

MEANING, DISPOSITIONS, AND NORMATIVITY

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Josefa Toribio

Department of Philosophy
Washington University in St. Louis
Campus Box 1073
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, Mo., 63130

e-mail: pepa@twinearth.wustl.edu

Abstract. In a recent paper, Paul Coates defends a sophisticated dispositional account which allegedly resolves the sceptical paradox developed by Kripke in his monograph on Wittgenstein's treatment of following a rule (Kripke, 1982). Coates' account appeals to a notion of 'homeostasis', unpacked as a subject's second-order disposition to maintain a consistent pattern of extended first-order dispositions regarding her linguistic behavior. This kind of account, Coates contends, provides a naturalistic model for the normativity of intentional properties and thus resolves Kripke's sceptical paradox. In this paper I argue that Coates' second-order dispositional account *cannot* solve the sceptic's problems regarding meaning and normativity. My main contention is that in order for second-order dispositions to be able to effectively regulate the coordinated responses constitutive of first-order dispositions, those first order dispositions must be independently identifiable. Yet that's precisely what Kripke's sceptical argument calls into question. I shall also argue, in a more positive fashion, that Coates' own appeal to *practical* breakdowns may suggest a different —and more effective— response to the sceptic's concern.

Key Words: dispositions, mistake, normativity, sceptical paradox.

1. Introduction

Kripke's monograph on Wittgenstein's treatment of following a rule introduces one of the most interesting (not to say devilish) philosophical problems afflicting the development of a theory of meaning. The target of Kripke's argument is the very notion of meaning characterized as that conceptual element (rule) attached to the expressions of a language which determines their reference, and in virtue of which we can say when the expressions have been used correctly or incorrectly. In order to develop the argument, we are asked to imagine a radical sceptic who claims that, given the way I have used 'plus' in the past, and since I never performed additions with numbers greater than 57, that when faced with the new computation '68 + 57', my correct answer should be '5'. The idea is that, faced with this new addition, I should apply the same function or rule that I applied in the past. But which function is this? Since, by hypothesis, I can only invoke facts concerning myself and since I have performed only a finite number of additions in the past, how can I be sure how to go on? After all

perhaps in the past I used 'plus' and '+' to denote a function which I will call 'quus' and symbolize by '≈'. It is defined by:

$$\begin{array}{ll}
 x \approx y = x + y, & \text{if } x, y < 57 \\
 = 5 & \text{otherwise}
 \end{array}$$

(Kripke, 1982, pp. 8-9)

The problem arises since the theory can't distinguish between someone *mistakenly* using a word and someone (*correctly*) meaning something completely different when using that word. As Kripke likes to put it, the problem is that there doesn't seem to be a fact of the matter about the speaker's mental states or (occurrent or dispositional) behavior that justifies her meaning e. g. plus by 'plus' instead of some other bizarre function.

Kripke is particularly interested in showing how a dispositional account cannot possibly solve the sceptical paradox. He summarizes his objections against dispositional accounts as follows (Kripke, 1982, p. 28):

if the dispositionalist attempts to define which function I meant as the function determined by the answer I am disposed to give for arbitrarily large arguments, he ignores the fact that my dispositions extend to only finitely many cases. If he tries to appeal to my responses under idealized conditions that overcome this finiteness, he will succeed only if the idealization includes a specification that I will still respond, under these idealized conditions, according to the infinite table of the function I actually meant. But then the circularity of the procedure is evident. The idealized dispositions are determinate only because it is already settled which function I meant.

In a recent paper Paul Coates has argued against the soundness of Kripke's arguments (Coates, 1997). Coates believes that the difficulties Kripke encounters in the dispositional account he sketches are just the natural consequence of its simplicity. A more sophisticated dispositionalist view, Coates contends, can meet the sceptic's challenge and thus provide both a naturalistic basis for the normativity of intentional properties and a necessary condition for differentiating between original and derived intentionality. The sophistication of the account consists in the appeal to second-order dispositions. The idea is based on an analogy with the notion of homeostasis. Second-order dispositions seek to maintain a consistent pattern of *extended* first-order dispositions (see below) regarding linguistic behavior, much as a thermostat (or other homeostatic device) might maintain a consistent room temperature.

In this paper I argue that Coates' sophisticated dispositional account cannot solve Kripke's sceptic's problems regarding meaning and normativity. I claim that, in order for second-order dispositions to be able to 'homeostatically' regulate the coordinated responses constitutive of first-order dispositions, the content of the first order dispositions must already be fixed, and that's precisely what the

sceptic challenges. Coates' proposal thus begs the question against the sceptic. I shall proceed like this. First, I will analyze the notion of homeostasis upon which Coates' proposal is built and show that the tendency to maintain internal stability in an organism by automatically compensating for environmental changes only makes sense on the assumption that the target environmental parameters can be independently determined. I then criticize the very notion of a second-order semantic disposition and show that, however interpreted, it cannot undermine Kripke's original argument against basic dispositionalist accounts. I finally argue, in a more positive fashion, that Coates' appeal to *practical* breakdowns might yet suggest a different, but more effective, response to the sceptical concerns. I have no interest, however, in criticizing Kripke's own argument, either on its own or from the point of view of its accuracy as an interpretation of Wittgenstein's original remarks. The structure of my argument is basically: if Kripke's arguments against the simple dispositionalist are sound, then increasing the complexity of the dispositional position doesn't undermine those arguments.

2. The Problem(s)

According to Coates, Kripke's response to the dispositionalist (which he calls the 'mistake objection') contains four distinct arguments: (i) the 'justification objection', which suggests that the dispositionalist cannot explain 'what it is that justifies a person in using words in the way she does at a given time' (Coates, 1997, p. 173) nor what constitutes a person's intention to maintain a constant meaning across time. Coates calls these two different aspects of the problem the extension and the aiming problem respectively (see below); (ii) the 'bent rule objection', which points out that the dispositionalist cannot rule out the possibility of an agent suddenly altering her use of a word in a quus-like fashion; (iii) the 'derived intentionality objection', which challenges the dispositionalist to find objective facts about the states of a machine

in virtue of which we can decide whether it is malfunctioning or just following a different function; and, finally, (iv) the 'systematic mistake objection', which states that the dispositionalist cannot give an account of the difference between an agent uniformly and repeatedly making a mistake about the meaning of a word (even when all her physical conditions and the conditions of her environment are optimal) and an agent meaning something completely different by that word.

I believe that, despite all these subdivisions, the dispositionalist *really* faces a single problem, but I will not argue for that explicitly. Instead I will target the so-called justification objection because Coates' attempts to show how a sophisticated dispositionalist account can resolve Kripke's other objections are just variations of the argument he uses against the justification problem. As I said, Coates presents the objection in two different ways: as involving an extension problem and an aiming problem.

The extension problem is not just the problem of fixing the reference/extension of a term. The way Coates formulates it suggest that the extension problem is the problem of fixing the *meaning* (both extension and intension) of a term for a speaker at a given time:

[t]hus one problem with the crude dispositional account is that it gets the extension of a term wrong, by failing to allow that what a person *means* by a term and *how she is in practice disposed to use that term* may diverge ... I shall refer to [this aspect of the justification objection] as 'the extension problem'.

(Coates, 1997, p. 174, my emphasis)

However, the extension problem is not the only one involved in Kripke's response to the dispositionalist. There is also what Coates, following Sartorelli (1991), calls the aiming problem, namely, how to account for a speaker's intention to keep the meaning of a word constant across time. In Sartorelli's words, the

normativity of meaning involves two aspects: determining the speaker's target (Coates' extension problem), and determining the speaker's *intention* to aim at the target (Coates' aiming problem) (Sartorelli, 1991, p. 81). If Coates is right, there are thus two distinct dimensions to the sceptical paradox: one concerns how to fix the speaker's target (meaning) when she uses a word, the other concerns the speaker's intention to aim at the same target over time.

According to Kripke, there are two conditions that any response to the sceptic has to meet. The challenge is (a) to find a fact of the matter about the user of a term that constitutes her meaning one thing rather than other and (b) to show that the identification of such a fact constitutes a justification of her use of the term as correct. Following Kripke's example, we have to find a fact of the matter about the agent that constitutes her having meant plus by 'plus' rather than quus and a justification of why '125' is the right answer to '68 + 57' instead of '5'.

Coates attempts to meet these two conditions by defending a sophisticated dispositional account of meaning that operates at two different levels. First-order dispositions are the input-out functions describing a system's behavior at a given time. Extended first-order dispositions are then the input-out functions describing a system's behavior, including 'those she would repeat after checking' (p. 175). The full repertoire of a system's extended first-order dispositions, according to Coates, fixes the meaning of the terms the system uses. Second-order dispositions, on the other hand, are Coates' solution to the aiming problem. They allegedly keep extended first-order dispositions constant across time. Second-order dispositions are thus introduced to account for that aspect of meaning to which Sartorelli draws attention when he talks about the need to determine the speaker's *intention* to aim at the target.

In analyzing the plausibility of Coates' proposal we thus face a double task. Since extended first-order dispositions are put forward as constituting the fact of the matter regarding the user's meaning plus by 'plus' (instead of quus), we will have to see whether and how those extended first-order dispositions can constitute the speaker's meaning one thing rather than other. Secondly, we will have to see

how the identification of second-order dispositions can constitute a justification of the speaker's correct use of 'plus' when faced with the new computation '68 + 57', i.e. we have to show how an appeal to second-order dispositions justifies that '125' as the right answer to that computation. I shall argue that neither of these burdens can be discharged by a second-order dispositionalist account. I will first approach the topic from the point of view of the cyberneticist's use of the notion of homeostasis. I will then move on to more philosophical ground.

3. Homeostasis.

Coates glosses the central idea of his treatment in the following way:

The basic idea ... is that for a person (or more generally, any system) to mean something by her responses, the dispositions governing the pattern of those responses must be subject to something analogous to "homeostasis"

(Coates, 1997, p. 172)

The general idea, as it is developed later in the paper, is that we can identify an agent's (here and now) commitment to a certain pattern of future use of a word as "essentially supervening upon a *second-order* disposition to maintain the *first-order* dispositions governing [its] use" (Coates, 1997, p. 181). The analogy with something like homeostasis is thus clear. A homeostatic process (the term was originally coined by Walter Cannon (1932) in a physiological text) is one in which some aspect of a system's behavior is *kept in line* by some combination of feedback and corrective activity. For example, the temperature of the human body is homeostatically regulated so as to remain (under most conditions) within highly constrained limits. If it begins to diverge from the acceptable range, biological alarm bells sound and a variety of compensatory mechanisms come into play.

The notion of homeostasis was also prominent in the cybernetics literature of the forties and fifties (see e.g. Ashby (1952) (1956)) Norbert Wiener, in the pioneering (1948) text *Cybernetics: Of Control and Communication in the Animal and The Machine* notes that:

A great group of cases in which some sort of feedback is not only exemplified in physiological phenomena, but is absolutely essential for the continuation of life, is found in what is known as homeostasis. The conditions under which life, especially healthy life, can continue in the higher animals, are quite narrow ... the osmotic pressure of the blood and its hydrogen-ion concentration must be held within strict limits ... our heart rate and blood pressure must be neither too high nor too low ... In short, our inner economy must contain an assembly of thermostats, automatic hydrogen-ion concentration controls, governors and the like, which could be adequate for a great chemical plant

(Wiener, 1948, p. 135)

A little reflection, however, on the operation of any familiar homeostatic regulator will show that the appeal to (anything at all like) homeostasis cannot (on pain of magic or circularity) feature in a principled rebuttal of the sceptical challenge concerning meaning. To see why, consider a basic thermostat: just about the maximally simple case of a device capable of homeostatically regulating some property (viz., the temperature of a room). A typical thermostat works, in part, by exploiting the uneven rates of expansion (in response to temperature) of two metals (brass and iron) welded together into a bi-metallic strip. The brass expands at about twice the rate of the iron and so the strip bends, in the direction of the iron side, as heat increases. As the heat drops, the strip bends back in the direction of the brass. It is fixed at one end, and the other makes and breaks an electrical circuit according to the degree of bend. When you manually set the target temperature, you physically shift the position of the electrical contact, thus altering

the degree of bend (and hence the temperature) needed to make and break the circuit. As a result, when the temperature falls below the target, the heating is activated until the pre-set temperature is reached. At this point the bend in the strip no longer makes the required contact and the heating is shut off, until some future temperature drop causes the strip to bend back in the direction of the brass, close the circuit, and start the whole self-regulating process all over again.

Now, consider the case of the agent who (according to Coates) deploys something akin to homeostatic regulation to maintain the consistent use of a term despite occasional fluctuations (due to perceptual error or bad lighting conditions or whatever). For the trick to work, the system (in this case the agent) must have some way of knowing when a fluctuation has occurred. For it is her second-order disposition to identify and correct her own (first-order) fluctuation that constitutes, on Coates' account, the determinate fact about what she means when she uses a term. In the case of thermostatic control, temperature fluctuations physically cause the bending of the bi-metallic strip that, in turn, regulates the heating and thus drives the system back to the target temperature. How is this to work in the case of meaning?

There are, it seems to me, just three options. First, it is magic. Second, the fluctuation is detected because the agent *knows* what she intended the term to mean, and is thus able to recognize a given usage as deviant. Or third, the fluctuation is signaled by some breakdown in practical activity. Let's rule out magic (although, in fact, magical homeostasis is exactly what the argument requires!). What about option 2 —the detection of a mismatch between *intended* and actual patterns of use? There are several passages where Coates seems to suggest something like this (e.g. passages on pp. 179, 183 and 186-187). The clearest of these passages is probably the following:

Roughly speaking, the extension of the term that a subject *understands* is fixed by her extended first-order dispositions; whereas the fact that the subject takes that extension as

providing the standard to aim for ... is fixed by her ... second-order dispositions to maintain those first-order dispositions.

(Coates, 1997, pp. 181-182)

Now, it is difficult to see how *extended* first-order dispositions could be held accountable for fixing the fact of the matter regarding the subject's meaning plus by 'plus' (instead of quus) *on their own*. The only difference between crude first-order dispositions and Coates' extended version is that the latter, but not the former, seem to rely on some kind of feed-back from the environment which would alter the input-out functions responsible for the subject's behavior. But, in order for that for that feed-back to take place, the second-order dispositions must already be in place.

In other words, it is pretty clear that the subject's intention, at time t_0 cannot be used as the comparison point to alert her to a deviation at time t_1 . For the whole point of the sceptical argument is to show that there can be nothing in the agent's current (at any time) intention that determines one future pattern of use as correct and another as a (corrigible) fluctuation. Coates talks, worryingly, of the subject 'aiming at consistency" (p. 187). But to appeal to introspective awareness of meaning is simply to reject the sceptical conclusion, not to offer any kind of counter-argument. What we need is some clue as to *in what* such "aiming" might consist, and the suggestion is that aiming is grounded precisely by second-order dispositions (p. 181):

It is the emphasis it places on the role of second-order dispositions that distinguishes the sophisticated dispositional proposal from its cruder predecessor.

So, it seems that, deep down, (and despite the talk about extended first-order dispositions) Coates is aware that the real challenge for his account is to describe some kind of non-introspection based way in which the agent might recognize unwanted fluctuations in her patterns of use, and hence activate a

second-order ("homeostatic") disposition to bring her own performance back into line. Coates' principal suggestion —the third option mentioned above— is that breakdowns in practical activity provide just such non-introspective evidence (of improper fluctuation). Thus we read (p. 178) of a "tendency to correct errors when, roughly speaking, things turn out adversely". For example, when you try to ride the cow you had accidentally taken to be a horse, or when your woodworking project fails because your calculations have been made using a deviant notion of "plus" (pp. 178-179).

As far as I can see, such appeals to practical breakdown constitute the only real candidate, in Coates' treatment, for a reliable signal able to trip some kind of self-regulating mechanism. But it should be clear that such practical signals are, ultimately, unable to fulfill such a role. For they could *only* fulfill that role if the agent is able to distinguish between breakdowns traceable to her failure to maintain a first-order disposition to use a word in such-and-such a way, and breakdowns traceable to innocent and non-semantic causes (such as a (real) horse being lively, or one piece of wood expanding because it got damp, and so on). Call this the "assignment of blame problem". The assignment of blame problem, I suggest, is soluble only if we simply *assume* that the original sceptical argument fails. For it is only if the agent can be relied upon to know how her original intentions *should* fix a pattern of future usage, that she can recognize a case of breakdown as rooted in deviation from that pattern.

In short, there is nothing in Coates' scenario capable of playing the role of an *independently recognizable signal* that the system is deviating from its pre-set semantic target. There is, to put it bluntly, no meaning-sensitive bi-metallic strip able to signal fluctuation when it occurs. Nor, as far as I can see, is it *possible* for there to be such an independently recognizable signal. But without one, the appeal to a second-order "homeostatic" disposition adds nothing to either the simple or the extended first-order case. So *if* the sceptical argument works in the first-order case (as Coates seems

willing to accept), the ascent to higher-order dispositions merely adds another wheel, spinning in the void.

4. Mistakes

I next approach the same issue circumventing the notion of homeostasis, and with more attention to Coates' specifically philosophical proposal. Coates provides a set of three necessary conditions that have to be met for a subject (S) to mean a feature (P) by a term ('F') at a given time T_0 :

1. The extended dispositions of S at T_0 are to apply the term 'F' only to input from P
and
2. S has a second-order disposition at T_0 to maintain those extended dispositions in respect of 'F'.
- ...
- (3) The second-order disposition that S has at T_0 must be sufficiently robust.

(Coates, 1997, pp. 182-183)

The key questions remain the same: to block the sceptical conclusion, we have to show what constitutes the fact of matter that allows us to say that S means P (rather than Q), and how the identification of such a fact constitutes a justification of 'F' being the right term to use. What we want, in other words, is to know how these three conditions allow us to move from the descriptive arena of dispositions to the normative terrain of how the subject *ought* to use the term 'F'. Coates is pretty explicit about this:

The answer consists in the fact that I committed myself to using the word consistently, and that this commitment was grounded in a robust second-order disposition to be consistent in my first-order dispositions to use the term.

(Coates, 1997, p. 183)

Now dispositions, classically understood, are always dispositions *to behave*. It makes sense to opt for a dispositionalist account when trying to provide a naturalistic explanation of

intentional properties because in appealing to dispositions we are appealing to concepts which are not themselves intentional. First-order dispositions are given by the input-output function describing the system's behavior and therefore it is clear that they fit this characterization. However, it is not clear that second-order dispositions are dispositions in this sense. The main difficulty involving this notion can be formulated in the form of a dilemma each of whose horns reveals apparently insurmountable problems with Coates' sophisticated dispositional proposal.

On the one hand, if second-order dispositions are dispositions to behave, and since Coates seems to agree that Kripke's argument against *simple* dispositionalist proposals is sound¹, it is difficult to see how the introduction of *more* dispositions (even if they belong to a higher level) can avoid Kripke's criticisms. What the sceptic is demanding is the specification of a non-semantic fact such that (a) it will determine what a subject means by any given word and (b) it will also determine what the subject ought to do—how she ought to use any given word—in each new instance. The simple dispositionalist account that Kripke analyzes does not meet these conditions because it keeps the relation of meaning and intention to future action at the behavioral descriptive level. But even if second-order dispositions were somehow to determine what a subject means by a given word, second-order dispositions cannot determine how the subject *ought* to use the word since the subject could be second-order disposed to maintain first-order dispositions to do all kind of things (e.g. to make systematic mistakes) and yet there is only one thing that she *ought* to do.

On the other hand, if second-order dispositions are not really dispositions to behave, but dispositions *to mean* (to mean precisely such-and-such whenever I have the first-order dispositions to use a given term in a particular way), then the very point of introducing such sophisticated dispositions has been defeated. Second-order dispositions become mental acts and as such they are again a proper target for Kripke's sceptical argument. The goal of providing a *naturalistic* explanation of intentional properties cannot possibly be reached.

The way in which Coates characterizes the fact about what kind of first-order dispositions the subject's second-order dispositions keep stable seems to favor the latter interpretation. We are told that second-order dispositions allow the subject to be consistent in her first-order dispositions to use a term. Second-order dispositions are indeed introduced in order to account for what Sartorelli sees as one of the two elements of the normativity of meaning, namely, the subject's *intention* to use a word with the same meaning she used it in the past. But surely such a characterization of second-order dispositions is itself intentional (consistency being a paradigmatic semantic notion) and also circular. In order to maintain, in a *consistent* way, my first-order dispositions to use a word in new instances, we already have to know what semantic property is instantiated by the subject's first-order dispositions. If Kripke's argument is right, then Coates' introduction of second-order dispositions simply cannot solve the problem, since it effectively begs the question against the sceptic.

5. Mechanisms, Reiteration and Ordinary Observational Terms

Even if we assume that second-order dispositions do somehow play the regulating role that Coates has assigned to them, and that they do this in a reliable, efficient (and suitably fallible) fashion, we still don't know *how* that is possible. Looking for mechanisms at the physical level will not do the job since physical mechanisms are just causal and the sceptic's challenge is precisely to show what it is that allows us to differentiate between someone using a term correctly but making a mistake (i.e., the mechanisms are malfunctioning) and someone using the term in a deviant or bizarre fashion (the mechanisms work fine but the output is still not 'right'). Notice, in this regard, that Coates never really tells us what *kind* of mechanisms could explain how second-order dispositions are successful in performing their function. We can, however, find some

clues in some of the examples he uses as illustrations of his main thesis.

The main theme in all these illustrations is that, at least in the case of simple terms used to refer to ordinary observable properties (more about this below), environmental impacts upon the subject will guarantee that the relevant dispositions are corrected and kept in line. We can adapt one of Coates' examples to display this point. Let's first see how Coates introduces the example:

... in the mathematical case, the subject will have dispositions to use the word 'plus', again sometimes mistakenly. But she may find out, for example, in doing some carpentry in isolation, that certain calculations which she wrote down have led her astray: two lengths of wood do not match as had been expected, giving her the motive to check and revise her earlier employment of 'plus'. In this manner a person's extended dispositions will tend, in many cases, to lead her own use of a term to coincide with the correct one.

(Coates, 1997, p. 178)

If I understand Coates correctly, the point of this argument is that one could stop the sceptic's move by using the environment as a kind of ultimate *normative check point*. Second-order dispositions keep stable those first-order dispositions that don't lead us completely astray when dealing with practical aspects of our environment. Thus, for example, imagine that I am paneling the floor of my study and I know that I need a piece of wood 125 inches long. I don't have a piece that is that long but I have shorter ones. I measure their length and I find out that I have one which is 68 inches long and another which is 57 inches long. When I add '68 + 57' to find out whether those two pieces of wood would have the same length as the space I want to cover, I am justified in saying that '125' is the right answer. The correct answer couldn't possibly be —despite the sceptic's claims— '5' because I can see that the length of my two pieces of wood together is the same length as the

space I want to cover. This is incompatible with the hypothesis that I meant quus when adding 68 and 57.

Now, what Coates seems to ignore all through his paper is that the sceptical argument must be reiterated in cases like the one just mentioned. The sceptic should question my present interpretation of my past uses of e.g. 'length' and 'same' just as he did with the present interpretation of my past uses of 'plus'. He can thus claim that whenever I used the expression 'length' in the past I really meant *quength* where the 'quength' of an item is the same as its length unless it is longer than 57 inches in which case it is 5 inches long. The space I am trying to cover is thus 5 inches long and so is the length of my two pieces of wood together. '5' is thus the right answer and not '125'.

Of course the sceptic's proposal gets increasingly wild. But, as Kripke says: 'Wild it indubitably is, no doubt it is false; but if it is false, there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it. For although the hypothesis is wild, it does not seem to be *a priori* impossible' (Kripke, 1982, p. 9). The fact about my past usage that Coates cites is, of course, the fact about *extended* first-order dispositions or (equivalently) first-order dispositions kept stable by second-order dispositions. However, as I have already argued, in order to keep the first-order dispositions constant, we must already know what semantic property is exhibited by the subject's first-order dispositions!

What seems to lie behind Coates' faith in the power of the environment is his conviction that the sceptic's challenge does not apply throughout language, and that it is only possible to make systematic mistakes when using terms that are somehow abstract or that, at least, involve some kind of calculation. Thus, for 'ordinary observational terms' like 'green' or even like 'counting', the idea that an agent could uniformly and repeatedly make a mistake about the meaning of a word, Coates argue, doesn't make sense. Coates' defense takes the form of a dilemma: either the environmental conditions force the truth upon the agent (as when she tries to bite an apple that's made of rubber) thereby blocking the propagation of the mistake, or there is, after all, no mistake whatsoever. Instead

what that situation shows is that the person using the term has attached a completely different meaning to the term and she is using the word *correctly* according to *that* meaning: 'Speakers whose responses deviate in a systematic fashion from others still attach a fixed meaning to their words. By their own standards, their meanings are determinate —it is just that their meanings differ from those of normal speakers of the language' (Coates, 1997, p. 191).

But neither line works as a reply to the sceptic, since Coates is now taking for granted precisely what the sceptic is questioning, namely, the possibility of *attaching a fixed meaning* to a word by appealing to facts about the subject's mental states or behavior. Indeed, examples such as Coates' are extensively criticized by Kripke as clear failures of the dispositionalist against the sceptic. In the case of 'counting' Coates thus seems to have completely missed Kripke's point, since he describes the sceptic as acknowledging that the concept of addition can be characterized using more basic notions such as counting (cf. Coates, 1997, p. 193). This is, however, what Kripke has to say about such a proposal:

... the sceptic can question my present interpretation of my past usage of 'count' as he did with 'plus'. In particular, he can claim that by 'count' I formerly meant *quount*, where to 'quount' a heap is to count it in the ordinary sense, unless the heap was formed as the union of two heaps, one of which has 57 or more items, in which case one must automatically give the answer '5' ... if 'plus' is explained in terms of 'counting', a non-standard interpretation of the latter will yield a non-standard interpretation of the former.

(Kripke, 1982, p. 16)

The same kind of argument can be applied to observational terms such as 'green', as it is in Goodman's argument (cf. Goodman, 1973, especially ch. III, § 4, pp. 72-81. See also Fetzer, 1993, pp. 30-33). As in the case the woodworking failure, all the sceptic needs is to iterate the original argument again and again, applying it to any words used to characterize the meaning attached to e.g. 'green':

Perhaps by 'green', in the past I meant *grue*, and the color image, which indeed was *grue*, was meant to direct me to apply the word 'green' to *grue* objects always. If the *blue* object before me now is *grue*, then it falls in the extension of 'green', as I meant it in the past. It is no help to suppose that in the past I stipulated that 'green' was to apply to all and only those things 'of the same color as' the sample. The sceptic can reinterpret 'same color' as same *schmolor*, where things have the same *schmolor* if ...

(Kripke, 1982, p.20)

It might seem that in mentioning Goodman's 'grue' example, or in invoking Kripke's application of the sceptic paradox to observational terms such as 'green', I have simply overlooked Coates' claim that this problem is independent of the issues raised by the sceptic (p. 190). Coates claims that for observational terms such as 'green', and also for what he calls 'ordinary words', what the subject means when she uses those terms is fixed by her extended dispositions to linguistically behave in a given way. So, if a speaker uses 'green' in a systematically bizarre way, she is still attaching a fixed meaning to 'green'; it is just that this meaning of 'green' differ from the normal speaker's meaning of 'green'. The problem, Coates contends, doesn't fall under the sceptical umbrella: "[t]he problem raised by these cases is a problem about how the meanings of different speakers mesh together" (p. 191). The difference between a term like 'plus' and a term like 'green', we are told later, lies in the fact that a term like 'plus' is "governed by recursive rules to which we have introspective access and which we use in calculating. A term like 'plus' relates an indefinitely large range of differing inputs to correspondingly different outputs ... In contrast, for a term like 'green', the input-output relation connects one kind of input — wavelength of a certain range— with one type of output, the utterance of the term" (p. 192).

But I don't see how this issue could be considered *completely* independent of Kripke's sceptic move. After all, even if we agree

with Coates that the problem is one of different meanings "meshing together", we still have to find some normative criteria which determine how to individuate those different meanings in the first place, and that's precisely Kripke's sceptic's problem. To add that the difference between abstract terms such as 'plus' and observational terms such as 'green' is based on the existence or not of some set of recursive rules that the subject introspectively checks does not really help since, even for "ordinary words" such as 'green', we still need some account of when the speaker is using them correctly. To assume, as Coates seems to do, that in the case of e.g. 'green', the matter of fixing the meaning is just one of connecting input to output (perception to utterance) is to undermine the normativity implicit in the very notion of (ordinary word) meaning. In other words, to say that speakers whose responses deviate in a systematic fashion from others attach a fixed (but different) meaning to their terms is just to conflate performance and correctness (cf. Kripke, 1982, p. 24). No matter how consistently and how systematically I give the answer '5' to '57 + 68', my answer is wrong, and the same is the case for 'green' if I consistently and systematically apply 'green' to objects which are blue and round. To claim that if I answer that way repeatedly and systematically, I am just meaning something different by 'plus' or 'green' is precisely to grant the sceptic's argument. Once that step is taken, we can say there is nothing about the agent that we can invoke such that it will determine when the agent is wrongly following a particular rule rather than correctly following a completely different one. So, if Kripke's arguments against the dispositionalist are sound, then Coates' sophisticated dispositionalist account doesn't do anything to stop the sceptic's move.

6. Some positive thoughts, and a conclusion

Coates' sophisticated dispositionalist account cannot, it seems, ultimately defeat the sceptic's devastating argument. I would like to end, nonetheless, by exploring some more positive options. In

particular, I think there may be a better way to exploit Coates' pragmatic idea of 'things going wrong' in the environment. The use Coates makes of this idea (as in the woodwork or the cow/horse examples) has two faults: the reference to the environment is purely physical (the social aspect of the environment is never appealed to) and there is a presupposition that it's only when the meaning we attach to the words fails to 'fit' the external environment that our projects fail (begging the question against the sceptic). However, if we remove these two elements, we find ourselves very close to what Kripke himself calls the sceptical *solution* to the paradox (a solution notably lacking in reference to second-order dispositions).

The solution is called 'sceptical' because it concedes the central sceptical point: if we seek to justify our linguistic practices by appeal to facts about individuals' mental states, or behaviors, or dispositions to behave, we are doomed. But although *that* kind of justification is untenable, we may not need it after all. We won't need it if we can show that the justification of an agent's linguistic behavior looks beyond the isolated agent. The environment counts, but it's the *social* environment that is most relevant. The justification we are looking for comes from the network of social responses of the community in which the individual is embedded. The game of ascribing concepts like 'plus' is thus rooted in a network of social practices and commitments to act in a certain way. There is no hidden conceptual element attaching meanings to words. We don't display co-ordinated responses to new problems involving previously used concepts ('68 + 57') because we share a conceptual element attached to 'plus'. Rather, to say of someone that she means plus by 'plus' is to locate her in a web of social patterns, regularities and interests; a web characteristic of the community to which she belongs.

Coates' appeal to the environment seems to factor out such social-practical aspects of the justification of our linguistic behavior. When he talks about 'things turning out adversely', he is seeking a reliable signal able to drive some kind of self-regulating mechanism. But since the notion of the environment that is invoked doesn't include other people, or indeed any social factor, we remain at the

mercy of the sceptic, i.e., we are left seeking the justification of our linguistic practices in the realm of facts about individuals². Hence all the problems discussed in the present text.

Of course, it might be argued that my own qualified endorsement of the sceptical solution ignores the point made by Hoffman (1985), Boghossian (1989), and Blackburn (1984) —among others— that by relying on the *social* environment for justification, the account becomes circular³. In fact, I think that the only way of avoiding the threat of circularity mentioned by Coates and suggested by these authors is *precisely* to treat normativity as ineliminable from semantics and to understand it as immanent in ('instituted by') practical activities in a social world. In other words, the circularity is avoided by taken the social environment as the primary locus of normativity and accounting for the normativity involved in the individual's use of language in a derivative way (see e.g. Brandom, 1994). I have argued elsewhere that reductive attempts to naturalize semantics, i.e., attempts to naturalize semantics following a higher-to-lower explanatory strategy cannot, ultimately, make contact with the normative features of meaning their advocates are trying to explain. Either that or they become circular by impregnating the merely physical with normative notions that don't belong there (see Toribio, 1998. Coates' sophisticated dispositionalist account belongs to this latter kind).

But in the end, it boils down to this: if Kripke's arguments against the simple dispositionalist are sound (as Coates concedes), then increasing the complexity of the dispositional position does nothing to undermine those arguments. If there is a solution to the sceptical paradox at all, it may well involve some kind of appeal to successful environmental activity; but only if the environment and activities include not just the physical world in which the individual is embedded but also, and crucially, the social forces and structures which surround her. The direct appeal to second order dispositions cannot help resolve the sceptical paradox⁴.

Notes

1 See e.g. p. 184: "Now if the past fact which justifies my present response was simply my first-order disposition to use a word in a certain way, then we would be unable to distinguish the case where I mean to use '*' to apply to a specific function, and the case where I mean to use '*' randomly".

2 In fact, Coates seems surprisingly comfortable with the idea of a 'private language' and with the possibility of purely individualistic facts about meaning: 'In choosing an example where an individual may be considered in isolation from any community I do not deny that the situation is different when social pressures persuade us to use words with the same meanings as our peers. But on the dispositional account, *it is a contingent matter* that a commitment to mean something is normally stronger in the case of the use of public language' (Coates, 1997, p. 184, my italics).

3 Coates mentions this point in footnote 4 of the paper.

4 Thanks to Jim Fetzer and an anonymous referee for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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