Semantic Normativity

Åsa Maria Wikforss

Stockholm University

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With the publication of Saul Kripke's book on Wittgenstein's rule-following discussions philosophy of language received a new slogan: "Meaning is Normative."[1] If I mean something by an expression, Kripke argues, then I <u>should</u> use it in certain ways; if I do not use the expression in the ways required, I have used it <u>incorrectly</u>, made a mistake. What makes Kripke's claim that meaning is normative particularly intriguing is his suggestion that it is a requirement which any theory of meaning must meet. That is, the claim is not actually part of a theory of meaning defended by Kripke, but rather is put forward as a pre-theoretical <u>litmus test</u> for other theories: Any theory which fails to allow for the required normativity can be rejected out of hand. Thus, all 'pure use' theories that suggest accounting for meaning in terms of what the speaker does (and is disposed to do), rather than in terms of what she should do, are to be dismissed. Since there are many versions of pure use-theories (causal-informational theories, conceptual role theories, Davidsonian use-theories[2], etc.), it seems as if Kripke's normativity thesis, if correct, could be used to wipe out a good part of contemporary philosophy of language.[3]

It therefore is hardly surprising that Kripke's thesis has received so much attention. What <u>is</u> surprising is that despite extensive discussions of the topic it remains obscure exactly what the normativity thesis amounts to and why it should be endorsed. The objective of this paper is to determine whether there is any reason to subscribe to the claim that meaning is essentially normative. Part of the difficulty is that there are many notions of normativity, and it is not clear how they are related.[4] My concern here will be exclusively with normativity in the sense that implicates an 'ought', a prescription. It is this notion of normativity that is relevant in the present context, since it is the alleged need for semantic 'oughts' that poses a threat to pure use theories. Thus, in his criticism of dispositionalism, Kripke writes: "A candidate for what constitutes the

state of my meaning one function, rather than another, by a given function sign, ought to be such that, whatever in fact I (am disposed to) do, there is unique thing that I should do."[5]

My question, therefore, is simple: Is meaning essentially prescriptive? Is it the case that any acceptable theory of meaning must allow for semantic 'oughts', and that, for this reason, pure use theories can be ruled out tout court? The paper is divided into two main sections. In the first I examine four different versions of the idea that meaning is normative in order to determine whether any of them can be defended. My conclusion is that the examined theses all fail, either because the alleged normativity has nothing to do with normativity, or because it cannot plausibly be said that meaning is normative in the sense suggested. In the second section I offer some comfort to those who worry about giving up on semantic normativity. There are certain concerns that have typically driven people towards Kripke's thesis, concerns having to do with justification, communication, and naturalism. I argue that these concerns can be taken care of without appealing to semantic normativity. Contrary to received opinion, there is no reason to subscribe to the idea that meaning is an essentially normative notion.[6]

I. Semantic Normativity: Four Construals

<u>1. Norms and Truth</u>

The most common suggestion is that the normative nature of meaning derives from the connection between meaning and truth. This is how Kripke tends to present it, and most commentators follow Kripke's lead in this. One example is found in Paul Boghossian's discussion of Kripke's normativity requirement:

> Suppose that the expression 'green' means <u>green</u>. It follows immediately that the expression
> 'green' applies <u>correctly</u> only to <u>these</u> things (the green ones) and not to <u>those</u> (the non-greens).

> The fact that the expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of <u>normative</u> truths
>
> about my behavior with that expression. . ..[7]

How are we to understand this alleged connection between truth and normativity? It should be clear that the connection is not immediate. That an expression is true of some things but not of others does not in itself imply that it should be used in any particular way, that there are "normative truths" about my behavior with that expression. If 'horse' means <u>horse</u>, then 'horse' is true of horses only, but it does not follow that I <u>should</u> apply the term to horses only.

In reply to this it is sometimes suggested that the 'should' in question derives from meaning in combination with the speaker's intention to speak the truth. Thus, "If I wish to speak the truth, and if I mean horse by 'horse', then I should apply 'horse' to horses only." But it should be clear that this reasoning alone cannot show <u>meaning</u> to be normative. All it shows is that meaning may be one of the factors that are relevant to the truth of hypothetical imperatives concerning how I ought to act in order to reach certain goals. All sorts of factors can be relevant to such imperatives but this does not automatically make them normative (e.g. facts about the weather can go into determining whether or not I should take my coat, but this does not imbue these facts with normativity).[8]

To make the transition from truth to normativity a further assumption is needed. It must be argued that we somehow have an <u>obligation</u> to express ourselves truthfully. That an expression is true of certain things would then imply that the speaker ought to apply the expression only to those things that it is true of. This is the move that is standardly made in the literature. Boghossian, for example, suggests that "[t]o be told that 'horse' means <u>horse</u> implies that the speaker ought to be motivated to apply the expression only to horses. . . ."[9] Moreover, in order for this reasoning to demonstrate the normativity of meaning the 'ought' in question must be genuinely semantic; it must be an 'ought' which derives solely from semantic notions. Thus, regardless of whether we have some kind of epistemic or moral obligation to speak the truth, if <u>meaning</u> is to be normative, the normativity in question must be semantic in kind, not

merely epistemic or moral.[10] The claim must be that expressing a false judgment is, ipso facto, a semantic error.

But it is far from clear how such a claim could be supported. Consider the case where I misperceive and utter 'That's a horse' of a cow. What semantic norm do I then violate? I see the animal, believe it to be a horse and, consequently, utter 'That's a horse'. Although I have made a false judgment, I have not broken any semantic norms. On the contrary, if 'horse' means horse, then my use of the word to express my belief that the animal is a horse was semantically 'correct'. What this shows is that we must distinguish between two quite different claims: The first is the claim that if I mean horse by 'horse' then applying the word to a non-horse is making a false statement. The second is the claim that if I mean horse by 'horse' then applying the word to a non-horse is violating a semantic norm. While the first claim is indisputable, it does not support the second claim.[11] This is not to say that there is no sense in which expressing falsehoods could imply a violation of a linguistic rule. For instance, it has been suggested that there are certain rules that regulate assertion and that these rules are bound up with the notion of truth. An example of this is what John Searle calls the 'preparatory rule' (do not assert p unless you have adequate grounds for p) as well as the 'sincerity rule' (do not assert p unless you believe that p).[12] The liar, it might therefore be said, violates not only a moral rule but also a linguistic one. Notice, however, that these rules are not semantic but pragmatic. The normative force of such rules derives not from meaning alone but from their role in making our linguistic interactions go smoothly.[13] To conclude from the existence of these rules that meaning is an essentially normative notion is to commit a fallacy akin to Searle's well-known 'assertion fallacy', the fallacy of "confusing the conditions for the performance of the speech act of assertion, with the analysis of the meaning of words". [14]

Of course, one might challenge the idea that there is a strict division between semantics and pragmatics and argue that truth and linguistic correctness cannot be separated: To make a

true judgment, one might argue, is to make a correct assertion; to make a false judgment is to make an incorrect assertion. It is not possible to fully address this challenge here. Two comments will suffice. First, the suggestion is prima facie very problematic. The link between Searle's assertion rules and truth is very weak. I can make a false judgment without either violating the sincerity rule (p can be falsely but sincerely asserted) or the preparatory rule (p can be false but justified).[15] Conversely, I can make a true judgment and violate both the sincerity rule (I do not believe p -- I can lie without making a false judgment) and the preparatory rule (I do not have adequate grounds for p). That the link is this weak poses a serious difficulty for anybody who wishes to collapse truth and linguistic correctness, falsity and linguistic incorrectness. Second, if what underlies the idea that meaning is normative is the controversial claim that we reject the distinction between semantics and pragmatics, then it cannot be said that the commitment to normativity is a pre-theoretical constraint, independent of any particular theory of meaning. The normativity claim would no longer function as a theory-independent 'litmus test', but rather as part of a controversial theory of meaning.

The suggestion that the normativity of meaning derives from the connection between meaning and truth alone must therefore be rejected. This, I believe, throws new light on the claim descriptive theories, such as dispositionalism, cannot account for error, false judgments. The assumption behind this claim is that the distinction between true and false utterances is a normative distinction and that for this reason a purely descriptive theory of meaning must fail to account for error. Colin McGinn, for example, puts it:

> The general point here is that we can partition the totality of uses (actual or potential) into two
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> sets, the correct and the incorrect, those that accord with the content of representation and those
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> that do not; but this partitioning cannot be effected without employing a notion not definable
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> simply from the notion of bare use, actual or dispositional, viz. the normative notion of using a
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> representation as it ought to be used given its content.[16]

This objection fails, it should be clear, for the reasons given above. It simply is not true that in order to account for truth and falsity we need to distinguish between correct and incorrect use, between how the speaker ought to use her words and how she will use them. What we need to do, of course, is distinguish between what a word is true of and what it is not true of, but this is just the old problem of accounting for reference and has nothing to do with norms.[17]

There is therefore no principled reason why descriptive, 'pure use' theories must fail to account for error. Of course, there are descriptive theories that run into the problem of error, but it is important to see that this has nothing to do with their lack of normativity. Consider, for instance, the most common objection to dispositionalism, which runs as follows: "Simple dispositionalism identifies what I mean by 'horse' with what I would apply 'horse' to. This fails since 'horse' would then be true of everything to which I apply it and no error would be possible. To avoid simple dispositionalism, the dispositionalist must say that what I mean by 'horse' is identified with what I would apply 'horse' to under certain ideal circumstances. But these ideal circumstances cannot be specified in a non-question begging way, i.e. without employing semantic and intentional notions. Consequently, the dispositionalist cannot account for error."[18] Dispositionalism fails, that is, not because it cannot allow for semantic 'oughts' but because of the difficulties involved in giving a non-circular conditional analysis of dispositions. But this leaves a number of responses open to the dispositionalist. In particular, she can reject the assumption that simple dispositionalism can be avoided only by giving a conditional analysis of dispositions. The mistake, she can argue, is to assume that dispositions must be given a conditional analysis. All dispositions have exceptions in the sense that there are interfering factors that can prevent the manifestation of a disposition: Just as an object can be fragile and yet not break when dropped (if, say, a force interferes preventing the object from breaking), so S can be disposed to apply 'horse' to horses and yet, on occasion, apply 'horse' to a cow. In neither case can a finite list of possible interfering factors be given and so no conditional analysis will

be forthcoming, but in neither case does it matter. Rather, dispositions are to be understood categorically, as identical with certain underlying physical states. Thus, there is no problem of error.[19]

Whether responses such as these are ultimately compelling will have to be settled elsewhere. The important point here is that the problem of error has nothing in particular to do with normativity. The point might be put as follows: The standard diagnosis of why the problem of error arises is that it arises if a theory fails to allow for semantic normativity. But that is not the correct diagnosis. The correct diagnosis, rather, is that the problem of error arises for theories, such as simple dispositionalism, that construe the relation between meaning and use in such a way that any difference in use implies a difference in meaning. On these theories every apparent misapplication (S applies 'horse' to a cow), has to be construed as a meaning difference (S does not mean horse by 'horse' but horse or cow), and so no error is possible. [20] It should be clear, however, that there is no principled reason why a pure-use theory should have to construe the relationship between meaning and use this way. What the pure-use theorist is committed to, plausibly, is the idea that meaning is fully determined by how S uses (and is disposed to use) her words. This can be put in the form of a supervenience claim: Any difference in meaning implies a difference in use. This claim does not, clearly, commit the pure use theorist to the quite different, problematic, claim that any difference in use implies a difference in meaning. The latter claim, again, does lead to the problem of error, whereas the former does not.[21]

The next question is whether there are other arguments supporting the view that meaning is normative. That is, accepting that we cannot motivate the normativity requirement by appealing to truth and reference alone, is there nevertheless an essential normativity which rules out descriptive accounts of meaning? Kripke, it seems, would give an affirmative answer. Boghossian puts it this way: "Kripke seems to think that even if there were a suitably selected disposition that captured the extension of an expression accurately, that disposition could still

not be identified with the fact of meaning, because it still remains true that the concept of a disposition is descriptive whereas the concept of meaning is not."[22] And Boghossian sides with Kripke on this point, as do a number of other writers.[23] The question, then, is why we could not give a descriptive account of meaning, once it is granted that we could give a descriptive account of truth and reference. What would be left out? On this issue, there is less of a consensus. Let us examine three of the most common suggestions.

2. Linguistic Errors

One suggestion is that semantic normativity does not concern correctness in the sense of truth, as on the standard view, but a correctness which is distinctively linguistic. This suggestion can be found in McGinn's critical discussion of Kripke's book. Kripke's notion of correctness, McGinn argues, does not concern <u>factual</u> correctness (stating a truth about the world) but instead concerns "<u>which word</u> is linguistically appropriate to the facts." McGinn continues: "Thus, for example, suppose I truly believe that this object is red; the question of linguistic correctness is then which word expresses this belief: is 'red' the word I ought to use to state the fact in which I believe?"[24] This suggests the following picture. When I make a statement, such as "That's a horse", two types of mistake can be made. First, I can make a factual mistake, as when I misperceive. Second, I can make a linguistic mistake, as when I use the word 'horse' to express my belief that the animal is a cow. I have then not made a factual mistake (my belief is correct) and yet my statement is linguistically incorrect.

How are we to understand McGinn's notion of 'linguistic incorrectness'? McGinn is not very clear on this. He suggests that Kripkean normativity is "a matter of meaning now what one meant earlier" and that linguistic incorrectness consists in going against one's own prior intentions, in "using the same word with a different meaning from that originally intended."[25] Thus, if at time t1 I intended 'horse' to mean <u>horse</u> and at t2 use 'horse' to mean <u>cow</u>, then I have

made such a mistake. However, if this is a mistake at all, it is clearly not a semantic one. If at t2 I use 'horse' with a different meaning than at t1, then I have simply changed my intentions and the word has a different meaning.

To give some content to McGinn's notion of a linguistic mistake we need something stronger. There are two ways of making it stronger. First, it can be argued that the normativity in question concerns what I <u>should mean</u> by my words. We can then make room for a genuine notion of a linguistic mistake: If I should mean <u>horse</u> by 'horse', and I mean <u>cow</u> by 'horse' uttering "That's a horse" of a cow then I have made such an error . This, it is clear, gives us a construal of Kripke's 'normativity requirement' which would rule out pure use theories. We can, again, use dispositionalism to illustrate this. Meaning, on the dispositionalist picture, is determined by the dispositions S in fact has, and there is no question of having the 'right' or 'wrong' dispositions. In this sense dispositionalism undermines the distinction between how a word <u>should</u> be used and how it <u>is</u> used. Indeed, at points this is precisely how Kripke formulates his objection to dispositionalism. The fundamental problem, he says, is whether my actual dispositions are 'right' or not, whether there is "anything which mandates what they <u>ought</u> to be?"[26]

The problem is that it is hard to see how this type of normativity could be essential to meaning. Semantic normativity, as standardly characterized, is the idea that <u>if</u> S means horse by 'horse' then she should use this word in certain ways. This, clearly, does not imply that S <u>should mean</u> <u>horse</u> by 'horse'. To get the latter implication one would have to add constraints on what S is free to mean by her words. However, since these additional constraints go beyond semantic normativity they cannot be derived from meaning itself. No doubt there are all sorts of reasons why one ought to have certain meaning dispositions rather than others. For instance, if I wish to make myself easily understood when in an English speaking community, I ought to be disposed to apply 'horse' to horses, not to cows. But the 'ought' here derives from my desire to

communicate with ease, not from meaning alone, and it is therefore not an objection to a particular theory of meaning that it fails to account for such 'oughts'.[27]

There is a second way of making McGinn's notion of error stronger. McGinn is quite right, it might be argued, to say that there is a notion of error over and above false judgments: Meaning errors. Such errors occur when we misapply a word, not because we have made some kind of empirical error, but because we have an incomplete understanding of the meaning of our own words, of our own concepts. For instance, S means horse by 'horse', but has only partially understood the meaning of her own word (she thinks that donkeys fall under the concept horse) and so she misapplies it. A pure use theory, however, is not able to allow for the possibility of incomplete understanding, since this possibility violates the supervenience claim. Thus, if S could have incomplete understanding of her concepts, there could be a difference in concepts which would not be reflected in individual use. This is well illustrated by certain versions of externalism. For instance, Tyler Burge has argued that because meaning and thought content is determined by the speaker's social (and physical) environment, individual speakers will typically have an incomplete grasp of their own concepts, and this undermines the idea that meaning and thought-content supervene on individual use.[28] This is the point of Burge's famous thought experiment concerning the concept arthritis: Two speakers can use (and be disposed to use) the expression 'arthritis' in the same way, and yet not share the same concept.

Let's grant, then, that pure use theories cannot allow for meaning errors or conceptual errors of this sort.[29] The question is why the possibility of making meaning errors should be essential to meaning. An appeal to Burge is of no help to answer this question, it is clear, since one cannot use Burge's account of incomplete understanding to reach any type of modal conclusions about the nature of meaning and concepts. Burge does not argue that it is necessary that we be able to make meaning errors, but merely that in a linguistic community some speakers (but not all) typically have an incomplete grasp of the community concepts. Indeed, it

is hard to see what such an argument would look like. It certainly cannot be claimed that meaning errors are essential to the possibility of false judgments.[30] To be able to mistake a cow for a horse, I need not also be able to think that "horse" applies to cows. We must not confuse the gap between what S thinks is true and what is true, with the gap between what S thinks a word means and what it does mean. While we must allow for the former gap, there is no reason why we should have to allow for the latter gap.

I am therefore skeptical of the claim that meaning errors of this sort could be shown to be essential to meaning. Let us consider a third construal of the idea that meaning is normative.

3. Intentions and Internal Relations

A common suggestion is that the normativity of meaning derives from the normative nature of intentions.[31] This suggestion is based on a famous quote from Kripke:

> The point is not that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I will answer '125', but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I should answer '125'. Computational error, finiteness of my capacity, and other disturbing factors may lead me not to be disposed to respond as I should, but if so, I have not acted in accordance with my intentions. The relation of meaning and intention to future action is normative, not descriptive."[32]

How are we to understand the suggestion that the relation between intention and future action is normative? It is clear that there are norms associated with intentions. For example, if I intend to get rich I should spend less. These norms are similar to Kant's hypothetical imperatives in that they specify some contingent means of reaching a given goal: 'If you desire x you should do y', where 'should' has the content of 'it would be prudent to do y'. Failing to do y, then, does not necessarily imply failing to meet one's goal since there may be other means to the same end (I could win the lottery). It should be clear, however, that this cannot be what Kripke is after. Kripke's 'imperative' (if I intend addition by '+' I should answer '125' to '68+57') does not specify a contingent means to an end. It is not an empirical hypothesis that if I intend to add I

should answer '125' in order to act in accordance with my intention, and there is no other, equally good way, of adding (say, by answering '135' instead).

Instead, what Kripke appears to have in mind when saying that the relation between intention and future action is normative is the idea that the relation between an intention and its fulfillment is, as Wittgenstein liked to put it, 'internal' and not 'external'.[33] For instance, if I intend to eat an apple, then it is not merely an empirical question what will fulfill my intention; rather, I <u>have</u> to eat an apple (and not, say, a pear) to fulfill this intention. Similarly, if I intend to add, then it is not an empirical question what I should do in order to fulfill my intention; rather, I <u>must</u> add (e.g. I <u>must</u> answer '125' to the query '68+57'). Kripke is explicit about this. In a footnote anticipating the discussion of normativity he writes: "Wittgenstein's view that the relation between the desire (expectation, etc.) and its object must be 'internal', not 'external', parallels corresponding morals drawn about meaning in my text below (the relation of meaning and intention to future action is 'normative, not descriptive'...)."[34]

The trouble with this approach is that the fact that the relation between an intention and its fulfillment is <u>internal</u> does not show that it is <u>normative</u>. If I intend to eat an apple and I eat a pear instead, then my intention is not fulfilled, but there is no implication that by eating the pear I have failed to do what I <u>should</u> do. Similarly, to say that the relation between intending to add and answering '125' to '68+57' is internal is not to say that I ought to answer '125', but just that if I do not do so my intention is not fulfilled, that is, <u>I am not adding</u>. This is not at all a prescriptive claim but a constitutive one. In other words, the claim "If you intend to add you should answer '125' to '68+57' in order to fulfill your intention" does not lay down any sort of prescription but specifies <u>what it is to add</u>, to do that which you intended.[35] So the alleged normativity has nothing to do with normativity.

There is therefore no reason a pure-use theorist, such as the dispositionalist, should have difficulties accounting for the distinction between internal and external relations. The

dispositionalist does suggest that to have the intention to add (to mean <u>addition</u> by '+') is to be disposed to give certain responses, and it is, of course, an empirical contingency that a person will behave in a certain way. But this is just to say that it is an empirical contingency that a given person has a certain disposition. It does not follow from this that it is an empirical contingency that in order to fulfill one's intention to add one must answer '125'. That is, the claim that meaning addition by '+' is to have a certain disposition, does not in itself imply a denial of the claim that only she who answers '125' to '68+57' is adding. Consequently, the dispositionalist cannot be accused of obliterating the distinction between internal and external relations.

This takes us to a fourth, and final, construal of the idea that meaning is normative.

4. Rationality Constraints

Philosophers with a Davidsonian bent are prone to emphasizing the normative nature of meaning and content. John McDowell, for example, argues that "our dealings with content must be understood in terms of the idea that mental activity is undertaken under the aspect of allegiance to norms."[36] To support this claim McDowell appeals to Davidson's idea that normative interconnections are "necessary to make intelligible the presence of content in our full picture of mental life. . .".[37] Such interconnections, McDowell argues further, cannot be accounted for within a purely individualistic, functionalistic, framework. Rather, meaning and content must be construed as determined by our shared social rules.

McDowell's suggestion, in other words, is that we can derive the normativity of content and meaning from Davidson's view of rationality as constitutive of intentionality.[38] The appeal to rationality considerations provides the missing link between epistemic normativity and semantics. This suggestion is taken seriously by some descriptivists who set out to argue against Davidson's appeal to rationality constraints. Such a move is uncalled for, however. It is quite possible to stick to the Davidsonian view of intentionality and yet deny that meaning is

normative. In fact, this is precisely what Davidson does. Davidson has repeatedly argued against the idea that meaning is bound up with rules and insisted that meaning is determined simply by what the individual does and is disposed to do (hold true). To take a famous example, when Archie Bunker utters "Let's have some laughter to break up the monogamy" he is not, according to Davidson, making an error but merely using familiar words with a new meaning.[39] Davidson's account of meaning is therefore a prime example of a pure use theory.

This may appear puzzling at first. How can one hold both that rationality is constitutive of intentionality, and that norms are not essential to meaning (in particular if, like Davidson, one takes meaning and belief to be inextricably connected)? But there is nothing puzzling about it. Davidson's appeal to rationality considerations is not at all prescriptive. His claim is not that we should be rational, but that rationality is <u>constitutive</u> of what it is to be a language user, a thinker.[40] And constitutive claims of this sort, as argued above, do not have any implications for how S ought to use her words. [41] The claim is not "If S means <u>horse</u> by 'horse' she should. . .", but rather that <u>unless</u> S uses (is disposed to use) 'horse' in such a way that a reasonable set of horse-beliefs can be attributed to her, 'horse' does not mean <u>horse</u> in her language. In fact, it is precisely <u>because</u> Davidson takes rationality to be constitutive of intentionality that he denies that meaning is normative. The reason we should not interpret Archie Bunker's utterance standardly, in accordance with the community norms, is that this would violate the principle of charity: It would imply ascribing an inexplicable, crazy belief to Archie (the belief that laughter can break up the monogamy).[42]

It is therefore quite possible to endorse a pure use theory of meaning and yet subscribe to Davidson's view that rationality is constitutive of intentionality. Thus, yet another argument for the normativity of meaning dissolves.

II. Living without norms

I have suggested that none of the ordinary construals of Kripke's normativity thesis can be supported. This shows that we should question the (almost) universal commitment to Kripke's thesis. It does not, admittedly, suffice to show that meaning is not normative since there may be another construal of the normativity requirement, yet to be formulated, which is in fact compelling. I doubt it, however. I think nothing is lost and much gained by giving up on normativity, and I will end by suggesting how we can live without normativity. There are certain anxieties that typically drive people towards Kripke's thesis and I will argue that those anxieties can be alleviated without semantic normativity. The anxieties I have in mind concern three issues: Justification, communication, and naturalism.

1. Justification

In the course of spelling out his normativity objection, Kripke sometimes appeals to the notion of justification. After stating the dispositionalist reply to the skeptic, Kripke responds that "this reply ought to appear to be misdirected, off target."[43] The reason for this, according to Kripke, is that the skeptic's demand that it be shown that the answer '125' (to the query '68+57') is justified can never be satisfied by an appeal to dispositions. I may know that '125' is the response I am disposed to give, but, Kripke asks, how does any of this "indicate that -- now or in the past -- '125' was an answer justified in terms of instructions I gave myself, rather than a mere jack-in-the-box unjustified and arbitrary response?"[44]

How are we to understand the notion of justification appealed to here? It is not, it should be clear, the ordinary notion of a rationalization. To rationalize my linguistic use ("That's a horse") we need to appeal to what I believe (I believe the animal is a horse) and what I mean ('horse' is true of horses only), but there is no need to appeal to a rule. That is, an appeal to descriptive facts is enough to rationalize my use and no norm need be involved. So Kripke's notion of justification is not that of a rationalization. Rather, he has something stronger in mind.

The idea is that in using my words I must be <u>guided</u> by a general rule, an 'inner instruction', telling me how to apply the word in the particular case. Kripke says for instance that the meaning fact "should <u>tell</u> me what I ought to do in each new instance."[45] If I mean <u>horse</u> by 'horse', therefore, I must be guided by a rule telling me how to apply the word (such as, "Apply 'horse' only to horses").

But why should we find this claim at all compelling? Why are not rationalizations enough to avoid the conclusion that my use is "unjustified and arbitrary"? If my word 'horse' is true of horses only, there is nothing arbitrary about me applying 'horse' to an animal I take to be a horse. There is no need to refer to a guiding rule in Kripke's sense.

What is worse, it is not even clear that we can make <u>sense</u> of the suggestion that speaking a language essentially involves being guided by rules telling us how to apply our words. The rule in question is supposed to be essential to what it is to mean <u>horse</u> by 'horse', to have the concept <u>horse</u>. But how can I understand the rule "Apply 'horse' only to horses", how can it guide my actions, unless I already have the concept horse? And if I already have this concept then this cannot in turn be explicated in terms of a further rule, on pain of a regress. Either, therefore, the rule guiding my use of 'horse' presupposes that I have the concept <u>horse</u> already, and so the rule is not essential to content as such, or we get an infinite regress of rules. Consequently, it cannot be essential to content that we are guided by rules in Kripke's sense.[46]

Not only, therefore, is it the case that we do not need to appeal to guiding rules in order to justify our linguistic use, it is also unclear how rules of that sort could be essential to meaning.

<u>2. Communication</u>

One important motivation for appealing to rules is the idea that this is required in order to account for communication.[47] Without rules, it is argued, we get linguistic anarchy: People

could use their words in any way they like and so the important connection between language and communication is lost. The result is a 'Humpty Dumpty'-theory of meaning.

But this worry too is unfounded. The assumption is that the only possible constraints on use are norms. As should be clear from the discussion above, however, there is an alternative picture that constrains use in a much more powerful way. According to this picture, there is a constitutive relation between use and meaning such that in order to mean horse by 'horse' you must use (be disposed to use) your words in certain ways. The 'must' here, again, is not an 'ought' in disguise; it is not the 'must' of a prescription, but the 'must' of an internal relation. The claim is that there is an internal relation between meaning and use such that how S uses (is disposed to use) her words determines what she means by them. The theory is therefore fully descriptive, and yet linguistic anarchism is avoided. To take a famous example: Humpty Dumpty can mean a nice knock-down argument by 'glory', if he likes, but only if he uses (is disposed to use) 'glory' accordingly.[48]

So, instead of appealing to norms constraining use, one can make the relationship between use and meaning constitutive and thereby avoid linguistic anarchism. In fact, I think anybody who takes seriously the idea that there is an intrinsic relationship between meaning and communication should do it this way. As long as the constraints on use are merely prescriptive the connection between meaning and use is too loose to secure communication. This is so since prescriptive constraints allow for a creature to be a language user and yet not use her words in ways that are intelligible to others (because she consistently violates all her semantic prescriptions). Thus, on such a view, S could mean horse by 'horse' and yet use 'horse' in any way she likes.[49] By making the link between meaning and use constitutive, this kind of scenario is avoided.

3. Naturalism

One of the reasons Kripke's normativity requirement had such an impact on the philosophical community was that it seemed to pose a new threat to naturalism. If meaning is normative, if it implies an 'ought', then the problems of giving a naturalistic account of ethics could be transposed to semantic naturalism. And some people liked this: They liked the idea of having a knock-down argument against naturalistic theories of meaning and content.[50] So, the question is, if we reject semantic normativity are we stuck with naturalism (assuming this is something we would rather not be)?

No. What follows from the rejection of semantic normativity is not that <u>naturalism</u> is home safe, but that <u>descriptivism</u> is. We must not conflate these two notions. Of course, naturalism is a notoriously unclear notion. Early this century it denoted theories that avoided an appeal to the supernatural (such as Aristotelianism), today it often signifies some form of reductive theory about the mind, one which not only shuns an appeal to other-worldly entities but also to any intentional or psychological notions.[51] In addition, there is the famous 'naturalistic fallacy' of trying to derive an 'ought' form an 'is'. How all these notions of 'naturalism' are related is a topic in itself, but let me say the following.

A descriptive theory of meaning, again, is a theory which claims that meaning is to be accounted for in terms of what S does and is disposed to do, without any appeal to prescriptions. I have suggested that this claim is best understood as one about meaning determination: Meaning is determined by, supervenes on, what S does and is disposed to do. A naturalist theory, as the term 'naturalism' is most commonly used today, is one that attempts to account for meaning in purely non-intentional and non-semantic terms. Such a theory is reductive in the sense that it avoids appealing to intentional notions, but it may or may not take the form of providing a reductive <u>analysis</u> of meaning, i.e. it may or may not be an account which provides necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning.[52] Given these characterizations, it is clear that a theory may be descriptive but not naturalistic. That is, one might hold that meaning is

determined by use, but resist the suggestion that use can be given a fully non-intentional characterization.[53] Conversely, a theory may be naturalistic and prescriptive. Such a theory would grant that meaning essentially involves prescriptions, but suggest that we can give a naturalist reduction of these prescriptions.[54] Naturalism of the latter sort would be akin to ethical naturalism, which attempts to show that we can, after all, derive an ought from an is.

What follows, then, if Kripke's normativity requirement is rejected is that a crucial obstacle to descriptive theories has been removed, and this does mean that the naturalist has less to worry about -- naturalist theories of meaning can no longer be rejected on the grounds that such theories must fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy. However, naturalism goes beyond descriptivism, and the question therefore remains whether naturalism is acceptable.[55] And to answer that question we have to consider all the old objections to naturalism. For instance, there is still Davidson's claim that because rationality is constitutive of intentionality we should not expect a naturalistic reduction of meaning and content. This remains a challenge to naturalism, notice, even if we deny that Davidson's claim has anything to do with prescriptions. The challenge derives from the idea that rationality is constitutive of the intentional, but not of the physical, and that therefore psychology is governed by different constitutive principles than the physical sciences.[56] Moreover, the worry that a purely naturalistic account of meaning cannot allow for error, survives even if semantic normativity is rejected. To account for error, as suggested above, the function from meaning to use must be construed in such a way that not every difference in use is a difference in meaning. This requires distinguishing those differences in use which do imply a difference in meaning from those that do not, and it is a serious question whether this can be done within a purely naturalistic framework. So plenty of weapons remain for those who wish to go on a crusade against naturalism.

We can conclude, therefore, both that the standard versions of Kripke's normativity requirement should be rejected, and that the types of worries that have driven people towards

Kripke's thesis, can be resolved without appealing to semantic norms. For these reasons, I suggest we simply give up the uncritical commitment to semantic normativity and start afresh.[57]

Åsa Maria Wikforss

Stockholm University

ENDNOTES

[1] Kripke 1982.

[2] That Davidson's account of meaning qualifies as a pure use theory will be argued below, in section 1.4.

[3] See Boghossian 1989. Of course, Kripke's (or "Kripkenstein's") goal is to wipe out all theories of meaning. But people have been much less taken by Kripke's meaning skepticism than with the normativity thesis, and my focus here is on the latter.

[4] For instance, there is normative in the sense of evaluative, and normative in the sense of prescriptive, and it is not obvious that the former reduces to the latter. For a discussion of this see Bernard Williams 1985. See also von Wright's discussion of the distinction between *Tunsollen* and *Seinsollen*, norms for actions and 'ideal rules' (von Wright 1963, 14-15).

[5] Kripke 1982, 24.

[6] It should be noted that there are other dissenting voices. For instance, Akeel Bilgrami has argued that the assumption that meaning is normative must be rejected (Bilgrami 1992 and 1993). See also Coates 1986, Glueer 1999 and Horwich 1995.

[7] Boghossian 1989, 513.

[8] See Bilgrami 1993 for this point.

[9] Boghossian 1989, 533. See also Ebbs 1997, 18. Ebbs derives the normativity of meaning from the idea that we must aim at truth in making assertions. Similar reasoning can be found in Millikan 1990, 350-351.

[10] Of course, there is the suggestion, associated with Davidson, that epistemic notions are central to semantic notions and that, therefore, semantic normativity derives from epistemic norms. I discuss this suggestion in section 1.4 below.

[11] For a related point see Bilgrami 1993, 142-143.

[12] Searle 1969, chapter 3. See also Grice 1989.

[13] Grice is very clear on this. He groups the various rules for assertion under a general principle - the "Cooperative Principle" - the purpose of which is to make for ease of communication (Grice 1989, 26).

[14] Searle 1969, 141. That the belief in semantic normativity derives from a conflation of semantics with pragmatics is suggested by Rosen 1997.

[15] This point is made by G.E. Moore in his discussion of Wittgenstein's 1930-33 lectures: "It is obvious that you may use language just as correctly when you use it to assert something false as when you use it to assert something true." (1954, 80)

[16] McGinn 1989, 160.

[17] Jerry Fodor shows awareness of this. Responding to Boghossian's claim that any candidate for a theory of meaning must be such as to ground the normativity of meaning, Fodor writes: "The trouble is that requiring that normativity be grounded suggests that there is more to the demand of a naturalized semantics than that it provide a reduction of such notions as, say, extension. But what could this 'more' amount to?. . .I am darkly suspicious that the Kripkensteinian worry about the normative force of meaning is either a non-issue or just the reduction issue over again; anyhow, that it's not a new issue."(1990, 135-136).

[18] For a version of this objection to dispositionalism see Kripke 1982, 30, and Boghossian 1989, 537-538.

[19] This strategy for solving the problem of error can be found in C.B. Martin and John Heil 1998.

[20] The problem of error is therefore sometimes called the 'disjunction problem'. See Fodor 1988, 102.

[21] See Pagin 1997 for a discussion of the idea that meaning supervenes on use. Pagin makes very clear that the relationship between meaning and use need not be 'one-one', such that any difference in use is a difference in meaning (1997, 23-24).

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[22] Boghossian 1989, 532.

[23] See Blackburn 1984, 291; Brandom 1994, 29; McDowell 1984, 329; Wright 1984, 771-772.

[24] McGinn 1984, 60.

[25] Ibid. 147.

[26] Kripke 1982, 57.

[27] See Bilgrami 1992, 110-111, for a discussion of this.

[28] Burge 1979.

[29] Of course, this does not rule out pure use theories that take meaning to be determined by community-wide use, rather than by individual use. Nor need it rule out pure use theories that take the notion of 'use' to include causal interaction with the external environment. My focus here, however, is on the type of pure use theory that seems most vulnerable to this kind of objection.

[30] This claim is made by Bar-On 1992.

[31] See for instance McDowell 1991, and Wright 1984 and 1987.

[32] Kripke 1982, 37.

[33] The special relationship between an intention and its fulfilment is a central topic in Wittgenstein's middle period writings. See for instance Philosophical Remarks, 111.

[34]Kripke 1982, 25. Wright suggests the same: "Intentions have a normative power in the sense that an intention determines whether a particular course of conduct fulfils it." (1984, 777)

[35] To this it might be objected that, surely, one could be adding and not answer '125', as when one miscalculates. But that would miss the point here. The point is not that necessarily if you do not answer '125' to '68+57' you are not adding, but merely that internal relations are not prescriptive and that, therefore, the fact that the relation between intending to add and

answering '125' is internal does not show that it is normative. It is then a further question whether it should be said (as Kripke seems to do) that only she who answers '125' has fulfilled the intention to add.

[36] McDowell 1986,11.

[37] Ibid. 12.

[38] For a more recent version of this idea see Zangwill 1998.

[39] Davidson 1986.

[40] It might be thought that rationality is trivially a prescriptive notion since it implies prescriptions of the sort "If S believes that p, S should believe that q". This is mistaken. Spelling out rationality in terms of prescriptions is not at all trivial but presupposes a controversial view of belief as a matter of choice (since ought implies can). Anybody who rejects that view of belief will also deny that rationality is to be understood in terms of prescriptions.

[41] See Glueer 1997 for a discussion of the distinction between constitutive rules and norms.

[42] See Bilgrami 1992, 102-104, for a discussion of the relationship between Davidson's principle of charity and semantic normativity. Although Bilgrami uses a different argument than the one above, he too concludes that Davidson's appeal to rationality constraints does not imply semantic normativity.

[43] Kripke 1982, 23.

[44] Ibid., 23.

[45] Kripke 1982, 24. See also Gampel 1997 and Zalabardo 1997 who both argue that meaning must function as a guiding rule. Gampel puts it: "[m]eaning is like a rule, being essentially capable of serving to guide and justify linguistic use." (1997, 229).

[46] This, I believe, is the point of Wittgenstein's rule-following remarks: Construing meaning in terms of rule guidance would lead to a regress and so we must give up the assumption that

speaking a language involves being guided by semantic rules. This interpretation runs counter to the received view of Wittgenstein, but fits neatly with his insistence that our use of language is not justified but more like a primitive response. He says, for example: "'What made you call this color 'red'?'...Nothing <u>makes</u> me call it red; that is, <u>no reason</u>. I just looked at it and said 'It's red'." (Wittgenstein 1958, 148.)

[47] See for example Dummett 1986.

[48] Of course, if one is to secure communication it is essential that the constitutive relation between meaning and use is spelled out in such a way that communication is made possible. For instance, some form of regularities over time should be required. For this reason I think we should be skeptical of Davidson's more recent views (see Davidson 1986) according to which meaning is highly contextualized such that the meaning of my words may change from context to context. See Wikforss 1996 for an extended discussion of this question.

[49] Perhaps not quite in any way she likes, since the prescriptivist can hold that S must have some minimal competence with the expression in question in order to be subject to the relevant prescriptions (see Burge 1979, for example).This just shows, however, that the prescriptivist needs to add constitutive constraints (constraints defining minimal competence) and that it is these constraints, rather than the prescriptions, that secure the possibility of communication.

[50] See for example McDowell 1984 and 1994.

[51] See Burge 1992 who distinguishes between naturalism in the sense of 'physicalism', the claim that there are no mental, non-physical entities (a version of Aristotelianism within philosophy of mind) and naturalism in the sense of a methodological demand that mentalistic discourse must be explained, reduced, or eliminated in favour of a discourse which is acceptable in the natural sciences. An example of a theory which is naturalistic in the first sense but not the second, is Davidson's anomalous monism.

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[52] See Tye 1992 for a discussion of this. As an example of a naturalist theory which does not provide necessary and sufficient conditions Tye quotes Fodor 1990, 96.

[53] For example, the theories of Davidson and Peacocke are both descriptive, but neither is reductive since they do appeal to intentional notions in their account of meaning (although Peacocke's theory may be more naturalistic than Davidson's). See Davidson 1984 and Peacocke 1992.

[54] An example would perhaps be Millikan who accepts Kripke's normativity requirement but attempts to show how it is compatible with naturalism of the teleological sort (Millikan 1990).

[55] See Bilgrami 1992 for a related point. Bilgrami emphasizes that one can resist naturalistic reductionism on other grounds than that norms cannot be given a naturalistic reduction.

[56] Davidson is quite clear on this. Physical concepts, he says, "have different constitutive elements" than psychological concepts, and for this reason we cannot insist on a law-like connection between the physical and the psychological. (1980, 239).

[57] Thanks to Paul Boghossian, Bill Brewer, John Collins, Adam Green, Mark Greenberg, Peter Pagin, and Gideon Rosen for valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks to Akeel Bilgrami who first made me suspect that there is something wrong with the idea that meaning is normative, and to Kathrin Glueer with whom I have had extensive discussions on all of the issues discussed in the paper.