

On Epistemic Conceptions of Meaning: Use, Meaning and Normativity

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The definitive version of this article is published in *European Journal of Philosophy* by Blackwell Publishing, and is available at www.blackwellsynergy.com.

1 Introduction

A number of prominent philosophers advance the following ideas:

- (1) Meaning is use.
- (2) Meaning is an intrinsically normative notion.

Call (1) the *use thesis*, hereafter UT, and (2) the *normativity thesis*, hereafter NT.

They come together in the view that for a linguistic expression to have meaning is for there to be certain proprieties governing its employment.¹

These ideas are often associated with a third:

- (3) The norms governing the use of linguistic expressions and constitutive of their meanings are epistemic.

This leads immediately to what one might call, following Skorupski (1997: 29), an *epistemic conception of meaning*, hereafter EM. While certain versions of EM—specifically, Dummett's—have come under pressure in recent years, others remain widespread and receive little critical attention.

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In what follows, I shall expand upon each of the above ideas. Next, I shall present a reason for thinking that EM is problematic. I do not take it alone to refute the view, but at least to motivate a reassessment of it. Accordingly, I then turn to the arguments in its support and suggest that they are not cogent. This is the principal task of the paper.

To anticipate, I shall suggest that EM involves a certain kind of act/object or -ing/-ed confusion. A point emerging from this diagnosis is that one can accept UT and NT (and indeed several other putative insights) without thereby accepting EM. That is, one can continue to view the meaning of an expression as given by norms governing its use without taking those norms to be epistemic in nature.

2 UT, NT and EM

In several places, Wittgenstein remarks that ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (1967: §43), that the ‘use of the word *in practice* is its meaning’ (1969: 69; cf. 1975: §61). Whether or not one views this as gesturing at a ‘theory’ of meaning, or instead as aiming primarily at dissuading us from certain misconceptions of language that are a source of puzzlement, it is clear that Wittgenstein held that for certain purposes the meaning of an expression could profitably be characterised as its use.

Several contemporary philosophers endorse UT.² While I shall not argue for it here, it is intuitively attractive; it promises to remove perplexity concerning how expressions come to have the meanings that they do—i.e. by acquiring a distinctive role in a linguistic practice—and makes sense of the fact that we attribute understanding to speakers and meaning to expressions on the basis of how those speakers employ those expressions.³

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If one accepts UT, there appears to be good reason to equate the meaning of an expression, not with how it is as a matter of fact employed, but with how it is *properly* employed. Although for present purposes I shall take this claim for granted,⁴ it can be motivated by the observation that, in employing a term in a certain way, a speaker can act *incorrectly*; she can make *mistakes*. While this is not decisive, it gives prima facie reason to think that meaning is an intrinsically normative notion, that a statement of an expression's meaning follows immediately from a statement concerning how that expression should, may or ought to (not) be used (and vice versa). Wright endorses this putative insight:

Meaning is normative. To know the meaning of an expression is to know, perhaps unreflectively, how to appraise uses of it; it is to know a set of constraints to which uses must conform (1993: 24).

This 'broadly Wittgensteinian conception of meaning', he says, 'is familiar (and vague) enough to strike most people now as a harmless platitude' (1993: 247). I shall pick up on three ideas expressed in this comment.

First, NT is indeed 'Wittgensteinian'. Waismann records the remark that 'the meaning of a sign is the effect which it *should* have [...] not the effect that it will have' (Wittgenstein and Waismann 2003: 343). Elsewhere, Wittgenstein stresses that 'there exists a correspondence between the concepts "rule" and "meaning"' (1975: §62; cf. 1967: §108; cf. 1978: VI §29). Second, NT is certainly accepted, if not by 'most', then by a significant number of philosophers.⁵ Nevertheless, and third, NT is 'vague'. As Wikforss comments, 'despite extensive discussions of the topic it remains obscure exactly what the normativity thesis amounts to' (2001: 203-4).⁶

One glaring lack of clarity concerns what *kind* of norm governs the employment of an expression. Evidently, the use of a word might be subject to an indefinite number of standards—moral, prudential, customary—which have nothing

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of relevance to do with meaning. A widespread assumption is that, if there are norms pertaining to the meanings of expressions, they are fundamentally *epistemic*.

Typically, epistemic propriety concerns one's justification for *believing* that such-and-such is the case. However, this does not get us far as one might have all sorts of justification for believing something. One might be *morally* justified in holding a belief, for example, if doing so furthers a good cause. The relevant sense of justification is one that, perhaps when certain other conditions are met, provides *knowledge*. Evidently, however, if the norms picked out by NT are supposed to concern the use of linguistic expressions, they cannot be norms governing the formation of belief; rather, they would be norms for *asserting* that such-and-such is the case, for making a *claim* to knowledge.

If one thinks, first, that an expression's possessing meaning consists in its having a use that is subject to norms and, second, that those norms are epistemic, one arrives at EM.⁷ Note, however, that there is no single version. On the strongest, an expression is conventionally associated with perceptual conditions that warrant (epistemically) its assertoric use by decisively establishing the truth of what is said in uttering it.⁸ On a moderate version, the perceptual conditions are evidential and only defeasibly warrant the assertoric use of the expression. The weakest version holds that for an expression to have a meaning is for there to be some assertions or beliefs (not necessarily perceptual) that are conventionally taken to warrant its assertoric use, and for that use in turn to license further actions, including assertions.

Proponents of EM typically view it as simultaneously providing an account of linguistic understanding. This is motivated in part by the conviction, which Dummett articulates, that

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philosophical questions about meaning are best interpreted as questions about understanding: a dictum about what the meaning of an expression consists in must be construed as a thesis about what it is to *know* its meaning (1993: 35).⁹

Weak EM, for example, suggests that understanding an expression requires grasp of what claims or beliefs epistemically warrant the assertoric use of an expression, and what that use in turn licenses.¹⁰

At times, Dummett¹¹ appears to endorse strong EM, but his considered view is the moderate (1991; 1993; 2006), as is Wright's (1992: 17; 1993: 37; 2003: 62) and Putnam's, during his 'internal realist' phase (1978: 128-9; 1983). The weak version is accepted by Brandom (1994; 2000), Skorupski (1986; 1988; 1993; 1997),¹² Wedgwood (2001: 6) and, at least for certain classes of expression, Boghossian (2003a: 240; 2003b: 25-6).¹³ A commitment to EM of some kind is also apparent in remarks from Wittgenstein's middle and later writings. For example, 'It is what is regarded as the justification of an assertion that constitutes the sense of an assertion' (1974: I §40; cf. 1967: §353; 1979: 19, 26). Of course, such pedigree does nothing to show that EM offers an unproblematic perspective on meaning. It is to that matter I shall now turn.

3 Kinds of mistake

In this section, I shall raise a challenge to EM, based on considerations regarding the different kinds of mistake one might make in employing a linguistic expression.¹⁴

Imagine that Sophie utters assertorically:

(4) The pygmy shrew is Britain's smallest mammal.

On this occasion, Sophie expresses a truth. In addition, one can suppose that she does so on the basis of information received from a suitably reliable source. Sophie

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therefore satisfies any epistemic propriety governing her act.¹⁵ Finally, the sentence contains no obvious mistakes with respect to meaning; putting such words together in such a way to produce that sentence is in accord with the meaning of each. Hence, Sophie's act meets any standards determinative of the meaning of the expressions used. In sum, her assertion is factually, epistemically and semantically correct.

In contrast, imagine that Mike utters assertorically:

(5) The pygmy shrew is Britain's largest mammal.

On this occasion, Mike expresses a falsehood. Nonetheless, supposing that he does so on the basis of information received from a source that is to a suitable standard usually reliable, Mike satisfies any epistemic propriety governing such an act of assertion. Finally, like (4) the sentence contains no obvious mistakes with respect to meaning; indeed, it is precisely *because* (5) is a well-formed, meaningful sentence that Mike is able to express a falsehood in uttering it. Hence, combining those words together to produce that sentence meets any standards determinative of their meanings. While Mike makes a mistake, it is neither semantic nor epistemic but factual.

Now imagine that Alex utters (4) assertorically. In doing so she expresses a truth. However, Alex does on the basis of a hunch, contrary to information supplied by a suitably reliable source and against the available evidence (perhaps all the pygmy shrews she perceived to date were unusually well-fed and so larger than the half-starved lesser white-toothed shrews found in her garden). Hence, it would be appropriate to criticise Alex for making an epistemically unjustified assertion. Nevertheless, once more, (4) contains no obvious mistakes with respect to meaning; indeed, it is precisely *because* (4) is a well-formed, meaningful sentence that Alex performs an assertoric act that might rightfully be criticised as ungrounded. Hence,

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combining those words together to produce that sentence meets any standards determinative of their meanings. While Alex makes a mistake, it is neither semantic nor factual but epistemic.

The possibility of such a scenario immediately suggests that EM is mistaken. Semantic norms cannot be epistemic, since one's act can be correct by the standards of the former without being correct by the standards of the latter.

A proponent of EM might allow that one can commit *certain* epistemic mistakes without committing a semantic mistake; she does not hold the view that *all* matters of epistemic propriety are semantic. However, she might respond, there are *some* epistemic mistakes that would cast doubt on a person's understanding and this is all EM requires. Imagine, for example, that Bernard utters:

(6) The common lizard is Britain's smallest mammal.

In doing so, he expresses a falsehood. Now, suppose that Bernard does so on the basis of his knowledge that the common lizard is Britain's smallest cold-blooded, terrestrial vertebrate. This knowledge evidently does not support what is asserted in uttering (6). Hence, in addition to his factual error, Bernard makes an epistemic mistake.

Moreover, in this instance one would equally judge that he has made a semantic mistake; he does not properly know what 'mammal' means, perhaps taking it to mean *reptile*. This shows that semantic norms are equivalent to epistemic norms.

One can surely accept the judgement here—that Bernard is *semantically* mistaken—without accepting the analysis—that this is due to his being *epistemically* mistaken. A reason for denying that Bernard understands 'mammal'—and so fails to employ it in accord with its meaning—is that he does not grasp what entails the proposition expressed in its use and what it is entailed by. This pushes one only to a version of inferentialism, according to which making a mistake with respect to

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meaning is to make a mistake about an expression's inferential significance. There is as yet no pressure to describe the standards involved in epistemic terms.

Indeed, there appears positive reason *not* to do so. Given Bernard's semantic error, one should surely not judge that he is thereby guilty of epistemic impropriety. Since he does not properly understand what he said in uttering (6), it would be wrong to criticise Bernard's action as being one of making an assertion that lacks warrant, of failing to heed the evidence, or of expressing an unreasonable belief. Equally, it would be wrong to say that his claim *is* epistemically justified. It would be better to say that such considerations do not apply in this case. Due to his *semantic* impropriety, the *epistemic* standards fail to get a grip.¹⁶ Thus, a plausible case of semantic error, of the kind the EM theorist is after, is not a plausible case of epistemic error. The two standards diverge.¹⁷

If the advocate of EM does not share the intuition regarding how to judge this case, consider the following, more clear-cut example. Sharon, intending to make an assertion, utters:

(7) The pygmy shrew is a prime number.

It is plausible to hold that, although (7) is grammatically well-formed, one can attach no meaning to it,¹⁸ in which the case Sharon fails literally to express anything in uttering it. Thus, Sharon neither expresses a truth nor a falsehood and, more importantly, neither makes a justified nor an unjustified claim. Sharon fails so completely to abide by the semantic norms governing the constituent expressions that epistemic considerations simply not apply. This provides, then, a case of semantic error that does not qualify for epistemic assessment.

The norms determinative of meaning cannot be epistemic norms, since one can act wrongly by the standards of the former without acting wrongly by the

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standards of the latter. For epistemic norms to govern an act, that act must be antecedently subject to, and arguably satisfy, semantic norms. Hence, one cannot equate the two and EM is false.

4 Assessing arguments for EM

As stressed at the outset, I do not take the above criticism to be decisive; a proponent of EM might have the resources to respond to it. Nevertheless, it strongly invites a reconsideration of EM. Accordingly, one might return to the considerations offered in its support and judge whether they are compelling. If not, there is no pressure to find a solution to the alleged problem.

4.1 UT and NT

Some appear to hold that mere commitment to UT takes one to EM. Skorupski, for example, says that ‘the idea that use exhausts meaning [...] leads to a distinctive conception of meaning’, namely EM (1997: 29).¹⁹ Though the assumption that UT immediately entails EM might not be anyone’s considered view, it is worth investigating if only to rule it out.

One can surely accept the dictum that meaning is use without accepting EM.²⁰ There are a number of non-epistemic ways in which UT might be interpreted. One might think that for ‘vixen’, for example, to have a given meaning is for there to be circumstances in which one might apply that word (e.g. when a vixen is present), certain words with which one might substitute it (e.g. ‘female’), certain expressions with which one might combine it (e.g. ‘is a mammal’) and with which one would not (e.g. ‘is prime’). This idea could be reformulated at the level of sentences in terms of what transitions to and from sentences involving ‘vixen’ one might make. Further

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argument is needed to show that such a pattern of use must be interpreted as a matter of certain uses of expressions being epistemically warranted and warranting.

Irrespective of how attractive the alternative sketched is, it points to a more general issue regarding UT. It could only lead to EM if the relevant use is taken to be use *in assertion* or use *in making a claim*, that is, if the act is understood as *illocutionary*. But one might take the relevant kind of employment to be use *with other words* or use *in forming a sentence* (perhaps in response to the forming of other sentences). Call this the *sentential* act. While this might contribute to the making of an assertion, it is not equivalent to doing so. The sentential act is prior to and more fundamental than the assertoric act, since performing the latter depends on performing the former but not vice versa.²¹ Of course, there might be reasons to view the use relevant to UT as illocutionary—some of which will be considered below—but the proponent of EM cannot assume this without argument.

Note that sentential acts are still *uses* of words. The relevant ‘moves’ involve combining or substituting expressions in certain ways, and might amount to linguistic ‘transitions’. They therefore concern an expression’s role ‘within’ a language. And in elucidating that role, and the sentential acts that exploit it, there is no barrier to making reference to the kinds of activities (linguistic or otherwise) it might contribute to. The point is only that what is done in so using words is not *as such* an asserting, although of course one might do that too.

By appeal to understanding, rather than meaning, Skorupski presents an argument from the absence of alternatives to suggest that one *ought* to view the relevant use in a way that supports EM:

Wittgenstein’s stress on the fact that understanding language is a practical ability is the essential thesis from which the epistemic analysis of meaning and understanding

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should be seen to flow. For in what practical ability could the understanding of a statement consist, other than the ability to recognize a state of evidence as warranting or not warranting the assertion of that statement (1988: 509)?

The answer is that there are many other abilities in which understanding might plausibly consist (individually or cumulatively), such as the ability to combine expressions together in certain ways, to make transitions of a specific sort to and from the relevant sentence, to offer an explanation of the terms involved or to provide a suitable paraphrase of the sentence, and so on.

UT alone, then, does not lead to EM. A more common route is via UT in conjunction with NT. Thus, Peacocke suggests that a ‘very direct way of capturing the normative dimension of meaning’ would be to specify, for any given expression, ‘its contribution to what constitutes good reasons for accepting sentences containing it, and to what sentences containing it give good reason for accepting or doing’ (1998: 97). Likewise, Skorupski proposes that, if one thinks of meaning as given by rules for use, ‘The most straightforward assumption to make about these rules would be that they combine to specify when a sentence in a language is correctly assertible’ (1997: 32; see also Brandom 2000: 186).²²

Perhaps the guiding thought here is the following. Meaning is given by norms for the use of expressions. Since one is dealing with language—as opposed, say, to hammers or money—then one should construe the relevant use as *use to make assertions*—as opposed to *use to hammer nails* or *use to buy products*. The relevant norms must, therefore, concern reasons for making assertions—as opposed to *reasons to hammer a nail* or *reasons to buy a product*. Thus, one arrives at EM.

However, the above observation blocks this line of thought. Even if one restricts attention to the assertoric use of language only—ignoring, say, orders or questions—there is more than one thing done in so using expressions. For our

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purposes, one need only distinguish the sentential act of producing a sentence from the assertoric act of (thereby) making an assertion. Given that there are different things done, it is reasonable to think that there might be different standards in force. The assertoric act evidently answers to epistemic norms, but the sentential act as such would surely not (merely forming a certain sentence is not something that admits of epistemic assessment). In short, one can view the meaning of an expression as determined by norms governing its use but not view those norms as epistemic by taking the relevant act to be sentential rather than assertoric. Doing so has the added advantage that the norms apply across the board—wherever a sentential act is performed—and not only to those acts that constitute assertions.

It is becoming apparent that EM rests on a kind of act/object or –ing/-ed confusion. Epistemic norms concern the *act* of asserting a given content while, assuming there are such things, semantic norms pertain to the *object*, what is asserted. Of course, semantic norms too govern an act, but the sentential act, which (if it suitably accords with them) makes available the object for asserting. Since this is the case, semantic norms cannot in turn be identified with those epistemic norms that govern the assertoric act.

Wright offers a quite different argument for EM, but which again takes as its premises UT and NT:

In order for these sentences [within the range of the truth-predicate] to be determinate in content at all, there has to be a distinction [...] between proper and improper use of them. And since they are sentences with assertoric content, that will be a distinction between cases where their assertion is justified and cases where it is not. It follows that a norm, or complex of norms, of warranted assertibility will hold sway [...] over the sincere and literal use of the sentences to which the T[ruth]-predicate applies (1992: 17; cf. 2003: 62, 12, 338).²³

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Wright arrives at EM via the claim that, since the relevant norms are determinative of *assertoric* content, they must be norms of *assertion*, i.e. epistemic. This move, however, trades on precisely the act/object ambiguity noted above. To say that some content is assertoric might be to say either that it is *asserted* or that it is *assertible*. Only the latter reading is innocuous, but only the former supports EM. No doubt certain norms of use must be in place for a sentence to possess *assertible* content, but it does not follow that those norms must be norms for *asserting*. Correlatively, no doubt epistemic norms must be in place for a content to be *asserted*, but it does not follow that those norms must be in place for a content to be *assertible*. Hence, Wright's argument for EM fails.

Perhaps one line of thought implicitly guiding the transition from NT to EM is that the norms determinative of meaning must be epistemic (and hence govern *asserting*) because merely uttering a sentence is not *as such* a normative matter. While there can be reasons for or against making a claim, there can be no reasons for or against simply producing a sentence. But this is not compelling. One can treat the mere production of sentences as a normative matter by recognising norms that are distinctively *semantic*. There need be nothing mysterious in this idea, insofar as there is nothing mysterious in the idea that one is capable of subjecting oneself to a distinctive kind of norm by participating in a distinctive kind of practice (here, linguistic). While there is no doubt more to be said for and against this picture, the present point is that NT does not by itself lead to EM.

4.2 Fregean and Sellarsian insights

An alternative suggested route to EM is by reflection on certain insights of Frege and Sellars. I shall consider each in turn.

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Frege (1997) points out that two expressions can share a reference—for example, ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’—while differing in cognitive significance. An adequate account of meaning—that meshes with one of understanding—should recognise that expressions in addition have ‘sense’. Perhaps the notion of sense is best cashed out in epistemic terms:

for anyone who employs a notion of content constrained by Fregean considerations of cognitive significance, it is a consequence of the very nature of intentional content that evidence cannot be completely irrelevant. If, when we hold background information constant, there is something that is evidence for p but not evidence for q , it follows that p and q are distinct Fregean Thoughts. If we apply Frege’s classical test, someone with that evidence could rationally believe p but not believe q (Peacocke 2004: 34; see also 1998: 93).

While the Fregean test might provide a means of distinguishing logically equivalent thoughts, one might ask whether the difference in what evidence warrants the assertoric use of a sentence is *determinative* of its meaning or merely a *consequence* of it. One can accept that, when two expressions are understood differently, different conditions will be taken to epistemically warrant their assertoric use, without holding that difference in evidential significance *constitutes* difference in cognitive significance; the reverse might be the case.

Second, the Frege point only requires recognition of something additional to an expression’s reference to account for its cognitive significance. Plausibly, what is further required is that the expression play a particular role in a person’s language (and thinking). One might, however, describe that role in terms of how a person combines it with other expressions, or what kind of transitions to and from sentences containing it she makes, rather than in terms of what might epistemically warrant its assertoric use and what that in turn might warrant. To put this in the terms introduced

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above, difference in sense might consist in difference in sentential rather than illocutionary role.

Needless to say, there is not space here adequately to develop or defend such a picture. The present aim is only to illustrate how one might accept Fregean insights without accepting EM.

Alternatively, some take a Sellarsian insight to support EM. Sellars (1997) points out that merely reliably responding differentially to some environmental stimuli by tokening an expression—uttering ‘parrot’, for example, only in response to parrots—is not sufficient for understanding that expression or for it to have meaning. To put it vividly, it would not distinguish one who genuinely possesses understanding from a thermostat! A possible moral to draw, as Brandom remarks, is that ‘the key element missing’ in cases like thermostats is ‘mastery of the practices of giving and asking for *reasons*, in which their responses can play a role as *justifying* beliefs and claims’ (1994: 89). Hence, the thought continues, in characterising the meaning of an expression one must consider not only those environmental stimuli that typically elicit a person’s utterance but also ‘what follows from her claim and what it follows from, what would be evidence for it and what is incompatible with it’; that is, one must capture ‘its capacity to serve as *evidence*, as a *reason* for or against some commitment, theoretical or practical’ (2002: 351, 86).

That there is an intimate link between an expression’s meaning and how it might be employed in reasoning is intuitively attractive. But one can accept this without accepting EM. Perhaps understanding an expression requires, in addition to tokening it in response to stimuli, that one grasp (some subset of) what that which is said in its utterance entails and what entails it. More fundamentally, there must be certain transitions to and from sentences containing that expression that one is

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prepared to make. This is a kind of inferentialism, which accommodates the Sellarsian insight, but further argument would be needed to show that one must cash it out in terms of the epistemic norms governing the relevant transitions, that one must view the extra required to understand an expression as appreciating what would provide (epistemic) reason for employing it in making a given assertion and what doing so provides reason for asserting or believing.

Again, there is not space here adequately to develop or defend such a picture. The present aim is only to show how one might accept Sellarsian insights without accepting EM.

In summary, it is not at all obvious that, in incorporating the Fregean and Sellarsian points, one needs to describe the ‘something extra’ required in terms of what epistemic proprieties an expression is subject to. While those insights might push us to UT, they need not push us to EM.

4.3 Manifestation and circularity

The argument for moderate and strong EM that has received most attention stems from Dummett’s manifestation requirement (1991: 13ff; 1993: 46ff, 70ff; see also Wright 1993: 13ff). Accordingly, I shall be brief and rely on the remarks of others.²⁴

Inspired by UT, Dummett introduces the following requirement. A theory of meaning must avoid attributing to speakers understanding of an expression that could not be manifest in the use made of it. (Non-epistemic) truth-conditional accounts of meaning—according to which one gives the meaning of ‘The Cornish language died out many years ago’, for example, in giving its truth-condition, namely, that the Cornish language died out many years ago—supposedly fall foul of this requirement. Such accounts would associate with sentences concerning, say, the distant past or

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unreachable places truth-conditions that transcend evidence. Since speakers are not in a position to adjust their linguistic behaviour in response to the obtaining of those conditions, truth-conditional accounts attribute understanding incapable of manifestation. Alternatively, an account of the meaning of expressions given in terms of their use being subject to epistemic norms will (trivially) satisfy the requirement, since it is built into it that the standards speakers must grasp are not beyond their ken.

Following McDowell (1998a: ch. 15) and Schiffer (1987: 224), one might challenge the sparse resources that Dummett allows for manifestation, namely behavioural responses to the obtaining of perceptual conditions. One might surely display one's understanding of 'The Cornish language died out many years ago' by using it to say that the Cornish language died out many years ago. Alternatively, and more fundamentally, one might manifest it by displaying sensitivity to what the claim thereby made entails and what entails it, or by explaining the terms involved. It does not seem, then, that only EM can satisfy the manifestation requirement.

One might object that the above accounts of manifestation employ semantic notions, such as *saying that* or *entailment*. While this allows them trivially to satisfy the manifestation requirement, it does so at a cost: circularity. Indeed, fully stated, Dummett's requirement is that one offer an account of manifestation in *non-semantic* terms, such that it affords an explanation of what meaning and understanding consist in. Accordingly, his real complaint is that 'Truth-conditional theories of meaning [...] are irredeemably circular'. In contrast, 'A non-circular theory of meaning would represent knowledge of the meaning of a sentence or word as knowing how to use that sentence or word' and, specifically, what 'justifies' its assertoric use (2006: 51, 56).²⁵

First, it is far from clear that providing a reductionist account of meaning in independently intelligible and more basic terms of any sort is either feasible or

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desirable.²⁶ Instead, one might offer some kind of non-reductionist elucidation that traces relations of mutual interdependency between and thereby sheds light on the relevant concepts. Since circularity need not, by default, be vicious, Dummett's manifestation argument is inconclusive.

Second, in any case one might be able to offer a non-epistemic, used-based theory of meaning in non-semantic terms, which would deliver an account of how understanding would be manifest. According to such a theory, an expression's meaning is determined by the fact that various transitions between sentences involving it are treated as correct or incorrect, that combining it with others in certain ways is counted as permissible or impermissible, that uttering it in certain circumstances is allowed or not. No semantic terms appear explicitly in this story and it is not hard to see how, according to it, understanding might be fully exhibited.

Both the preceding points involve substantial promissory notes that cannot be cashed in here. The present aim is only to show that the manifestation and non-circularity requirements do not provide immediate support for EM.

4.4 Constitutive ideals

Another route to EM might be to view norms of meaning as derived from (or as included in) certain *rationality constraints*. Plausibly, it is constitutive of a person's having psychological attitudes that those attitudes are, by and large, rational; they must suitably cohere with one another and appear reasonable in the light of her behaviour and environment.²⁷ As part of conforming to this ideal, a person's use of words to express her psychological attitudes must satisfy certain epistemic norms.

Whatever the merits of the view that conforming to principles of rationality is constitutive of possessing psychological attitudes, it does not lead to EM. The

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requirement that a speaker satisfy rationality constraints is *general* and does not have immediate implications for how she is to use *particular* words. There is an indefinite number of ways in which a person might approximate to the ideal. Hence, that such a requirement is in force has no immediate implications for what norms would have to govern an expression in order that it have meaning.

A more specific instance of the general idea is that *assertion* is constitutively governed by epistemic norms. In Dummett's view, 'The fact that the use of language is a conscious rational activity—we might say *the* rational activity—of intelligent agents must be incorporated into' a theory of meaning, 'because it is integral to the phenomenon of human language' (1991: 91). One way to do so would be to suggest that there is some 'basic principle of the practice of assertion', such as (Skorupski 1997: 32).²⁸

- (A) One correctly uses a sentence to make an assertion if and only if one is justified in believing, of the proposition expressed by that use of the sentence, that it is true.

It is indeed plausible that some such principle is not merely regulative but constitutive of the practice of assertion. Moreover, unlike the more general rationality requirements, (A) promises to provide a link with an account of the meanings of particular expressions, insofar as what proposition a particular sentence expresses, and hence whether one satisfies (A) in assertorically using it, is a matter of its meaning.

Nonetheless, once one keeps in view the act/object distinction, the putative insight that according with a principle such as (A) is constitutive of assertion does not support EM. The epistemic norm (A) expresses governs the *act* of asserting. But EM is a thesis concerning its *object*, what is asserted. One can accept that epistemic norms attach to, and are constitutive of, the former without accepting that they attach to, and

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are constitutive of, the latter. Indeed, surely what counts on an occasion as satisfying the epistemic norms governing an asserting is determined at least in part by what is asserted, and so by the meaning of the sentence employed. Indeed, as the formulation of (A) itself suggests, only if the expression used has an antecedently determined meaning, is already assertible, could a principle such as (A) apply. Thus, the plausible suggestion that epistemic norms are constitutive of asserting is not grounds for taking them to be constitutive of meaning, and so for accepting EM.

5 Closing remarks

I suggested that EM, a theory of meaning accepted by a number of prominent contemporary philosophers, is problematic. In particular, it presents the wrong picture of the kinds of mistakes people make in employing expressions. This prompted a re-assessment of the arguments offered in support of EM. Those considered typically begin from seemingly unobjectionable premises—such as UT, NT, the Fregean and Sellarsian points, the manifestation requirement, the constitutively normative nature of assertion—but accepting them does not require accepting EM. Indeed, it should not be overlooked that many of EM's proponents have been *foremost* in introducing and insisting upon these putative insights. One thing that emerges from this paper is that one can accept those insights as genuine, and applaud the advocate of EM for highlighting them, while not going so far as to accept the picture of meaning that they advance.

At root, EM suffers from, and trades on, a kind of act/object confusion. The significance of this is that it mislocates the norms determinative of meaning. Only if they govern the assertoric act of asserting can they be properly described as epistemic,

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but only if they attach to the sentential act of producing the object, what is asserted, can they be viewed as semantic. EM tries, unsuccessfully, to have it both ways.

Accordingly, I have denied neither that epistemic norms constitutively govern assertion nor that for an expression to have meaning is for its use to be subject to norms, but only that one keep apart these two plausible theses. While there is a connection between them worth charting—it is surely in part because of the semantic standards governing the expressions used that a particular act of assertion is subject to epistemic evaluation—it is not one of identity.

Of course, this leaves the task of providing an alternative account of the norms that are supposedly determinative of meaning. It is not clear to me that one will be able to say very much about this matter that is informative. In particular, one might only be able to single them out using semantic notions of the same kind as that of meaning. Undertaking this task is, however, for another occasion.²⁹

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Notes

¹ The concern of this paper is the normativity of meaning, where ‘meaning’ refers to the invariant significance possessed by words and sentences of a natural language.

Many philosophers extend the normativity thesis to the content of attitudes such as beliefs, desires and hopes. To what extent mental content is normative, and whether the relevant norms are akin to those of meaning, will not be discussed here, although no doubt what follows has implications for such issues.

² See, e.g., Alston 2000; Brandom 1994; Dummett 1993; Harman 1999; Horwich 2005; Ryle 1968; Sellars 1953; Skorupski 1993.

³ That is *not* to suggest that UT is without problems. For critical overviews of the prominent objections, see Lepore 1994; Lycan 2000: ch.6.

⁴ For recent criticism, see Boghossian 2005; Glüer 1999; Hattiangadi 2006; Miller 2006; Wikforss 2001. For recent defence, see Glock 2005; Whiting 2007.

⁵ See, e.g., Alston 2000; Baker and Hacker 2004; Blackburn 1984; Boghossian 1989; Brandom 1994; Gibbard 1994; Glock 2005; Kripke 1982; Lance and O’Leary Hawthorne 1998; Luntley 1999; McDowell 1998b: ch.11; Skorupski 1997.

⁶ Likewise, Glüer notes that ‘hardly anyone takes much trouble about explaining what this normativity amounts to’ (1999: 112).

⁷ There are, it should be noted, non-normative versions of EM. According to Quine, for example, ‘all inculcation of meaning of words’ rests ‘ultimately on sensory evidence’, where evidence is characterised as the ‘stimulation of sensory receptors’ (1969: 75). Few contemporary proponents of EM would, however, endorse this idea (see Dummett 1993: 104; Brandom 1994: xiii). One reason for this is the worry that facts about dispositions to respond to sensory stimuli leave meaning radically indeterminate, as Quine himself insists.

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⁸ Strong EM is, evidently, a form of verificationism. As such, it might be open to some of the well-known criticisms levelled at verificationism (see, e.g., Berlin 1968; Grayling 1997: 217ff; Hempel 1959; Lycan 2000: 120ff; Neurath 1959; Putnam 1975; Quine 1980: ch. 2; Schiffer 1987: 228ff). I shall not rehearse those objections here since, first, they are already familiar and well-worn and, second, I intend to focus on EM generally rather than a specific variant of it.

Note that not all versions of verificationism are epistemic. One might interpret verificationism as a kind of *inferentialism*, according to which an expression's possessing meaning consists in its standing in relations of entailment. Talk of what verifies the assertoric use of an expression might be intended as talk of what the claim thereby made follows from. This appears to be how Waismann understands matters. In describing the verification of a statement, he says, 'I establish a connexion between two statements by saying that the one (*s*) is to follow from the other (*p*). In other words, I lay down a *rule of inference* which allows me to pass from the one to the other' (1968: 36; cf. Waismann and Wittgenstein 2003: 117). Moving from such (incipient) inferentialism to the idea that the norms governing inferential transitions are to be cashed out in epistemic terms requires a further step. This point will be of significance later.

Relatedly, Skorupski (1986: 156) astutely observes that (for different reasons) the verificationism of positivists such as Carnap (1959: 63) and Schlick (1959: 86-7) does not amount to EM.

⁹ Cf. Brandom's claim that 'talk of what is expressed is intelligible only in the context of talk of the activity of grasping what is expressed', since '*meaning* and *understanding* are coordinate concepts' (1994: 73).

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¹⁰ Proponents of EM would not consider it sufficient for understanding an expression that a person merely act in conformity with (rather than ‘grasp’) the epistemic norms governing its use. For reasons familiar from Kripke (1982), any such behaviour would be in accordance with an indefinite number of standards. More is needed to determine that a person is following one such norm rather than any other. Typically, what is thought to be required is that, in some sense, the relevant norm figure among her *reasons* for acting as she does. As Brandom puts it, one must recognise that their ‘compulsion is mediated by our *attitude* toward those rules. What makes us act as we do is not the rule or norm itself but our *acknowledgement* of it’ (1994: 31).

¹¹ Due to Dummett (1991; 1993), EM in the philosophy of language is usually associated with anti-realism in metaphysics. For a critical overview of the debate, see Hale 1997. I shall not comment here on the connection, or on the extent to which my arguments against EM count as arguments against anti-realism.

¹² Although note that in more recent writings Skorupski holds that the ‘important insights contained in the epistemic conception’ should be treated ‘as insights about the normative nature of concepts rather than as insights about the form of language-rules’ (1997: 29). This qualification does not bear significantly on what follows.

¹³ Grayling also appears sympathetic to EM (see, e.g., 2007: 55).

¹⁴ Glock (2005) and Millar (2002) employ similar strategies to different ends. Millar considers different mistakes in arguing against the view that the norms of meaning are norms of truth, while Glock does so in arguing for NT generally.

¹⁵ I do not intend this claim to rest on any particular account of what constitutes epistemic justification. If one has a more (or less) stringent view on what is required

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for an act to be epistemically justified, it should be possible to plug it in here and for the point to remain the same.

¹⁶ Of course, the claim that Bernard intended to make—that the common lizard is Britain's smallest reptile—might have been well-grounded. But the issue concerns the status of the act he *did* in fact perform.

¹⁷ Note that there are two ways to describe this example. First, since what is required for a particular expression to possess meaning is that its employment be *governed* by a suitable norm, not that it actually be used in *accordance* with it, one might say that, given the meanings of the constituent expressions employed as determined by the established norms of for their employment, Bernard (inadvertently) utters a sentence that means *the common lizard is Britain's smallest mammal*. Alternatively, one might want to say that strictly-speaking and despite appearances Bernard fails to produce a meaningful sentence at all since he is not abiding by the relevant norms in producing those expressions. That is, though (6) *looks* like an English sentence it is not one, because Bernard did not produce it in accordance with the norms embodied in the practice of speaking English. Either way, the same point applies, namely that Bernard's semantic impropriety precludes epistemic assessment.

¹⁸ If one does not share this intuition for this particular case, and feels inclined to judge (7) false rather than meaningless, one can easily imagine a still more confused sentence. Presumably there will be a point at which, given how the words used are ordinarily to be understood, one will be able to attach no meaning to the sentence formed from them.

¹⁹ See also Putnam 1978: 97, 129; Skorupski 1988: 501; 1993: 133; Wright 1993: 358-9.

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²⁰ Indeed, several philosophers do so (see, e.g., Alston 2000; Horwich 2005).

²¹ The term ‘illocutionary act’ is Austin’s (1962), while ‘sentential act’ is Alston’s (2000). The latter corresponds, closely enough, to Austin’s ‘locutionary act’. For a recent and lucid account of the different acts one can perform in employing an expression, and the respects in which the illocutionary is dependent upon the sentential, see Alston 2000. Hornsby’s suggestion that an account of locution (or sentential acts) concerns ‘the linguistically meaningful [...] things that speakers of the language do when they produce particular sentences’, whereas one of illocution concerns the ‘communicative things that can be done with words’ (2006: 896, 902; cf. 1994), makes especially clear the respect in which matters of meaning pertain, in the first instance, to the sentential rather than the illocutionary level.

²² When considering the normativity thesis, Boghossian considers only two ways of interpreting the relevant notion of correctness, as truth or warrant (1989: 513).

²³ Note that Wright’s argument here is a stage in a larger argument designed, not to establish EM, but to establish that deflationist theories of truth are unstable. I shall not assess the larger argument here. Note also that I do not take the criticisms that follow to undermine Wright’s overarching project, which is premised on the idea that satisfying certain syntactic and disciplinary requirements is sufficient for a predicate to be one of truth.

²⁴ Strictly-speaking, the manifestation argument is supposed to demonstrate the need to recognise an epistemically constrained notion of truth, one which is to figure in a semantic theory representing a person’s understanding of a language. Here I am considering whether one might exploit the manifestation argument in arguing directly for epistemic conceptions of meaning in general. Dummett also has an acquisition

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argument, which requires that an account of meaning leave it intelligible how a person might acquire understanding of a language. To save space, and since it is almost universally acknowledged to be the less forceful of the two (see Wright 1993: Introduction), I shall not discuss it here. Note, again, that I shall not assess the bearing of either argument on the debate between realists and anti-realists.

²⁵ See also Putnam's remark that 'you can't treat understanding a sentence (in general) as knowing its truth-conditions, because it then becomes unintelligible what *that* knowledge *in turn* consists in'. Instead, 'the theory of understanding has to be done in a verificationist way' (1978: 129; cf. 3).

²⁶ For considerations in support of the view that a reductionist account of meaning is neither needed nor available see Boghossian 1989; McDowell 1998b: ch. 11; Stroud 2000: ch. 11; Whiting 2006.

²⁷ Davidson (2001: 221-3) advances this idea, and McDowell (1998b: ch.15) elaborates it (though neither present it as supporting EM).

²⁸ For a variant, see Williamson 2000, according to which the norm constitutive of assertion requires that one *know* the proposition expressed. Note that Williamson nowhere suggests that such a norm might be constitutive of the *meanings* of the expressions used. He rightly presents the view as concerning *asserting* rather than what is *asserted*.

²⁹ Thanks to Javier Kalhat and to members of audiences at Birmingham and Southampton for helpful comments on earlier versions of this material. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for this journal for exceptionally patient and constructive feedback.