to accept Lewis’ general metasemantic picture, one may doubt that The Rationalization Principle is among the folk platitudes. As already noted, it may seem to rule out intuitively possible scenarios with massive irrationality.

Noting these two contentious features of Lewis’ proposal suggests a distinct route to MC. We could try to vindicate MC by showing that it follows from general considerations about what it would take to come to know Karl, even if Lewis’ particular method is misguided. I’ll now sketch such a view.

3.4 Explanation and Constraints on Semantics

Set aside MC for a moment, and consider a distinct metasemantic thesis that has been debated recently: the claim that naturalness partly determines meaning. “Naturalness”, here, designates an objective feature of candidate meanings that familiarly distinguishes the plus function from the quus function. The former, the thought goes, is a more apt referent due to its objective naturalness. (Note, though, that the relationship between naturalness and reference is potentially much more complicated than I’ve suggested here. See Weatherson (2013) and Schwarz (forthcoming) for discussion of this in Lewis’ work.)

This thought has struck many as obscure at best, or magical at worst. Why, the thought goes, would natural properties have such magnetic powers that they attract our words?

Williams (2007) and Sider (2012) have suggested that we need not view the thesis that naturalness partly constrains interpretation as particularly mysterious. Their thought is that it flows from a more general principle: that explanatory power is a theoretical virtue along with the thesis that naturalness affects explanatory power. Take our semantic theory to partly consist of meaning-facts. A theory that attributes more natural referents, their thought is, has more explanatory power. Thus, we should prefer such a theory.

Like Lewis, we want to know Karl as a person: to know his beliefs, desires, and meanings. Now let’s say we construct a theory of Karl as a person that attributes him a system of beliefs, desires, and meanings, assuming a set of physical facts. Given these attributions, we can evaluate particular acts of Karl’s for their rationality. For instance, if we interpret Karl’s word “cat” as meaning dog, then, assuming nothing is interfering with his perceptual faculties, it seems that Karl would be far from optimally rational were he to utter “Fluffy is a cat” in the presence of Fluffy the cat. It is reasonable to wonder what explains such irrational speech acts.

Now we can make the crucial assumption: *ceteris paribus,* a theory has more explanatory power insofar as it does not attribute needless irrationality. The idea here is that part of what we want to explain is behavior, and a theory’s ability to explain behavior is diminished by attributing needless irrationality.

Why make the crucial assumption? Satisfactorily arguing for it requires another paper, but here is a sketch of a motivation. Consider a particular speech act S in which I utter the sentence "It is raining". There is a fairly straightforward sense in which that speech act could be rational: the content that I express could be supported by the evidence that I posses. Let's say that, in fact, I posses evidence that supports the proposition that it is raining (R), but not the proposition that cheese is falling from the sky (C). According to our hypothesis, we should favor the interpretation of S on which I express R. I suggested that we could justify this choice by appeal to explanation. Let me now flesh this out. Take explanation to relate facts. One reasonable indicator of an explanatory relationship is counterfactual dependence. On the interpretation according to which I express R, we can explain my speech act (or the fact that it occurs) as follows: my evidence for R explains S. Interpreting S as expressing R plausibly yields counterfactual dependence: If I didn't posses the evidence then S wouldn't have occurred. Contrastively, let's say that we interpret S as expressing C. Holding my evidence fixed, we don't have any analogous explanation. This is the sense in which I thought the principle of rationality fares better with regard to explanation.[[21]](#footnote-20)

Given that explanatory power is a theoretical virtue, we should prefer the theory on which Karl is rational. Given that our theory of Karl constrains which meaning-facts we attribute him, it seems that rationality facts constrain meaning-facts. This, then, is one way to attempt a vindication of MC.

Like Lewis’ view, the view in question links rationality to meaning by considering their dual role in a larger theory. This generates mutual constraints between rationality-facts and hypotheses about meaning. Unlike Lewis, though, the motivation here comes from general theoretical virtues, rather than contentious hypotheses about definition and folk platitudes.

Evaluating this route to MC requires substantial investigation. For now, suffice it to say that vindicating a connection between rationality facts and meaning-facts is an open possibility.

4. Three Metasemantic Projects

Let’s revisit our gloss of the slogan one last time: meaning-facts are either themselves normative, or they are related to normative facts in a way that a metasemantic theory must accommodate. We’ve been casting about, attempting to determine whether meaning and normativity are connected in such a way. It is natural to step back and examine varying metasemantic projects in conjunction with efforts to try and determine whether the relationship between meaning and normativity has theoretical import. Whether a relationship has theoretical import depends on our theoretical aims, and there are many theoretical aims one may have in considering meaning-facts. In this section I’ll consider a number of such aims. The discussion will be primarily taxonomic, suggesting connections between normativity and meaning without arguing that these connections hold.

Here are three (of many) possible metasemantic projects, which have come up in our discussion.

The Metaphysical Project: We identify the grounds of meaning-facts, and/or the facts grounded by meaning-facts.

The Epistemic Project: We attempt to explain our knowledge of meaning-facts.

The Interactionist Project: We draw connections between meaning-facts and other facts that could provide constraints on our account of meaning-facts.

These three projects are perhaps better thought of as three families of projects, since each can be pursued in a number of distinct ways

4.1 The Metaphysical Project

Already the metaphysical project can be divided into two distinct projects: to identify the grounds of meaning-facts, as well as the facts that they ground. Three further features of the project are worth mentioning.

First, as stressed by Fine (2012), those who accept that there are facts about grounding will likely also accept a layered conception of grounding. Consider a fact F with some grounds G. By the asymmetry of grounding, F doesn’t also ground G. However, for all we’ve said, G might itself be grounded by further facts H. If grounding is transitive then H also grounds G, but at a ‘lower level’ than G. This shows just how many distinct projects may be subsumed under the metaphysical project. One could attempt to identify the most fundamental grounds of meaning-facts or, alternately, one could focus on a higher layer and attempt to identify grounds in that layer. Where one focuses will be determined by their aims. For instance, if we are attempting to give a naturalistically acceptable ground for meaning-facts, we’ll focus on a layer that is, for independent reasons, taken to be naturalistically acceptable. This, however, need not be the most fundamental layer.

Second, note that we can distinguish between partial and total grounds. Intuitively, some facts provide total grounds for a further fact if they provide a complete metaphysical explanation for that fact. Partial grounds are provided by a fact if that fact can be a proper part of a metaphysical explanation. Making this distinction may affect the normativity debate. A familiar move in objecting to the normativity of meaning is to argue that meaning-facts don’t ground normative facts, because meaning-facts need to be supplemented with other facts (e.g. about the aims of speech-acts) in order to derive normative conclusions. Even if this argument works, however, it merely shows that meaning-facts don’t provide total grounds for normative facts. They may still provide partial grounds. If our aim is to identify the grounds (total or partial) of normative facts, then this connection between meaning-facts and normative facts would still impact our project.

Third, note that I’ve been making fairly free use of the notion of grounding. Here I’ve been following a recent surge of interest in the notion. Of course, many are skeptical of the notion. Grounding-skeptics can easily modify the metaphysical project by substituting grounding for whatever metaphysical relation they find acceptable: determination, supervenience, and necessitation are three likely candidates.

With these distinctions in hand we can now ask how the connections between meaning and normativity will impact the various projects. I’ve already made one remark: the fact that meaning-facts don’t themselves provide total ground for normative facts doesn’t mean that they don’t provide partial grounds.

Focus, now, one a consistent theme the literature: that we aim to provide naturalistically acceptable grounds for meaning-facts. Set aside our worries from sections 2.2-2.4 and assume that we can successfully demonstrate that meaning-facts ground normative facts. Does this show that meaning-fact are naturalistically unacceptable? Given the layered conception of reality, it need not show that at all. We would need further argumentation to show that there is no naturalistically acceptable layer that grounds both meaning-facts and normative facts. Many would be skeptical of this claim.

Now consider the connections between rationality and meaning-facts. Though we didn’t yet see an argument for it, many might find it plausible that meaning-facts are partly grounded by rationality facts. This would only impact the naturalism debate if one was worried about identifying naturalistic grounds for rationality facts. Even if it doesn’t impact the naturalism debate, the thesis that meaning-facts are grounded by rationality facts could help us place meaning-facts in their proper layer of reality: posterior to certain mental facts.

So far, I’ve considered two ways in which our discussion may impact the metaphysical project. On one reading of Kripke, meaning-facts ground normative facts. On one reading of Davidson (and Lewis) rationality facts ground normative facts. Glancing at the gloss of the metaphysical project, one may be tempted to claim that these are the only ways in which this discussion bears on the metaphysical question. This would be hasty. If meaning-facts are themselves metaphysical facts, as briefly suggested in 2.4 then we can partly assimilate the project of identifying the grounds of meaning-facts to the more general project of identifying the grounds of normative facts. Identifying grounds of meaning-facts could then be assimilated to a more general project: identifying the grounds of normativity.

4.2 The Epistemic Project

The epistemic project is to show how we can know meaning-facts. Note that I’ve used the word “can”. Certainly it is interesting to investigate how we *do* know meaning-facts, but completion of that project will require empirical work that is outside of the purview of most philosophers.

The epistemic project is of intrinsic interest to many epistemologists and philosophers of language. However, it may also be extrinsically interesting for the following two reasons. First, one popular conception of the nature of semantics attributes comprehensive and systematic knowledge of meaning to speakers. It is reasonable to think that adequate completion of that project requires showing just how speakers could come to have such substantial knowledge. Second, and more generally, those with skeptical tendencies might worry whether it is possible to have such knowledge of publically available meanings at all.

Different versions of the epistemic project may be generated by placing different restrictions on available evidence. If we are provided with a rich set of intensional facts, it may be particularly easy to see how we could come to know meaning-facts. Providing us with set of only physical facts makes it considerably harder.

Kripke is not primarily concerned with the epistemic project. Nonetheless, his discussion can be seen as making a contribution. If, as he suggests, we cannot come to know meaning-facts on basis of dispositional facts, we must widen our evidential base.

In many passages, Davidson seems explicitly interested in the epistemic project. However, as we already noted, this is complicated by the fact that, following Lewis (1974), we may take the radical interpreter to provide a sort of dramatization of the metaphysical project. That said, it is plausible that Davidson’s constraints on interpretation could play an epistemic as well as metaphysical role.

4.3 The Interactionist Project

Finally, I will turn to a less familiar project: the interactionist project. My reason for introducing the interactionist project is as follows. Even if we think that no asymmetric dependence relation has been established between normative facts and meaning-facts, and we think that the connections between meaning and rationality are epistemically and metaphysically inert, these connections may be relevant to the interactionist project. Furthermore, the interactionist project has the potential to provide a naturalistically acceptable account of meaning-facts.

Recall Lewis’ method for coming to know Karl as a person. We elicit our folk theory that connects the physical facts about Karl with his beliefs, desires, and meanings. The tenets of this theory are, according to Lewis, analytic. Once we find the best satisfiers of the theory, we’ve identified Karl’s beliefs, desires, and meanings.

In section 3.3 I identified some particularly controversial aspects of this view. We may be skeptical of the definitional status of the folk platitudes, as well as skeptical of Lewis’ view about just what they are. However, note that we need not accept either contentious assumption in order to construct a theory about Karl as a person. Let’s say we have a theory about the connections between Karl’s physical facts, beliefs, desires, and meanings. If the theory connects meaning-facts with normative facts, then that connection will constrain what we can take meaning-facts to be. It hardly matters whether this theory consists of definitional folk platitudes; perhaps it consists of true empirical generalizations. Any connection between normative facts and meaning-facts will provide a constraint on meaning-facts. Note that this constraint need not amount to grounding: even if meaning-facts don’t ground normative facts, or vice-versa, the two could be mutually constraining due to their interactions.

How could this bear on naturalism? Well, let’s say that our theory contains only naturalistically acceptable terms, except for “belief”, “desire”, and “meaning”. If that’s the case, then, following Lewis, we can interdefine our suspect terms using only naturalistically acceptable terms. Thus, we could vindicate connections between meaning and normativity (due to the theory), while at the same time showing how meaning is naturalistically acceptable (because the terms are interdefined using only naturalistically acceptable terms).

There is a more general lesson. Any hypothesized interactions between meaning and normativity has the potential to be theoretically interesting, even if the connections aren’t as intimate as determination, constitution, or grounding. Just how interesting these connections are will depend on our overall theoretical aims. I’ve mentioned one: to show that meaning-facts are naturalistically acceptable. It doesn’t take much imagination to conjure many other aims. The importance of the connections between meaning and normativity will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

5. Conclusion

There are many connections between normative facts and meaning-facts. There are many metasemantic projects. Even if the connections don’t lead to semantic skepticism, *pace* Kripke, or if rationality doesn’t place extremely strong constraints on interpretation, *pace* Davidson, we should remain optimistic that there is much to learn about meaning by focusing on its connections to normative facts. Just what there is to learn can only be discovered by further metasemantic investigation.

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1. By speaking of normativity in tandem with action, I am glossing over a potentially important distinction between norms for action and norms for being. See Glüer and Wikforss (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. My focus means that I won’t discuss a number of important views on which meaning is, in some sense, normative. Brandom (1994) is particularly influential. Important secondary work on Brandom’s view has been done by Rosen (1997 and 2001), Nickel (2013), and Whiting (2009), among others. Lance and O’Leary-Hawthorne (1998) link normativity and discourse about meaning. Byrne (2007) criticizes their view. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. As will be discussed, justification is one of several relations that Kripke takes there to be between meaning and use. Others include mandating (1982: 15) and showing (11). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Kripke writes that his book “should be thought of as expounding neither ‘Wittgenstein’s’ argument nor ‘Kripke’s’: rather Wittgenstein’s argument as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him” (1982: 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. This stipulation is substantial and potentially controversial. Kripke doesn’t usually write about expression meaning. Rather, he focuses on speaker meaning: that a particular speaker, on a particular occasion, uses an expression with a meaning. A third alternative would be to focus on occurrence meaning: what an occurrence of an expression means. I follow most critics of Kripke by focusing on meaning facts, but it is worth noting that the choice we make here has potential impact for articulating and evaluating the slogan. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. I’m making the substantial assumption that there are normative facts at all. Those who wish to resist this view could reformulate in terms of their favorite alternative. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. For rhetorical effect, I’m assuming that the copula is the locus of predication. In fact, I don’t think this is true, see Liebesman (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. One may find it somewhat anachronistic to use terms like “grounding” and “in virtue of” in characterizing the thesis that meaning is normative, given that the most influential defenders of the thesis wrote before those terms came into (back into?) prominence. As Rosen (2010) argues, though, even if the terms weren’t used it is plausible that theorists had the notions in mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Glüer and Wikforss (2010) call this the distinction between MD (meaning-determining) and ME (meaning-engendered) normativity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Both Soames (1997) and Glüer and Wikforss (2010) use “determine”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. I have been somewhat fast and loose in my presentation here. To avoid self-defeat, Kripke’s skeptic begins by assuming that our present uses of “+” express addition, and challenges non-skeptics to provide a basis for concluding that our past uses of “+” also expressed addition. Raising the initial challenge only for past uses avoids self-defeat (Soames 1997). However, once the problem has been raised for past uses, the skeptic concludes that there are no meaning-determining facts even in the present (Kripke 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. An assumption: if the concepts of meaning and of intending one function rather than another make no sense, then the concepts of meaning and intending make no sense. A justification: meaning is a word-world relation and having a concept of the relation requires having a concept of differentiating instances of the relation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. My understanding is consonant with Soames (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Note that I am labeling this argument “Kripke-inspired” rather than attributing it to Kripke. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Hattiangadi’s presentation seems to suggest that we can move from the conceptual claim to the claim about properties as follows. If there is an a priori reduction of properties, then it would hold in virtue of concepts (or at least be grasped by any competent thinker). There is no a posteriori reduction. So, since there isn’t any true conceptual claim (by the open-question argument), there isn’t any reduction at all.

    A posteriori naturalists will doubt that there is no a posteriori reduction, and optimists about the a priori will doubt that any a priori truth will be conceptual in the strong manner required to run this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Here and in other example sentences, I’ll omit the universal quantifiers that tacitly bind the variables. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Hattiangadi (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Given that rationality is gradable, we’ll likely need more subtle facts that allow us to compare degrees of rationality of speech acts given candidate interpretations. I’ll set aside that complication since it won’t matter for our purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Glüer and Wikforss (2009) is concerned with arguing against the normativity of mental content, rather than the normativity of meaning. So their argument does not directly engage with MC: hence the adaption. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. I am being a little loose with the term “meaning” here. The way in which I’m using it suggests that the meanings Lewis is after correspond to my meaning-facts. However, the correspondence isn’t perfect. When introducing meaning-facts, I explicitly used a sub-sentential example and disquoted: “dogs” means dogs. This departs from Lewis’ discussion in two ways: (1) he is focused on sentential meanings rather than the meanings of sub-sentential expressions, and (2) he is taking meaning-specification to be coarse-grained, i.e. mere specification of truth-conditions. These divergences don’t matter too much for our purposes, given that connecting Lewis’ meaning facts to rationality would suffice to vindicate a version of MC. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. As I've fleshed out the argument, there are obviously worries. I've held evidence fixed, in order to interpret speech acts. However, one may worry about interpretation of mental states in the first place, which may influence which evidence I posses. Perhaps we could even uniformly suggest a bizarre principle of mental and linguistic interpretation that correlated them in such a way that the relevant counterfactual dependencies are generated. Does this show that rationality plays no role in interpretation? I think not: all it shows is that it is not the only constraint. However, insofar as it favors interpreting S as expressing R rather than C, I think it can play some role [↑](#footnote-ref-20)