

SEMANTIC SCEPTICISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MEANING

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ABSTRACT

Nearly four decades ago, Saul Kripke articulated a semantic version of scepticism, according to which no finite goings-on, either mental or behavioural, can establish what someone means by an expression. The semantic sceptic reveals, among other things, the hopelessness of a deeply tempting—and widely made—assumption, to the effect that we must be able to articulate what it is for a subject to use expressions meaningfully by appealing exclusively to explanatory resources that do not presuppose meaningfulness. A radical reconceiving of our approach to meaning is required. According to a strain of thinking that is influential in contemporary philosophy, this reconceiving must amount to the denial that there is a general story to be told about what it is for expressions to be used meaningfully. If we accept that we cannot explain in more basic terms what it is for someone to mean something by an expression, we must also accept, the thought goes, that no general elucidation of meaning can be had.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the project of undermining this strain of thinking. It seeks to reveal that the dichotomy between reductionism and quietist non-reductionism about meaning is a false one. It does this in the first instance by examining, and ultimately rejecting, a range of views offered in response to the challenge: Kripke's own sceptical solution, semantic Platonism as well as views articulated in opposition to it, and Hannah Ginsborg's conception of meaning. Then, it proceeds to extract from the later writings of Donald Davidson a version of semantic non-reductionism that provides an answer to the challenge of the semantic sceptic. At the core of his view is the idea that we cannot shed light on what it is for expressions to be used meaningfully without shedding light on the special sort of active engagement characteristic of the simultaneous interaction of two subjects with each other and their shared world. Meaningfulness is grounded in such triangular transactions.

This dissertation also illuminates the connections between the philosophical conceptions, or some aspects thereof, of two thinkers who have made an enormous contribution to the project, central to analytic philosophy, of making philosophical sense of meaning. Davidson seems never to have been genuinely gripped by Kripke's challenge, and Kripke seems never to have engaged in any substantive way with Davidson's views on triangulation. And yet, Kripke's challenge about meaning and Davidson's overall conception of meaning can each be seen as lending support to the other. Furthermore, what Davidson's writings show is that endorsing semantic non-reductionism need not be the desperate move that Kripke takes it to be, for it does not force us to give up on the distinctively philosophical search for generality.

For my parents

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INTRODUCTION

We use linguistic expressions to communicate: to describe the world, to make jokes, to complain, to make confessions. We should be astonished that we can do all these things through the use of what seem, from an outside standpoint, to be just marks and sounds. Somehow, these marks and sounds are meaningful to us. This dissertation is an inquiry into what makes this possible.

Philosophical inquiries are often pursued in response to puzzling sceptics, who confront us with challenges that might initially seem easy to meet but turn out to be deeply perplexing. We illuminate the nature of knowledge by reflecting on the challenge posed by the epistemic sceptic, who claims that knowledge is not something that creatures like us can attain, and the nature of morality by reflecting on the challenge posed by the moral sceptic, who claims that morality is not something by which we are moved to act. In this dissertation, I try to shed light on the nature of meaningful expressions by considering the challenge of a semantic sceptic, who claims that using expressions meaningfully is not something that we are capable of doing. Our impressions to the contrary, this sceptic thinks, may play a useful role; however, they are illusory.

Unlike other sceptics, the semantic sceptic is a relatively young creature. She has come to life through a text published nearly four decades ago by Saul Kripke, inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Her starting point is the platitudinous observation that the meaningfulness of an expression consists in its having a condition of correct application, or a standard of correctness, which sorts its uses into correct and incorrect. The sceptic uncovers the difficulty of providing an account of meaning that does not make a mystery of this fact. Let us consider an example. If I mean *round* by 'round', my applications of 'round' are correct

when made to round things and incorrect otherwise. Now, imagine that I am holding a red marble in my hand, and that it is my first encounter with a round object that is red. My application of ‘round’ to it will be correct. However, the sceptic remarks that all my previous uses of ‘round’ are equally compatible with my meaning *round unless red* by them. Let us suppose that she is right about this. She then asks why I am so confident that it isn’t *round unless red* that I meant by ‘round’ in the past. If I did mean *round unless red* by ‘round’ (and if I intend to use the word in the same way I used it before), I should not apply ‘round’ to the red marble—I should apply some other word instead, she claims. Perhaps I should apply ‘square’, by which, she suggests, I always meant *square or red*.

Kripke, taking himself to be following in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s path, argues on behalf of his sceptic that any attempt to answer the question by citing mental or behavioural goings-on that reveal which standards of correctness govern our uses is bound to fail. To take only a few of the examples discussed by Kripke, one might claim that the relevant standard for the expression ‘round’ is determined by a disposition to apply ‘round’ to round objects, or by the psychological state of being attuned to the property of roundness, or by a mental image of a round item that is present whenever the expression is used, or by an experience uniquely characteristic of the state of meaning *round*. But in whatever way we may try to account for a use being governed by a particular standard, the account must be inconsistent with the claim that the use is governed by an alternative, deviant standard. Famously, none of the candidate accounts that Kripke examines seems to be able to meet this condition.

Much has been written about Kripke’s challenge ever since he first articulated it. Much of what has been written is based on an interpretation of it as involving not only the idea that standards of correct application are indispensable for the meaningfulness of expressions, but also

the idea that they render meaning normative in some robust sense. The fact that a phenomenon is normative poses a serious obstacle to any project that attempts to offer an account of it in more basic terms, and so, the thought goes, it is no wonder that no determinants of meaning have been found. As a result, a significant portion of the literature devoted to the sceptical paradox concerns the normativity of meaning—the idea that meaning is a source of categorical prescriptions, understood as prescriptions that hold independently of our aims and interests. As we shall see, it is open to us to read Kripke’s text without attributing to the sceptic the view that meaning is robustly normative in this way.

Some philosophers, including John McDowell and Barry Stroud, have suggested that the only way in which we could secure the intelligibility of the idea of governance by a standard of correctness is by viewing uses of expressions as meaningful. It is misguided, they think, to seek to give an explanation—any kind of explanation—of meaning and content. We can avoid dealing with the sceptic’s question if our descriptions of uses of expressions specify what is meant by them. For, they claim, a description of a particular use can be thought to be consistent with indefinitely many standards of correctness, and thus prone to the sceptical worry, only if that description does not specify the standard that governs the use. But if it does specify it—if it does say what is meant by the expression—then the description is, obviously, not consistent with indefinitely many standards or meanings. A description of my past uses of ‘round’ which states that I used it to mean *round* is not consistent with my having meant *round unless red* by ‘round’.

There may be no denying that what it is to use expressions meaningfully cannot be fully specified by appealing exclusively to resources that do not involve facts about what speakers mean by their expressions. However, the position espoused by McDowell, Stroud, and others—ultimately, a quietist view of meaning—might be accused of failing so much as to engage with

the philosophical question that motivates the sceptic's query; indeed, it might be accused of having altogether given up on philosophical elucidation. For even if we grant that we cannot describe meaningful use without specifying what the expressions used mean, there is still the question—the constitutive question, which quietists are not interested in answering—of what makes it possible to use expressions meaningfully. A non-reductionist approach to meaning need not be incompatible with genuine philosophical engagement with this question; it need not abandon the distinctively philosophical search for generality.

The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to articulate a non-reductionist response to the semantic sceptic's challenge, that is, a response that does not purport to offer an elucidation of meaning in more basic terms, but which nevertheless properly engages with the challenge. The response consists in a Davidsonian conception of meaning, at the centre of which is the claim that the idea of the meaningful use of an expression is constitutively linked to a distinctive kind of triangular transaction between two subjects and their common world.

I shall now offer a very brief overview of the dissertation. In the first chapter, I shall make a case for a way of interpreting Kripke's text that is different from one standard reading of it, on which the only condition that must be met by a successful answer to the sceptic is that of providing an account of what makes it possible for uses of expressions to be governed by standards of correctness. These uses are considered from a third-personal standpoint. On my reading, key to ascertaining the semantic sceptic's challenge is recognizing that its force is fully felt from the first-personal standpoint. As Kripke puts it, it is a challenge "from the inside" (1982, 15). The point of view of the speaker is thus indispensable for a proper construal of the challenge.

The possibility of reading Kripke's text in this way has been largely ignored—though there are, of course, exceptions—in part due to a certain lack of clarity in that text. For example, Kripke contrasts Wittgenstein's approach to meaning with that of W.V.O. Quine (Kripke 1982, 14-15). But Kripke appears not to make it entirely clear that there are two distinct dimensions along which their approaches differ. First, Quine is ultimately moved only by considerations about one's behaviour, while Wittgenstein, on Kripke's interpretation, obviously takes considerations about mental states of various sorts to be relevant. Second, Quine takes the third-personal standpoint to be central to our conception of uses of expressions, while Wittgenstein, as I take Kripke to interpret him, does not primarily rely on a third-personal approach in his inquiry into the nature of uses. These two ways in which their treatment of meaning differs should be kept apart.

The semantic sceptic's question should be understood as a question for the subject, and not merely for someone who considers the subject's states, including her mental states, from an outside standpoint, in an attempt to explain her uses and their meaningfulness. For one could offer a satisfactory explanation of our uses of expressions being governed by standards of correctness, without also offering an explanation of how those uses can be justified, one which would vindicate those uses from the subject's own perspective. The sceptic seeks an answer that is satisfactory from the perspective of the speaker herself, and not just from the perspective of the interpreter. Thus, we must distinguish between two conditions of adequacy that a conception of meaning must meet. These conditions correspond to two distinct features of meaningful uses of expressions: first, they are governed by standards of correctness, which sort them into correct and incorrect; second, they are non-arbitrary, that is, they are actions for which the speaker has reasons. An adequate account of meaning must show how these two conditions can be met.

In the second chapter, I turn to Kripke's sceptical solution. A solution is sceptical if it accepts the sceptic's argument while attempting to show that the kind of justification the sceptic was seeking is not needed for vindicating the ordinary practice that the sceptic challenges. Kripke's sceptical solution, on the standard interpretation of it, offers an alternate conception of meaning, according to which our ascriptions of meaning do not play a fact-stating role. After articulating the case for the implausibility of this interpretation as the right picture of meaning, I propose an alternative interpretation of the solution, according to which meaning facts are construed as intertwined with facts about agreement, in a way that does not allow us to explain either set of facts in terms of the other. This, however, is a version of the quietist approach to the constitutive question—a form of unilluminating non-reductionism.

In the third chapter, I investigate the plausibility of the idea that the meanings of our expressions are determined by external, self-standing entities, which I take to be tantamount to semantic Platonism. Some philosophers have suggested that it is this conception of meaning that is the real target of the sceptic's attack, and that the sceptical solution is not a denial of the fact-stating role of our ascriptions of meaning, but rather an attempt to re-conceive of the facts that such ascriptions allegedly capture. More specifically, according to this reading, the sceptical solution aims to resist the semantic Platonist conception of meaning, which the sceptic allegedly espouses. After arguing that semantic Platonism is unpalatable, I also argue that two prominent alternatives to Platonism recently proposed by George Wilson and Martin Kusch are unsatisfactory.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to what I take to be the most promising recent attempt at answering the semantic sceptic's challenge, namely the proposal put forward by Hannah Ginsborg. I start by explaining her view, which is supposed to carve a middle ground between

reductionist and quietist non-reductionist views. I argue that, as it stands, her view cannot offer a straight solution, because it cannot satisfactorily meet the first condition of adequacy put forward by the sceptic, according to which it must be shown what makes it possible for uses of expressions to be governed by standards of correctness. I then propose a modification of the way in which the distinction between using an expression correctly and using it incorrectly is accounted for on Ginsborg's picture, which would make it possible for her account to meet that condition. However, I show that this modification renders her proposal unable to meet the second condition, according to which one's account of meaning must show what makes it possible for uses of expressions to be non-arbitrary. I conclude that Ginsborg's proposal is unstable.

In the fifth chapter, I articulate an account of meaningful uses of expressions that is based on Donald Davidson's reflections on the necessity of triangulation, understood as the simultaneous interaction with a second creature and a shared world, for such uses. My reading of these reflections is informed by the development of them proposed by Claudine Verheggen.¹ What the triangulation argument reveals is that only an individual who recognizes that she might be mistaken can respond to the world in ways that are governed by standards of correctness. One cannot come to this recognition, and thus one cannot enter the realm of language and thought, by oneself, but only with another, through triangular transactions, which essentially involve the world, and through which standards of correctness that govern our responses to the world come into being.

The answer to the sceptical challenge, which I articulate in the sixth chapter, is thus a variety of semantic non-reductionism, albeit one that is very different from the version briefly

¹ See Chapter 1 of Myers and Verheggen 2016.

considered by the semantic sceptic and dismissed. I show how the two conditions of adequacy put forward by the sceptic can be met. Then, I turn to a challenge that exclusively targets non-reductionist views of meaning and content, which was recently mounted by Paul Boghossian and Crispin Wright. According to this challenge, non-reductionism is committed to the unpalatable claim that the only way to follow a rule is to do so “blindly”, and thus that our most basic responses to the world are not based on reasons. I try to offer some considerations in favour of the thought that the challenge is not effective against a Davidsonian account.

Lastly, I shall make some clarificatory remarks about structure. Given the enormous literature devoted to Kripke’s sceptical paradox, which cannot be tackled in its entirety within the confines of a dissertation, I had to be selective, perhaps even more so than is usual, with respect to the philosophical material that I addressed. My selection has been constrained in two ways. First, the interpretation of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* that I articulate in the first chapter, according to which, to repeat, the facts that we bring to bear on the sceptic’s constitutive question must be able to account for the speaker’s perspective on meaningful use, requires that I focus on proposals that do not seem entirely to lack resources to do so. This is why the conception of semantic Platonism that I start from in the third chapter conceives of the entities that determine meaning as capable of being grasped by the speaker’s mind, and as performing the determination task in this manner. This is also why the only detailed discussion of dispositionalism, which takes place in the fourth chapter, is focused on a view which conceives of the relevant dispositions as essentially involving a distinct variety of attitude, on the part of the subject, toward their manifestations. The other constraint, which I take to be closely related to the first, has to do with my conviction that semantic reductionism—the view that the semantic domain can be fully explained in non-semantic and non-intentional terms—is hopeless.

The proposals that I consider share—to various extents, and not always explicitly—this conviction. Thus, even though arguments against semantic reductionism are explained at various stages of this dissertation, they are not fully and decisively articulated. Moreover, views that are aimed at vindicating semantic reductionism are not seriously considered.

I also had to be selective with respect to the enormous literature devoted to Davidson's writings on meaning. While this dissertation is, in part, an attempt to interpret these writings, and to reveal the connections between them and Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, I might have gone further than Davidson would have been willing to go in certain respects. Ultimately, as I said, my main goal is that of making a contribution to the philosophical project of elucidating the nature of the meaningful use of expressions.

I. THE CHALLENGE OF THE SEMANTIC SCEPTIC

1. THE SCEPTIC'S QUERY

Consider the following scenario. I am confronted with a sceptic who holds a red marble in her hand. She asks of the red marble, 'Is this round?'. I look at the marble and say that it is, of course, round—I use the word 'round' to say so. But the sceptic, who obviously knows me quite well, remarks that my previous uses of the word 'round' are equally compatible with my using it to mean *round unless red*, rather than, as one might expect, using it to mean *round*. I seem to recall that, on multiple past occasions, I characterized certain things as round by using the word 'round'. Indeed, I described, using this word, the shape of various objects, such as oranges, clocks, and bagels. But I am astonished to discover that, implausible as it may be, this is my first encounter with a red thing that is round, and so this is my first opportunity to apply the word 'round' to something red. In light of this peculiar fact, the sceptic suggests that there is nothing in my previous uses of the expression 'round' that I can cite to deny that I have all along been using it to mean *round unless red*. Perhaps this is what I meant by 'round', she suggests, in which case I should not apply 'round' to the marble, for to apply 'round' to it would be to mischaracterize it. Even though her suggestion is perplexing, I must grant, it seems, that my previous uses of 'round' are compatible with understanding 'round' to mean *round unless red*. In fact, I now realize, my past uses of any expression (when its meaning is left unspecified) are compatible with many other ways of understanding it. This realization is disquieting. Despite the apparent compatibility between my past uses and each of the many meanings that I could have attached to the word 'round', there is, I am certain, only one meaning that I, as a matter of fact, did attach to it: I used 'round' to mean *round*. So, assuming that I wish to use 'round' in the

same way in which I used it before, I should apply it to the red marble in the sceptic's hand. There must be a way to show to the sceptic that she is wrong in suggesting that I might have meant something else, and, therefore, wrong in suggesting that I should not apply 'round' to the marble. But how could I persuade her of this? That is, how could I persuade her that it is *round* that I meant by 'round' in the past, and thus, given that what I mean by this expression has not changed, that it is 'round' that I should apply to the marble now?

This question is at the heart of Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, in which a "new form of philosophical scepticism" (1982, 7)—perhaps "the most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date" (1982, 60)—is presented. This variety of scepticism, semantic scepticism (or meaning scepticism), is inspired by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.² Kripke's sceptic calls into question the ordinary view that there is a fact of the matter about what we mean in our uses of language. She does this by asking me to specify the reason for which I apply an expression in a particular way in a particular case. If no considerations about my states of mind and behaviour can supply such a reason, scepticism about meaning ensues. Importantly, semantic scepticism is not merely epistemic. The sceptic allows me to answer her query from a cognitively ideal position, from which I have unencumbered access to facts about myself, more specifically, to facts about my mind and my behaviour, so that there is no such fact that I cannot cite. If, even from this ideal position, I cannot offer her a reason for my particular use of an expression, it must be because there is no such reason. And, if there is no such reason, I did not, in fact, mean anything by that expression. In Kripke's own words, "if it [the sceptical hypothesis] is false, there must be some

² I focus on the content of the sceptical challenge developed by Kripke, and not on its historical sources. Kripke made the first attempt to give substance to a semantic variety of scepticism. The semantic sceptic is, as I have said in the introduction, a relatively young creature, and so there is the question of how best to portray this creature, and thus how best to make sense of semantic scepticism.

fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it” (1982, 9). And if, even when equipped with complete knowledge of facts about my mind and behaviour, I cannot cite a fact that refutes it, then the sceptical hypothesis is not false, and meaning “vanishes into thin air” (1982, 22).

Kripke imagines a scenario that is not unlike the one I just described, the main difference being that it involves the use of a mathematical expression. Let us assume, with Kripke, that I have so far employed the expression ‘+’ only in relation to numbers smaller than 57. My past applications of it are obviously compatible with my understanding *addition* by it. But they are also compatible with my understanding *quaddition* by it, where quaddition is a function whose output is the same as that of the rule of addition for numbers lower than 57 and 5 for any numbers larger than 57. The sceptic casts doubt on the claim that I meant *plus*, rather than *quus*, by ‘+’ in the past, and thus that, given that I intend to use my signs in the ways in which I used them before, I should employ the sign ‘125’ when answering the query ‘68+57’. If no satisfactory response can be offered to the sceptic, then I cannot reasonably claim that I understand ‘+’ in any particular way, or that I mean anything by ‘+’ at any moment.

Kripke inspects a range of candidate meaning facts, which includes (but is not limited to) considerations about my behavioural dispositions involving the expression ‘+’, about the mental images that might accompany it, about the phenomenal features that I might experience when using it, and so on. He argues, on behalf of his sceptic, that none of these facts can offer a satisfactory answer, that is, that none of them can offer grounds for thinking that I meant addition by ‘+’ in the past, and none of them can point to a reason to use ‘125’ rather than ‘5’ in response to the sceptic’s query. He claims that the same is true with respect to any expression, including expressions that we use to talk about, say, medium-sized objects. For example, with respect to ‘table’, the sceptic claims that “by ‘table’ in the past I meant *tabair*, where a ‘*tabair*’ is anything

that is a table not found at the base of the Eiffel Tower, or a chair found there” (1982, 19). Since I do not seem to be able to defeat the sceptic’s alternative hypothesis about my usage of ‘table’, I can no longer claim to be using ‘table’ meaningfully. But, then, given that the line of thought generalizes, it seems that I can no longer insist that there are particular, determinate ways in which I understand my expressions, and so I can no longer take myself to mean anything by them. Here is how Kripke summarizes the problem:

This, then, is the sceptical paradox. When I respond in one way rather than another to such a problem as ‘68+57’, I can have no justification for one response rather than another. Since the sceptic who supposes that I meant quus cannot be answered, there is no fact about me that distinguishes my meaning plus and my meaning quus. Indeed, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by ‘plus’ (which determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all. (1982, 21)

The paradoxical and “absolutely wild” (1982, 9) claim to which Kripke’s reasoning leads is that meaningful uses of expressions are impossible. What is more, this problem does not affect only the meaningfulness of the sounds and marks that I produce. As Kripke himself notes, it would seem to concern just about any instance of concept application, threatening not only the very possibility of meaning something by an expression, but also the very possibility of thinking—of having intentional states with content. It thus puts pressure on the intelligibility of the notion of content. I focus on the case of using expressions meaningfully, though the Davidsonian treatment of the problem that I shall offer in the last chapter will bear on the notion of mental content as well as on that of linguistic meaning.

There are three ways of addressing the paradox, which it is urgent to do. One way is to try to defeat the sceptic by dissolving the challenge, that is, by showing that it is based on a confusion. Another way is to provide some facts that the sceptic either has not considered or has illegitimately dismissed, which would correspond to a straight solution. Yet another way is to claim that the only option in the face of the challenge is to try to show that, even though there is no problem with the sceptic’s argument, there is a way of conceiving of meaningful use that is

immune to it. Kripke pursues the third route. I shall discuss his sceptical solution in the next chapter. In the following two sections of this chapter, I shall focus on the challenge. I shall articulate a plausible way of interpreting it which, it seems to me, is different from many of the attempts at interpreting it that have been made thus far, and according to which we must distinguish between two conditions of adequacy that the sceptic puts forward. Then, in the remaining three sections, I shall briefly outline three candidates discussed by Kripke, and I shall suggest that one of them, namely non-reductionism, does not receive a fair treatment. I shall end by tackling the question of how different the two conditions really are.

Although much has been written about this challenge, much of it takes for granted a particular interpretation of the sceptic's remark to the effect that meaning is normative. On this interpretation, which is usually considered the orthodox interpretation, she is committed to the idea that it is constitutive of the meanings of our expressions that they generate categorical prescriptions—prescriptions that are binding independently of one's desires or aims—about how they ought to be applied.³ This conception of meaning has been heavily criticized.⁴ In recent years, there have been a few attempts to articulate an alternative interpretation of the sceptic's remarks that do not attribute to her the aforementioned conception of meaning.⁵ My own interpretation belongs to this tradition, inasmuch as it aims to offer an account that does not saddle the sceptic with the rather implausible view that there are distinctly semantic categorical

³ See, among others, Horwich 1990, Glüer 1999, Wikforss 2001, Hattiangadi 2007, Glüer and Wikforss 2009. The source of this interpretation is Boghossian 1989. But this text need not support the idea of categorical prescriptions being grounded in meaning facts, for it is not altogether clear that this is what Boghossian had in mind. Take, for instance, this claim: "Suppose the expression 'green' means *green*. It follows immediately that the expression 'green' applies *correctly* only to *these* things (the green ones) and not to *those* (the non-greens). The fact that an expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of *normative* truths about my behaviour with that expression: namely, that my use of it is correct in application to certain objects and not in application to others" (1989, 15). Boghossian later distanced himself from this interpretation.

⁴ By Hattiangadi 2007 and Glüer and Wikforss 2009, among others.

⁵ See, e.g., Zalabardo 1997, Guardo 2012 and 2014, and Bridges 2014.

prescriptions. Central to my account is that there are two conditions of adequacy that the sceptic expects to be met by an answer to her challenge.

2. THE FIRST CONDITION: STANDARDS OF CORRECTNESS

Addressing the semantic sceptic's challenge requires providing an account of what it is for our uses of expressions to be meaningful. The question is, what are the conditions that must be met in order for such an account to be satisfactory? As I said earlier, on one prominent view, the main condition involves normativity, or the idea that facts about what we mean categorically or unconditionally dictate how we ought to use expressions. But Kripke's formulations of this allegedly unique condition seem to vary significantly. Moreover, in his extensive discussion of dispositionalism, he writes, "[p]recisely the fact that our answer to the question of which function I meant is justificatory of my present response is ignored in the dispositional account and leads to all its difficulties" (1982, 37). So, it is the idea of a response being justified that is taken by Kripke to be central to the challenge. But what is meant by justification? Before answering this question (which I shall do in the next section), let us get clear on the notion of correct application, which is, by all accounts, fundamental to the challenge.

From the very beginning, it is clear that, for the sceptic, there is a distinction between correct and incorrect applications or uses of expressions. Kripke views correct applications as instances of what he calls "metalinguistic" correctness, as follows:

I perform the computation, obtaining, of course, the answer '125'. I am confident, perhaps after checking my work, that '125' is the correct answer. It is correct both in the arithmetical sense that 125 is the sum of 68 and 57, and in the metalinguistic sense that 'plus', as I intended to use that word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers I called '68' and '57', yields the value 125. (1982, 8)⁶

⁶ The expression '125' is used, and not mentioned, in the text. A better way of expressing Kripke's point would be to say that 'plus' denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers denoted by '68' and '57', yields the number denoted by '125'.

The suggestion is that, in order for something to be an instance of meaningfully using an expression, it must be governed by a standard of correctness, which classifies the uses of that expression into correct and incorrect. Thus, when I use an expression meaningfully, my use can be viewed as an element of an indefinitely long series of possible uses that are rendered, by the same standard, as correct and incorrect. That there are standards or conditions of correctness governing the uses of expressions is often taken to be a platitude.⁷ However, Kripke might be the first to have noticed that the platitude counts as a condition of adequacy on accounts of meaning determination.⁸

The fact that meaningful uses of expressions must be governed by standards of correctness does not entail that uses of expressions must be correct in order to be meaningful. It must be possible for an expression to be incorrectly, but nevertheless meaningfully, applied to an object. Thus, to apply an expression incorrectly is not necessarily to apply it in a way that does not accord with, or that goes against, its meaning. Rather, it is to apply it in a way that does not accord with the standard of correctness that governs its uses. For instance, I might apply ‘red’—by which I mean *red*—to a blue marble in order to tell a lie. My application would be incorrect, for ‘red’ applies correctly only to objects that are red, but it would still be meaningful.

There is, of course, the question of how exactly the notion of correctness itself is to be spelled out. For now, we may think of correctness as a placeholder for whatever one takes to be the central semantic notion. If one’s preferred theory has the form of a truth-conditional semantics, then the notion of correctness will be taken to be equivalent to truth: correct use is

⁷ Anandi Hattiangadi, for instance, refers to it as the Meaning Platitude (2006, 222), and takes it to be one of the “assumptions we can all share” (2006, 221). See also Boghossian 1989, Hattiangadi 2007, Glüer and Wikforss 2009, among many others. There are dissenters. Charles Travis, for example, thinks that Wittgenstein must be interpreted as resisting the platitude, which he characterizes as a Fregean idea. “What words name (by way of concepts and objects), and the structured way they do that, does not determine, uniquely, when they would be true” (Travis 2006, 2). See Bridges 2010 for a critical response to this interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remarks.

⁸ As remarked by Boghossian in his 1989, 15, for instance.

truthful use (i.e., use of a sentence that is true). If, instead, the central notion of one's preferred semantic theory is not truth but some epistemic notion such as that of assertability, correct use will be construed as assertable use (i.e., use of a sentence that is assertable in the circumstances of the use). If one takes a deflationist attitude toward semantic notions and adopts the view that the content of these notions is fully specified by trivial equivalence schemas (such as, for example, *the proposition that p is true iff p* (Horwich 1998), etc.), then the notion of correctness might have to be spelled out in a way that does not rely on the aforementioned notions.⁹

Regardless of the way in which correctness is conceived, the idea that conditions of correct application are mandatory for meaningful expressions is, to repeat, indispensable, supplying “the platitudinous core” of any adequate account of meaning (Hattiangadi 2007, 67). As Simon Blackburn puts it, this

...distinguishes the production of terms from mere noise, and turns utterance into assertion—into the making of judgment. It is not seriously open to a philosopher to deny that, in this minimal sense, there is such a thing as correctness and incorrectness. (1984, 29)¹⁰

There is one feature of the notion of correctness involved in the condition that meaningful expressions must have conditions of correct application that is worth emphasizing, namely that it rules out the possibility in which, when it comes to each use, the fact that the use is correct or incorrect is fully determined by considerations about the speaker's taking it to be so. If this

⁹ One might claim, for instance, that correctness can fully be specified in terms of conformity with a norm, which in turn could be explained by appealing to a regularity. This is Paul Horwich's recently developed approach (Horwich 2012). He writes that “a vital constraint on how the term “use” must be understood in the context of Wittgenstein's account of meaning is that there be the possibility of appreciating that we have been saying (and thinking) false things—that is, applying words incorrectly. It must be possible to discover that certain common uses of words are in fact mistaken” (2012, 71). He therefore accepts the platitudinous idea that there must be a distinction between correct and incorrect use. On his view, the discovery that one applies one's words incorrectly amounts to the realization that one has not been conforming to the law-like regularity specific of a word (2012, 117-121).

¹⁰ Similarly, Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss take the platitude to be that “meaningful expressions have semantic correctness conditions,” a fact which “can hardly be challenged”. The only controversy which they take this point to generate concerns “how these correctness conditions are to be construed, whether the basic notion of semantic correctness is that of truth or warranted assertability, for instance” (Glüer and Wikforss 2018; see also Glüer and Wikforss 2009).

possibility was not ruled out, just any use of an expression made by a speaker might be able to count as correct. But if just any use might count as correct, the notion of correctness is simply out of place, and, consequently, so is meaningfulness. This may be what Kripke seems to have in mind when he writes that “nothing is more contrary to our ordinary view—or Wittgenstein’s—than is the supposition that ‘whatever is going to seem right to me is right’ (§258)” (1982, 23-24).¹¹

Most have taken the idea that uses are governed by standards of correctness to supply the basis for the only condition of adequacy for conceptions of meaning articulated by the sceptic. Note, however, that the claim that the conditions of correct application of expressions are essential for their meaningfulness does not seem to have any obvious implications for how we should construe the speaker’s perspective on her uses of language. But the speaker’s perspective is, I submit, central to Kripke’s sceptical challenge, which is, as Kripke himself puts it, a challenge “from the ‘inside’” (1982, 15). He goes on to explain that “Wittgenstein’s challenge can be presented to me as a question about *myself*: was there some past fact about me—what I meant by ‘plus’¹²—that mandates what I should do now?” (1982, 15). The sceptic’s question should be understood as a question *for* the speaker, and not merely for someone who considers the speaker’s states, including her mental states, from an external standpoint, in an attempt to elucidate what she is doing. And yet most interpretations of the paradox tend to overlook the crucial role played by the speaker’s perspective. Indeed, most commentators overlook the significance of the distinction between a third-personal standpoint on one’s uses and one’s own

¹¹ It may also be what Boghossian has in mind when he writes, “my meaning something by an expression, it appears, does not guarantee that I *will apply* it correctly; it guarantees only that there will be a fact of the matter about whether my use of it is correct” (1989, 11).

¹² The expression ‘plus’ lacks quotation marks in the original text. It is clear, from the discussion, that this is an oversight on Kripke’s part, and so I took the liberty to add them.

standpoint on those uses, and thus they neglect the possibility that there are two fundamentally distinct constraints, or conditions of adequacy, that an account of meaning must meet. Thus, in addition to requiring that a satisfactory answer to the sceptic's question shed light on what makes it possible for the distinction between correct and incorrect uses or applications to be in force, the sceptic also demands that such an answer be able to depict the applications of expressions themselves as non-arbitrary. It is in connection to this condition, which I shall call the guidance condition, that the sense of normativity that Kripke takes to characterize meaning is, to my mind, revealed. The question is, how should we understand this demand for non-arbitrariness?

3. THE SECOND CONDITION: GUIDANCE

In this section, I shall inquire into the nature of the guidance condition. As we shall see, it is usually taken to amount to the idea that there must be inner mental items that guide the subject in her applications of expressions. I shall propose a more charitable construal, according to which applications of expressions must be able to be construed as made for reasons, and thus as capable of receiving reason explanations.

To begin with, we must take note of the fact that considerations about justification, guidance, and instruction are appealed to throughout *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private*

Language. For example, Kripke writes:

The basic point is this. Ordinarily, I suppose that, in computing '68+57' as I do, I do not simply make an unjustified leap in the dark. I follow directions I previously gave myself that uniquely determine that in this new instance I should say '125'. What are these directions? (1982, 10)

Three pages later, he writes:

Let me repeat the problem. The sceptic doubts whether any instructions I gave myself in the past compel (or justify) the answer '125' rather than '5'. (1982, 13)

He summarizes the sceptic's challenge as follows:

The sceptic argues that when I answered ‘125’ to the problem ‘68+57’, my answer was an unjustified leap in the dark; my past mental history is equally compatible with the hypothesis that I meant quus, and therefore should have said ‘5’. We can put the problem this way: When asked for the answer to ‘68+57’, I unhesitatingly and automatically produced ‘125’, but it would seem that if previously I never performed this computation explicitly I might just as well have answered ‘5’. Nothing justifies a brute inclination to answer one way rather than another. (1982, 15)

Moreover, as we have already seen, it is the notion of justification that Kripke resorts to when he lays down what might seem to be the unique condition for a successful account and writes:

[A]ny putative candidate for such a fact (...) must, in some sense, show how I am justified [in my use of the expression]. (...) Otherwise, the sceptic has not been answered when he holds that my present response is arbitrary. (1982, 11)¹³

It might seem obvious, in light of these passages, that, to repeat, the justificatory role of meaning is of great importance for the sceptic’s argument. But, as I have said, this role has been ignored in discussions of the challenge.¹⁴ What the sceptic would seem to demand is not to be shown that 125 is the right answer—it is not my mathematical ability that is being challenged—nor to be shown that the use of the expression ‘125’ is correct, which is something that the previous condition is supposed to guarantee. Rather, what the sceptic demands (in addition to what the first condition expresses) is to be shown that my use of ‘125’ is not arbitrary: I did not simply happen to hit on the correct use. The use must be able to be portrayed as, to use Kripke’s word, justified. But what is the sense of justification at play here? And does this condition really add anything substantive to the previous one? If so, what exactly?

¹³ Also, “recall that a fact as to what I mean now is supposed to justify my future actions, to make them inevitable if I wish to use words with the same meaning with which I used them before. This was our fundamental requirement on a fact as to what I meant” (1982, 40).

¹⁴ There are exceptions, of course, and they include Gampel 1997, Zalabardo 1997, Jackman 2003a, Verheggen 2011, Guardo 2012, Bridges 2014. However, the notion of justification employed in their discussions varies widely. E.H. Gampel might have been the first one to argue that it is in the nature of meaning to be essentially justificatory, and this sets meaning apart from other phenomena (Gampel 1997). According to Jason Bridges, “the justificatory role of meaning is the primary topic of the skeptical argument” (2014, 257). My interpretation is close to Bridges’s, though it also differs from it in some important respects, as we shall see.

3.1. The guidance conception of understanding

One way of answering this question is by claiming that meaningful use requires, as a necessary condition, that the speaker be guided, when she applies an expression, by an item antecedently present in her mind, which instructs her on how to proceed. For instance, when describing our intuitive conception of meaning, Kripke writes that “there is something in my mind—the meaning I attach to the ‘plus’ sign—that *instructs* me what I ought to do in all future cases. I do not *predict* what I *will* do ... but instruct myself what I ought to do to conform to the meaning” (1982, 22). I shall refer to this conception as “the guidance conception of understanding”.¹⁵

On this view, the mental items apt to guide or instruct one also justify one’s uses. The guidance that one receives by consulting the relevant mental item is the reason for one’s application in a particular case. For example, my application of ‘round’ to the red marble is justified by the fact that a mental item that embodies the meaning of ‘round’ instructs me to apply it in this way. I thus have grounds for my application, and my uses of ‘round’ are not arbitrary—they are the uses that I am somehow compelled to make by the mental item that guides me. Here is how the guidance conception of understanding has been characterized in discussions of Kripke’s challenge:

Kripke describes the problem as that of finding a fact that constitutes a person’s meaning and understanding an expression in one particular way rather than another, and he holds that any such fact must somehow ‘contain’ within it some ‘directions’ or ‘instructions’ to the person to say or do things in a certain way in virtue of meaning or understanding the expression in the way he does. (Stroud 1996, 180)

Meaning or understanding something by an expression is a matter of being instructed, guided, or justified in the use of that expression. (Ginsborg 2011a, 148)

[A]pplying one’s understanding is a matter of being guided by an image in one’s mind. To understand an expression’s or utterance’s meaning is to have an image¹⁶ in your mind that *you can consult* when you need to use or respond to the expression or utterance, and that will then show you how to proceed. (Bridges 2016, 377, italics added)

¹⁵ I am borrowing this label from Jason Bridges (Bridges 2014), who borrows it from Stroud (2000).

¹⁶ According to Bridges, the inner item need not be an image; later on, he invokes “transactions with inner or mental *guides*” (2016, 377, italics added).

If our account of meaningful uses of expressions entails that such uses must be viewed as made after having consulted items in the mind, we are obviously committed to the existence of such items. How should we conceive of them? There are two possibilities. On the one hand, the items might be akin to images or sensations—mental goings-on devoid of meaning. In this case, they would need to be interpreted in order to issue guidance. For something devoid of meaning cannot convey any instruction—it cannot convey content. A mental image can guide one only if one takes it in some way rather than other. However, in order to interpret such an item, one will have to use other meaningful expressions, or to rely on other meaningful items. This suggests that, on pain of inconsistency with our initial move, we will have to posit additional mental items that guide one in one's use of these additional expressions. We are thus embarked on a regress.¹⁷

The second possibility is to conceive of the guiding item as already meaningful, and as ready to be consulted by the speaker without the need for interpretation. However, the guiding item would still need to be understood—it would still need to convey its instruction to her, as it were—and the speaker would still need to understand it. Here, we find ourselves in the position in which we are explaining the meaningful application of an expression, which is tantamount to its being applied with understanding by the speaker, by appealing to a meaningful item in her mind and to her understanding of that item. We seem to have reproduced within the mind the phenomenon that we are trying to explain, and which concerns external expressions; no progress has been made. What is more, we seem to be in a position in which, yet again, we are bound to appeal to yet another meaningful mental item that can serve as a guide. For, as Bridges puts it,

...the point of the guidance conception was to illuminate the role of understanding in facilitating performances. If we see a need for such an account, why should the need not be as pressing with respect to the understanding of mental guides as it is with respect to the understanding of public expressions and utterances? (Bridges 2016, 379)

¹⁷ It is the same regress that Stroud outlines in 1990b.

Alternatively, it might be thought that the relevant mental item is simply a state of understanding of the expression; it is such a state that the speaker consults when she applies an expression to an object.¹⁸ And, once we offer an account of such states, a conception of their guiding powers will be available to us, or so the thought goes. But it is, at the very least, not obvious that the mere presence of such powers would be enough. Given that we must conceive of the state as something that instructs the speaker, something that the speaker must be able to consult, we cannot escape the requirement that the state itself must be able to be understood by the speaker, and thus we cannot avoid appealing to yet another state of understanding. Furthermore, there is the difficulty, which I shall not explore here, of making sense of the puzzling idea of one's understanding one's own state of understanding.

So, to summarize, by positing an inner mental item, we either find ourselves embarked on a regress of interpretations, or we find ourselves in a position in which, at best, we have made no progress.¹⁹ It would seem, therefore, that we should view the project of explaining what it is for the use of an expression to be meaningful as not requiring that we posit items that guide. Indeed, we should not assume that there must be something that accompanies a use, and which, by issuing guidance to the speaker, makes it meaningful. This is what Stroud seems to be suggesting:

What an expression means is to be found in its use, not in any fact or item which is supposed to give it or specify its meaning. Disconnected from any particular ways in which it would be correct to use or to respond to it, any such fact or object on its own would be at best only one more 'dead' sign. This is the key to recognizing the futility of appealing to an object in the mind or anywhere else. (Stroud 1996, 181)

Even though "we find it almost irresistible to appeal to something somehow 'behind' our

¹⁸ If properly spelled out, this thought is correct. See the next section for further discussion.

¹⁹ As I see it, the regress involved in the argument is similar to the regress of interpretations (McDowell 1984), but its source is not the problematic assumption that understanding requires interpretation, but rather the uncontroversial assumption that goings-on that are devoid of meaning cannot be understood unless they are interpreted. Furthermore, this regress corresponds only to one horn of the dilemma; the problem with the guidance conception is not exhausted by it.

observable utterances and responses, something we must understand to be mental or inner” (Stroud 1990b, 115), we are to resist the temptation of doing so. The consequences of surrendering to the temptation of “thinking of thought, meaning and understanding as something that accompanies the handling of sounds, marks, or other objects” are, Stroud thinks, “disastrous” (Stroud 1996, 173).²⁰

It would be equally disastrous, however, if we refused to leave any room for the idea that our uses of expressions are, in some sense, guided. For this would be tantamount to relinquishing the requirement of their non-arbitrariness. As we have seen, our uses of expressions must be able to be depicted as non-arbitrary from the perspective of the subject. The way in which they are non-arbitrary must be connected to what the subject means by them. In other words, there must be a sense in which our uses of expressions are made in light of, or guided by, our understanding of those expressions. Indeed, it is difficult to see how we might be able to differentiate between cases of mere conformity with meaning, so to speak, from cases of genuine meaningfulness, if the appeal to guidance is beyond reach. Someone who happens to hit on the right application of an expression (assuming that we can make sense, in such a case, of the idea of a correct application of an expression), but who does not genuinely mean something by it,

²⁰ It might be thought that the guidance conception of understanding is inextricably linked to the paradox, inasmuch as, if we renounce the former, we also dismiss the latter. This seems to be Stroud’s view (and it is also what Stroud takes to be Wittgenstein’s view). On this view, the sceptical paradox results from the inability to find facts that could play a guiding role; more generally, it results from our search for facts that explain meaning. But there is no need to search for such facts in the first place, Stroud claims. There is no need, that is, to search for *further* facts that make it the case that one means *plus* by ‘plus’: “that English speakers follow the rule that when asked ‘What is *x* plus *y*?’ it is correct to give the sum, is part of what the fact that “plus” means *plus* amounts to” (Stroud 1996, 182). The craving for more is the unfortunate consequence of the failure fully to recognize that “what an expression or a speaker means (...) or what is a correct application of or response to an expression, are not equivalent or reducible to facts which are not themselves specified in similarly intentional or semantical or normative terms” (Stroud 1996, 184). Non-reductionism is depicted as being on a par with quietism, such that, if one recognizes the hopelessness of attempts at reduction, one must also recognize that no explanatory goals can be pursued concerning meaning. It is the refusal to accept quietism that might lead us to think that some further goings-on, such as guidance by general items, are involved in one’s use of expressions, goings-on that require explanatory work, or so Stroud seems to think. As we shall see, I do not think that non-reductionism commits us to quietism.

cannot be said to use the expression meaningfully, precisely because there is no sense in which her own understanding of the expression plays a role in the use.²¹

Alex Miller undertakes to rescue the idea that uses of expressions are guided by one's understanding of that expression (Miller 2017). Contra Stroud, Ginsborg, and Bridges, he argues that it is not threatened by a regress. He suggests that the regress argument offered against the guidance conception is based on a false assumption, namely that "guidance by a rule necessarily involves interpretation," where "an interpretation of a rule [or meaningful expression] R is another rule [or meaningful expression] R* which tells an agent what rule R requires in a particular situation" (Miller 2017). But if we do not commit ourselves to this way of construing guidance, that is, if we accept the possibility of being guided by a rule without needing to interpret it, no regress ensues.

The assumption that guidance requires interpretation is, on Miller's view, equivalent with the idea that understanding requires interpretation. This idea leads to a regress of interpretations. Here is how. If understanding an expression requires interpretation, it necessarily involves another expression that supposedly instructs one on how to understand, or what to do with, the first expression. But, then, understanding the second expression will also require interpretation, hence another expression—hence, the regress. It must be possible not only to understand, but also to apply, an expression without the mediation of another expression that instructs one in one's understanding or in one's use.²² Accepting this possibility is, Miller thinks, consistent with the idea that "there is such a thing as guidance by a rule [or meaning]" (Miller 2017). Miller

²¹ McDowell notes that Wittgenstein is preoccupied with "the relation between knowing the ABC, or understanding the principle of a number series, on the one hand, and the actions one performs in reciting the ABC, or extending the number series, on the other" (2010, 163n2). Bridges makes a similar point, emphasizing the explanatory dimension of this relation (Bridges 2016). If McDowell and Bridges are correct, and if my interpretation of Kripke's challenge is right, the gap between the challenge of the semantic sceptic and Wittgenstein's own reflections is not as wide as it is sometimes thought.

²² See also McDowell 1984.

concludes that the guidance condition “remains intact” (Miller 2017). Thus, any account of the constitution of meaning must make room for the idea that the speaker’s uses of an expression are guided, in an immediate way, by her grasp of its meaning.²³ Should we conclude that the guidance conception of understanding, as we have been conceiving it, is rehabilitated? In the next section, I shall suggest that we should not.

3.2. Two conceptions of guidance

There is a distinction between two ways of construing the guidance provided by a state of understanding that we ought to register. One construal is unobjectionable, while the other is problematic. As I see it, Miller rightly defends the former, while Stroud rightly rejects the latter. It is crucial that we recognize, with Miller, that there is a substantive condition on theorizing about meaning (and on successfully answering the sceptic) that involves guidance, and we must abandon, with Stroud, the guidance conception of understanding. Thus, ultimately there may be no disagreement between them.

Let us start by further examining the guidance conception. We have seen that, on this view, applying an expression meaningfully requires that one consult an item in one’s mind. The mere possibility of consulting such items suggests that they are antecedent to the uses whose meaningfulness depends on having consulted them. This in turn suggests that they have a certain

²³ Miller thinks that the argument against the assumption that guidance requires interpretation is to be found in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. He notes that “Wittgenstein himself appears to have no problem with the idea that grasp of a rule provides guidance or instruction” (Miller 2017). For, according to Miller, “Wittgenstein is not saying that when you follow a rule you are not being guided by it, but that when you follow a rule you are not being guided by your grasp of some distinct, further rule (or by a distinct application of the same rule). (...) [T]here is no suggestion that grasp of the rule doesn’t provide guidance, but merely that the guidance isn’t mediated by guidance by some further item” (Miller 2017). As I mentioned before, I shall limit myself to questions pertaining to the interpretation of Kripke’s text; questions about the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein’s text will have to be left for another occasion.

independence from the series of uses, which they must precede. For, presumably, in order for the very first meaningful use of an expression to be made, there must be an item that guides (or, at least, that is able to guide) the speaker. On this picture, to understand an expression, or to grasp a meaning, is simply to internalize an item that will subsequently instruct one on how to proceed with the expression. This seems to be a central commitment of the conception.

This is the conception of guidance that Stroud urges us to relinquish. It is essential to the kind of guiding item being denounced by Stroud that, to use his way of expressing the point, it merely *accompanies* the use, which it necessarily precedes. Thus, a crucial ingredient of this view is that the relationship between mental entities that serve as guiding items and the uses of expressions that are guided by those entities is not constitutive: the former must be prior to the latter, and thus guiding items must in this way be independent of uses. They must be no more than mere accompaniments of them. For, again, the meaningfulness of uses must be able to be explained (and justified) in terms that appeal to the mental entities that necessarily precede them. Furthermore, it is precisely because the entities in question must be seen as prior to meaningful use of language that Stroud takes them to be in need of interpretation. Anything that is disconnected from use, anything that is outside of it, must be interpreted if it is to provide any instruction, which is why anything that is disconnected from use is ultimately irrelevant.

However, Miller represents Stroud as assuming that “if a speaker’s grasp of the meaning of an expression guides particular uses of that expression then a question about *the interpretation of that meaning* arises” (Miller 2017, italics added). But it seems to me that it is open to us to read Stroud as suggesting that what requires interpretation is the “object or item or fact” (1996, 181)—not the meaning. Objects, items, facts are importantly different from the meanings of expressions. The same goes for what Stroud calls “inner mental item[s]” (1990b, 117). Thus,

the assumption that Stroud seems to rely on is not that guidance necessarily requires interpretation, as Miller suggests, but that something that is essentially divorced from the meaningful use of language, whether located in the external world or in the “mysterious or occult ‘inner’ medium” (1996, 173), necessarily requires interpretation. The problem, for him, lies in the idea of there being something that must be consulted prior to the use of language. Stroud writes:

The mystification is due to our thinking of thought, meaning, and understanding as something that *accompanies* the handling of sounds, marks, or other objects. Wittgenstein tries to expose that disastrous assumption by showing that *whatever* might be thought to accompany the use of a sound or mark would be nothing better than another ‘dead’ mark or object or event. (Stroud 1996, 173)

We thus must reject the claim that understanding an expression, and meaningfully using it, require engaging with a further “object or item or fact” (1996, 181), Stroud thinks. Such items must altogether be excluded from our reflection on the nature of meaning. But Stroud also writes that this “would not be to deny that thinking, meaning, and understanding must be present if producing and responding to sounds and marks is to amount to human communication” (Stroud 1990b, 117). This, to my mind, clearly suggests that the idea that understanding guides use is not to be discarded. Rather, what needs discarding is a certain conception of states of understanding as fundamentally distinct from the applications of expressions made in light of them—in other words, what needs discarding is the guidance conception of understanding. This brings us to the second way of fleshing out the idea that meaning guides use, which is, to my mind, unobjectionable, and to which I suspect that Stroud himself would not object.²⁴

²⁴ Stroud also writes that “the ‘use’ of an expression as it is relevant to meaning is the distinctive role the expression plays in the activities in which human beings utter it and respond to it as they do. Those actions and responses can help identify that meaning only if they are seen and understood as intentional; to ascribe them to those agents is to ascribe attitudes with intentional contents” (1996, 184). This suggests that the use of an expression must be understood as an intentional action, and thus must be able to be explained as such. No such explanation would be forthcoming if we did not attribute intentional states to the speaker, including, presumably a state of understanding. Moreover, in a more recent paper, when discussing the case of a subject who is given the number 2 and the instruction ‘Add two each time’, Stroud writes:

One might easily guess at this stage that I take this second view to be based on the idea that the states of meaning and understanding of a speaker are not altogether independent—are not constitutively distinct—from her uses of expressions. On this view, a state of meaning cannot be said to be antecedent to meaningful uses, for there is an essential connection between meaning and use.²⁵ One consequence of this thought is that it is not possible for one to understand expressions unless at least many of those expressions have been meaningfully applied (or meaningfully responded to). Importantly, to say that meaning and understanding require use is not to deny that meaning and understanding guide use; it is only to insist that we think of guidance in the right way. For instance, it is to insist that we cannot take guidance to involve a consultation, by the agent, of something that is entirely antecedent to her uses of the expression. This is why it is not altogether obvious that there is genuine disagreement between Miller and Stroud, despite the fact that Stroud recommends abandoning the guidance conception of understanding, and Miller rehabilitates the idea of uses being guided by meaning. I shall come back to Miller's view, and his conception of what makes guidance possible, in the last chapter.

Furthermore, there is room not to take the sceptic's talk of guidance as a symptom of her

...her application of the rule at each particular point could be said to be drawn from, or to issue from, her understanding of the general rule. It is because she understands the general rule in the way she does that she knows to put '10' right after '8'. The correctness of that step, and of each of the other steps she makes, is felt to be somehow "contained" in her understanding of the general rule, and needs only to be "extracted" from it.

It is when we ask exactly how someone who understands the general rule "extracts" from that understanding a particular application of the rule that we stand on the brink of the misunderstanding Wittgenstein warns against. (2017, 133)

This suggests that, by Stroud's lights, the source of the trouble comes from seeking to understand what is involved in consulting the state of understanding, not from the very idea of the use being made in light of one's understanding.

²⁵ That the elucidation of meaning is to be pursued through reflection on how words are used is one of the lessons of the *Philosophical Investigations*. ("For a large class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning"—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953, §43).)

endorsement of the guidance conception of understanding. When Kripke says, for instance, that “when we consider a mathematical rule such as addition, we think of ourselves as guided in our application of it to each new instance” (Kripke 1982, 17), he says something unobjectionable. In order further to flesh out the right conception of guidance, I shall turn to another recent interpretation of Kripke’s text.

3.3. Bridges’s interpretation of the sceptical challenge

In a recent paper devoted to elucidating the nature of Kripke’s paradox, Bridges makes a claim that is, given the vast philosophical literature produced during the past three decades in reaction to Kripke’s sceptical problem, extraordinary. The claim is that “the real source and character of Kripke’s sceptical doubts have never come into clear view” (2014, 249). According to Bridges, the standard interpretation of Kripke’s text, which Bridges calls “the evaluative interpretation”, fails to take into account a crucial strand in the argument. The evaluative interpretation, which corresponds to the first condition outlined in the second section of this chapter, is simply the view according to which accounting for how standards of correctness that govern uses of expressions are fixed is all there is to answering the sceptic’s challenge. In other words, the challenge, on this interpretation, is that of providing an account that is apt to explain that “the meaning of an expression, like the rules of a dance, provides a standard, or norm, against which performance is determined as correct or incorrect” (2014, 252). Even though, according to Bridges, this interpretation can explain Kripke’s rejection of reductive dispositionalism (for, Bridges suggests, dispositions cannot perform the task of sorting performances into correct and incorrect), it fails to explain Kripke’s rejection of a different sort of proposal, namely the non-reductionist one (2014, 254), so it should not be taken as a complete interpretation of the text.

The idea that uses of expressions are governed by standards of correctness is not puzzling unless one has a reductionist approach to meaning.

Bridges then claims that we can make sense of Kripke's rejection of non-reductionism either by attributing to him a commitment to the reductionist project, whose goal is to offer a specification of the meaning-constituting facts in terms that do not presuppose meaning, or by finding an additional condition that should be met by a satisfactory answer, and which puts independent pressure on the non-reductionist proposal. The former route is deemed "extremely dubious" (2014, 254), for Kripke never expresses a commitment to any form of semantic naturalism.²⁶ Bridges pursues the latter route; he argues that the aspect of meaning that Kripke has uncovered has to do not with the distinction between correct and incorrect use, but rather with the idea that meaning plays a justificatory role with respect to use. According to Bridges, then, there is a second condition, which is, in fact, "the central element" as well as "the real basis" of the challenge, and which, in his view, reveals that "the justificatory role of meaning is the primary topic of the sceptical argument" (2014, 256-7).

Bridges relies on the sceptic's appeal to the metaphor of blindness—the idea of something being a stab in the dark, or an arbitrary response—in order to flesh out the additional condition on a satisfactory answer to the sceptic. On his reading, in order for a performance not to be a stab in the dark, it must be justified, by which he means that it must be done for a reason. He calls this "the justification requirement."²⁷ He thinks that this requirement explains Kripke's

²⁶ I disagree with Bridges here, not because I think that Kripke expresses such commitments, but rather because one might be committed to reductionism unbeknownst to one, and I believe that the sceptic might just be in this position. I shall discuss Kripke's dissatisfaction with non-reductionism later in this chapter.

²⁷ Bridges writes:

What would it take to show that Kripke's answer was not a stab in the dark? To say that his answer was a stab in the dark is to say that it was a guess. And to say that it was a guess is to say that Kripke had no reason for giving that answer as opposed to another. This suggests that the justification requirement is best construed, in application to this particular case, as the demand that our account reveal Kripke's reason for

dismissal of non-reductionism, for Kripke takes himself to have unearthed “certain seemingly problematic or paradoxical features of the envisioned states of meaning,” which raise serious doubts about the very possibility of such states. And, “when a compelling doubt has been raised about the very intelligibility of a supposed property or state of affairs, it is no defense to style it as *sui generis*” (2014, 255). Bridges does not say more than this about Kripke’s dismissal of non-reductionism. As we shall see, I take this dismissal to be rooted in an implausible conception of non-reductionism, and thus ultimately unmotivated.

Let us further examine the justification requirement. A characteristic of acts done for reasons—acts that are justified, in Bridges’s sense—is that they are capable of receiving explanations of a distinctive sort. It is generally true that things that happen can be explained: we wonder why they happen, and we answer, or endeavour to answer, by citing some facts. However, when we wonder why someone did something, the facts that are apt to answer the question involve the speaker’s perspective on what she did. To explain why someone did something, we must appeal to her reason for doing it, or to that which she took to count in favour of her act, and which in fact made her act. As Bridges puts it, “when we say that a person S’s reason for A-ing was B, we imply that S took B to be a reason for her to A, and that this fact about S explains her A-ing” (2014, 259). This is because “rational [or reason] explanations explain actions and attitudes in terms of the subject’s conception of what supports or counts in favour of them” (2014, 260). Bridges suggests that the sceptic expects a conception of meaning to supply the materials for making sense of reason explanations for our uses of expressions, and

giving the answer ‘125.’ According to [standard] views of rational explanation and rule-following, giving Kripke’s reason for his answer will involve portraying his answer as explained by his taking the rule for addition to justify that answer. The justification requirement, as I think we ought to construe it, is the demand that our account of what constitutes Kripke’s meaning plus by “+” entitle ourselves to this portrayal of Kripke’s performance, in which his answer is explained by the justification he takes the rule to provide for it. (Bridges 2014, 261)

that she takes herself to show that no sense can be made of this idea by the candidate conceptions. So far, I agree with Bridges's interpretation of the sceptic's argument, that is, I agree that the sceptic requires that we construe uses as calling for reason explanations thus understood. But there are at least two further moves made by Bridges that should be resisted.

First, he thinks—with many others, including Stroud and Ginsborg—that Kripke has a clear expectation about how the justification requirement is to be met, which involves the guidance conception of understanding. Indeed, he thinks that Kripke “seems almost to run them together” (2014, 267). Thus, as far as the sceptic is concerned, an application of an expression (or of a rule, for Bridges's discussion is carried out with respect to rules, rather than meanings, for reasons which will become clear in a moment) is justified only if the speaker is guided by a mental item that instructs her with respect to it (Bridges 2014, 268-9). In other words, reason explanations can be made to work only if guiding items can be found in the minds of agents. We have already seen that we should hesitate to ascribe this problematic view to the sceptic.

Second, according to Bridges, it is, at the very least, not obvious that using expressions meaningfully is an instance of acting intentionally, or something that speakers intentionally do. This is because it is not clear that the descriptions under which uses of expressions are intentional include, in addition to those that cite the content of the utterance, descriptions that specify the expressions used. To take an example, for Bridges, it is doubtful that an utterance of mine of the word 'round' (more specifically, of a sentence that contains this word) counts as intentional under any other description than 'I said that the marble is round' (or something like it), which is a description that only cites the content of the utterance—it is silent with respect to the words used to express that content. (The description is entirely compatible with my having used some other word, indeed with my having used an altogether different language that lacks

the word ‘round’, when making the utterance.) Thus, the sceptic is allegedly wrong to take uses of expressions—as opposed to acts of saying things, of voicing thoughts—to call for reason explanations. As Bridges puts it,

The basic question is whether it is right to think that the meanings of linguistic expressions serve as reasons for which we use those expressions as we do. Certainly, the use of language is a rational activity: we generally have reasons for saying the things we do. But it is consistent with this point to suppose that for a fluent speaker of the language, the only descriptions under which her utterances (or responses to utterances) will be intentional (at least in typical cases), and hence the only descriptions under which she will have reasons for those utterances (or responses), are descriptions that cite the utterances’ content. On this picture, the question of what Kripke’s reason was for answering ‘125’ in response to ‘68+57?’, when interpreted strictly, may not have an answer. The answerable question in this vicinity may rather be what Kripke’s reason was for answering 125 when asked what 68+57 is. It would certainly be natural to answer this question by citing a rule as Kripke’s reason, but the rule will not be a rule for the use of a linguistic expression. (Bridges 2014, 264n17)²⁸

This interpretation, however, seems to suggest that Kripke is very confused: the paradox that he articulates may have nothing to do with meaningful expressions! Thus, if the sceptical argument succeeds, it renders rule-following unintelligible, indeed impossible, but, as Bridges sees it, this unintelligibility will have no consequences for our conception of meaningful uses of expressions. This is because, as I said before, while Bridges takes it to be undeniable that rules can serve as reasons—as Bridges puts it, “if I am following the rule for the Fibonacci sequence, then the rule is my reason for proceeding as I do—to put it another way, it is the reason for or upon which I proceed” (2014, 259)—it is, in Bridges’s view, doubtful that meanings can serve as reasons, or that the fact that I mean something by an expression provides me with, or contributes in any way to, a reason to proceed in a certain way with respect to it. The question, of course, is whether Bridges is right to doubt this. I shall suggest in the next section that the answer to this question is negative.

²⁸ This view is also defended, in the context of a different debate, by Jennifer Hornsby. According to Hornsby, “when a speaker says that p, there need be nothing such that she intentionally does it and says that p by doing it” (2005, 118). On her view, the use of signs or expressions, when made by competent speakers, need not be an intentional activity. What is intentional is speaking—voicing one’s thoughts. See Stanley 2005 for a response to Hornsby. See also Heck 2006 for a defence of the claim that uses of expressions are made for reasons.

3.4. Does meaning something by an expression serve as a reason for use?

We may start by noting an obvious, and widely invoked, analogy between meanings and rules, namely the fact that both meanings and rules classify actions or performances into those that accord with them and those that do not. Bridges agrees, but he resists taking this analogy any further. More specifically, he thinks that it is, at the very least, unclear “whether a user of language *follows* meanings, in the way a rule-follower follows a rule” (Bridges 2014, 258-259n11). It is, consequently, unclear whether “the meanings of linguistic expressions serve as reasons” (2014, 264n17) in the way in which rules obviously serve as reasons (in cases in which they are followed).²⁹ He doubts that “Kripke is right about this” (2014, 258), that is, about the fact that meanings do serve as reasons. But he does not offer any substantive considerations in favour of this doubt. I side with Kripke here, and I take it that the sceptic’s challenge does target, primarily, the possibility of using expressions meaningfully.³⁰ If to follow a rule is to take that rule to be (or to contribute to) a reason for one’s actions, to follow a meaning, so to speak, is to take that meaning—more specifically, to take what one means by an expression—to be (or to contribute to) a reason for one’s uses of that expression.

One obstacle to recognizing this aspect of the analogy has to do with the following way in which rules and meanings might differ. On the one hand, following a rule seems to require that one’s actions pertain to the category of actions that accord with it, or at least that they be

²⁹ I take the question of whether, preserving the awkward formulation for the sake of consistency, it is possible to follow a meaning to be equivalent with the question of whether it is possible for meaning to serve as a reason for someone’s uses of expressions.

³⁰ McDowell says that “it strikes [him] as unquestionable that speech-acts are intentional under verbal descriptions” (McDowell 2006, 47). An example of a verbal description is “uttering the words ‘You have a bit of spinach on your front teeth’”, and an example of a propositional description is “telling one’s wife she has a bit of spinach on her front teeth” (McDowell 2006, 47).

taken, by the follower, to pertain to that category. It might seem that I cannot be said to follow a rule in performing a certain action if I do not even view my action as conforming to that rule.³¹ On the other hand, meaning something by an expression does not require that one's uses of that expression pertain to the domain of correct uses of it. Crucially, however, it also does not require that they be taken by the speaker to pertain to that category. One might mean something by an expression even when one intentionally applies it incorrectly. For instance, one may be telling a lie, making a joke, devising a metaphor, and so on. To apply an expression incorrectly—and to do this intentionally—is not to fail to accord with its meaning, even though it is to fail to accord with the standard of correctness whose governance makes it possible for it to mean what it does. Thus, it might be tempting to think that meanings are not followed in the ways in which rules are, and that meanings do not serve as reasons in the way in which rules do. More generally, the domain of meaning is much less neat than that of rules, which is why the analogy might be thought to collapse.

However, even though meaning something by an expression, unlike following a rule, does not require that one takes one's application to be correct relative to that meaning, it is still the case that the reason for the application must involve the standard of correctness associated with it, and thus its meaning. For example, it is precisely because I take the application of a particular expression to be incorrect in a particular context that I make it when attempting to tell a joke in that context. Similarly, it is precisely because I take its application to be correct with respect to a particular object that I make it when attempting to offer a characterization of that object. Thus, this difference between meanings and rules does not threaten the claim that

³¹ This is not to deny that one could, say, cheat in a rule-governed practice, such as a game, and still count as playing the game. One could disobey a rule of a game without ceasing altogether to play it.

meanings or standards of correctness serve as reasons for our applications.³²

Another line of thought that may lead one to resist the analogy between meanings and rules—more specifically, the idea that we follow meanings just as we follow rules—would perhaps start from the observation that it is plausible to accept the analogy only if we think that meaning is metaphysically determined by norms, in a way that would make norms metaphysically prior to meanings.³³ But, the thought goes, it is not the case that meaning is so determined, for reasons that we need not go into here, and so the analogy cannot go through. But the starting point for this line of thought is misguided: rules need not determine meaning in order for meanings to be able to be followed by speakers in the way in which rules are followed. In other words, it may be constitutive of meaning that speakers be able to follow meanings, in a way analogous to that in which they follow rules, without there being rules or norms that metaphysically determine meanings. We shall return to the idea that uses of expressions call for reason explanations after we briefly review a proposal that is similar to the one made by Bridges.

3.5. Zalabardo's interpretation of the sceptical challenge

The interpretation of the challenge offered by José Zalabardo is similar to Bridges's, inasmuch as Zalabardo agrees that taking Kripke's sceptic to put forward one condition, which states that uses of expressions must be able to be sorted into correct or incorrect, fails to explain certain moves in

³² As Michael Dummett puts it,

Any adequate philosophical account of language must describe it as a rational activity on the part of creatures to whom can be ascribed *intention* and *purpose*. The use of language is, indeed, the primary manifestation of our rationality: it is *the* rational activity par excellence. (Dummett 1993, 104)

³³ The claim I have in mind is that “determination by norms is metaphysically ‘responsible for’, or constitutive of, meaning (...): It is *because* of the norms that expressions have meaning, not vice versa” (Glüer and Wikforss 2018). Glüer and Wikforss refer to the normativity involved in this relation of determination as “meaning-determining normativity”.

her dialectic. More specifically, Zalabardo thinks that the reading according to which the sceptic formulates only the condition that uses of expressions be governed by standards of correctness makes it difficult to identify what exactly Kripke takes to be the problem with the dispositional account of meaning.³⁴ Zalabardo's interpretation differs radically from Bridges's on this particular issue. As we have seen, on Bridges's account, there are no difficulties in explaining the rejection of dispositionalism if one adopts his alternative reading. I shall not address here the question of who among the two is right about this.³⁵ I shall focus instead on the alternative reading that Zalabardo proposes. On this reading, the crucial condition is that whatever facts we deliver to the sceptic must be such that they be able to provide guidance to the agent. Dispositions are not able to provide any guidance, which entails that they cannot be taken to determine meaning:

Satisfaction facts [*i.e.*, facts about which objects satisfy each predicate] have to ground claims about how I should apply predicates by telling me which applications to endorse. Dispositional facts cannot ground such claims because they don't meet this condition—they don't tell me which objects to apply each predicate to. (1997, 284)

More generally, the answer we deliver to the sceptic must portray us as justified in our uses of expressions. According to Zalabardo,

Whether a given procedure for answering K-questions [*i.e.*, questions of a certain kind] is justified can be expected to depend on which facts determine how K-questions should be answered, and on how the procedure is related to these facts. (1997, 285)

To take an example, whether a given procedure for answering the question of whether I should apply 'round' to the marble is justified depends on the facts that determine how questions about the applications of 'round' should be answered (*i.e.*, the meaning-determining facts), as well as

³⁴ Zalabardo takes the standard reading—"the standard normativity argument", to use his own terminology—to involve the semantic condition, according to which "the fact that determines the satisfaction conditions of a predicate licenses evaluative claims [*i.e.*, claims about correctness or incorrectness] about ascriptions of the predicate" (1997, 276). This reading corresponds to what Bridges calls "the evaluative interpretation".

³⁵ See section 5 of this chapter for more discussion of the dispositionalist view, as well as Chapter 4.

on how the procedure employed is related to those facts. A satisfactory account of meaning must ensure that the procedures that we in fact use to answer questions about how to apply expressions count as justified, by construing them as adequately connected with the facts that determine the correct applications of those expressions. Such an account must, therefore, view our ordinary applications of expressions as involving “conscious engagement with the facts that determine which objects I should apply each predicate to” (1997, 287). Because we do not, as a matter of fact, consciously engage with facts about how we are disposed to apply expressions in ideal conditions, such facts cannot constitute a satisfactory answer to the sceptic’s question. This, according to Zalabardo, illustrates the most powerful line of argument that Kripke deploys against dispositionalism, and, unlike the standard readings of the text, which ignore issues about justification, it explains Kripke’s rejection of it.³⁶

Zalabardo’s reading of Kripke’s text is, to a large extent, aligned with the reading according to which the guidance conception of understanding plays a central role in the paradox. The idea of conscious engagement with facts, of the sort that can guide one in one’s application of expressions, is intelligible only if we construe those facts as able to guide one, and, therefore, as already meaningful. For this reason, Zalabardo’s proposal is not substantively different from that of Bridges’s, insofar as Bridges also assigns the guidance conception of understanding a central role.³⁷

However, Zalabardo is entirely right that, contrary to Bridges’s suggestion, the sceptic’s dissatisfaction with dispositionalism cannot fully be understood unless the inability of dispositions to help speakers settle questions about how to apply expressions is registered. The

³⁶ A similar argument may be found in Guardo 2014.

³⁷ Bridges developed his view later than Zalabardo. However, I started with a discussion of Bridges’s view because it is developed in more detail.

problem, in a nutshell, is that the mere inclination to respond in some ways rather than in other ways cannot be cited in a reason explanation of uses of expressions. For a disposition cannot be cited in a reason explanation of one of its actualizations. Similarly, the mere fact that I have a disposition to use an expression in certain circumstances does not seem to be the sort of thing that can help make sense of a particular use as something worth doing from my perspective. This is why “the procedure that I actually employ” (Zalabardo 1997, 285) when deciding whether or not to apply an expression to an object does not appeal to my dispositions. (I shall revisit the dispositionalist views briefly later in this chapter, and in more detail in the fourth chapter, in which I examine what I take to be the most promising dispositionalist view.)

Let us take stock. The sceptic’s demand for an account of the facts that constitute meaning comes with two criteria of adequacy. Such facts must, first, account for the standards of correctness that govern a speaker’s uses of expressions, and, second, account for the non-arbitrariness of those uses—for their being justified. There has been a tendency, in the commentaries devoted to this text, to focus on the idea of correct use, and to ignore the idea of justified use. Bridges and Zalabardo are right to shift the focus on the question of the justification of meaningful uses. However, I think they are wrong to interpret the sceptic’s talk of guidance and justification as a symptom of her allegiance to the guidance conception of understanding, according to which the meaningful use of an expression requires consulting an item in one’s mind that is constitutively prior to use. We have seen that this conception must be relinquished. But, again, it would be a mistake to think that relinquishing the guidance conception implies renouncing altogether the idea of uses being guided by one’s understanding of expressions. We must spell this idea out in a different way. One plausible path is, as Bridges suggests, to construe the condition of guidance as a condition that uses be explainable in terms of

speakers' reasons for them; contra Bridges, this condition applies to instances of meaningful use of language.

3.6. Reason explanations of meaningful uses of expressions

One of the most widely quoted claims made by Kripke is that “the relation of meaning and intention to future action is normative, not descriptive” (Kripke 1982, 37). And yet, what is emphasized in relation to it is rarely the implication that the use of an expression is an instance of acting intentionally. Instead, the idea that meaning is akin to intending, considered as the source of the putative normativity of meaning, has been explored in some detail.³⁸ Certainly, just as intentions have conditions of fulfilment, meaning states involve conditions of correct application. But this analogy does not reveal anything that is not already captured, at least in principle, by the first condition put forward by the sceptic, that is, the condition that the answer to the sceptic make it possible to explain how expressions are governed by standards of correct application.

It seems clear, however, that the sceptic is asking for my reason for using a sign in a particular way, and not just for some kind of independent confirmation that my use is correct (or under the purview of a standard of correctness). We can imagine being able to offer such a confirmation. However, if it is not available from my own perspective as a speaker, it will not satisfy the sceptic, for it will not show that my use is not “an unjustified stab in the dark” (1982, 17). What might my reason for the application of an expression in a particular context be? Take the case of my conversation with the sceptic. Let us assume that my reason would be revealed by a belief and a desire of mine.³⁹ Let us also assume that I want to characterize the items

³⁸ See, e.g., Hattiangadi 2007, 172-176.

³⁹ I am following Davidson 1963 here. See also 1974c. There is intense philosophical debate about how best to conceive of reason explanations (see, e.g., Hieronymi 2011), but I shall bracket this debate. One question is whether

around me, because this is what answering the sceptic's question requires. My application of 'round' to the marble can be explained by citing my desire to characterize the marble and my belief that 'round' applies correctly to it, and so applying this expression to it counts as characterizing it. But the sceptic, who is after all a *semantic* sceptic, will accept the explanation only if my taking 'round' to apply correctly to the marble is something that I can justify, and thus only if there are some facts that vindicate my taking it so. Of course, it is my understanding of the word 'round' that grounds my taking 'round' to apply correctly in this case. Thus, my reasons for using it in certain ways and not others are yielded, in light of my aims, by my understanding of the expression. The sceptic seeks to uncover the facts in which my understanding consists, and in virtue of which I am justified in taking 'round' to apply correctly to the marble.

All of this seems to suggest that these facts must be available to me. Thus, the facts in which meaning and understanding consist must be available to speakers *qua* speakers. This might strike some as a controversial interpretation of the sceptic's challenge. On what may be seen as the received reading of this challenge, the sceptic does not limit the domain of facts that we are allowed to appeal to in order to answer her to facts that are available to the speaker. Indeed, the inquiry into these facts is pursued, the thought goes, in conditions of cognitive idealization, which, on this reading, entail that we have "*complete and omniscient* access" to all the facts about our previous "behavioural, mental, and physical history" (Boghossian 1989, 17). The suggestion is that we are not "restricted to the sort of knowledge that an ordinary creature, equipped with ordinary cognitive powers, would be expected to possess" (Boghossian 1989, 17). Moreover, on this reading, the "character" of the "notorious sceptic" (Boghossian 1989, 16)

reasons are pairs of attitudes, or whether they are facts. I do not think that anything of importance for my argument hinges on settling these matters, which is why I bracket them.

plays a dispensable role in the challenge; it merely furnishes the “dialogic setting” (Boghossian 1989, 18), whose significance is entirely stylistic.⁴⁰

In my view, the cognitively ideal conditions that operate in the challenge do not amount to the idea that I have unencumbered access to all the facts about my previous behavioural, mental, and physical history.⁴¹ Rather, the conditions of cognitive idealization entail that, unlike in ordinary cases, my ability to retrieve the facts that I ordinarily exploit as a speaker and rule-follower is infallible, and that my cognitive powers (for instance, my memory, my perceptual capacity, my ability to calculate sums, etc.) are perfectly reliable. If we deny this, and we pursue the alternative interpretation according to which cognitive idealization involves complete access to all the facts, we will have trouble understanding why Kripke considers specifically the range of facts that he does consider as plausible candidates, and why he takes the challenge to be a challenge “from the ‘inside’” (1982, 15).

We will also have trouble making sense of the following remark, made by Kripke on behalf of the sceptic in response to the suggestion that the facts that the sceptic is looking for are facts about one’s dispositions to give certain responses rather than others—in this case, the disposition to respond ‘125’ rather than ‘5’:

Well and good, I know that ‘125’ is the response I am disposed to give (I am actually giving it!), and maybe it is helpful to be told—as a matter of brute fact—that I would have given the same response in the past. 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? Am I supposed to justify my present belief that I meant addition, not quaddition, and hence should answer ‘125’, in terms of a hypothesis about my past dispositions? (Do I record and investigate the past physiology of my brain?) Why am I so sure that one particular hypothesis of this kind is correct (...)? (Kripke 1982, 23, italics added).

The question here is whether considerations about one’s disposition could be cited in an attempt

⁴⁰ Wright 1984, Goldfarb 1985, Hattiangadi 2007, and Miller 2011 also seem to subscribe to this reading. Kusch, on the other hand, represents himself as playing “close attention to the dialogic setting” (2006, xiv).

⁴¹ It certainly does not suggest that I have access to all the facts in the universe. Here I am disagreeing with Hattiangadi, who thinks that, for Kripke, “all facts are up for grabs” (2007, 20).

to justify one's linguistic behaviour. On the one hand, one cannot cite the disposition that one has to behave in precisely that way—to utter '125' in response to the query, for instance—because a consideration about how one is inclined to act cannot generally justify an action; it does not reveal that one finds the action worth doing. On the other hand, one also cannot appeal to one's past dispositions, because facts about one's past dispositions are not immediately available to one. Indeed, one would have to observe oneself and infer, based on one's own observations, what those facts might be. But this is not a satisfactory picture of the justification involved in our acts of speaking. As Kripke seems to suggest, if our conception of meaning implies that the investigation of the past physiology of my brain is required in order to justify my use, then we are very far from a satisfactory answer to the sceptic.⁴²

Furthermore, contrary to what I characterized earlier as “the orthodox interpretation”, I take the character of the sceptic to be indispensable to the force of the challenge. As I see it, the purpose of the dialogic setting is to make perspicuous the intelligibility of asking speakers for their reasons for using expressions in certain ways and not others; it is to convey the naturalness of the expectation that reason explanations for uses of language be within our reach. Thus, the sceptic is asking for an account of meaningful uses that not only makes the assessment of a speaker's use as correct or incorrect possible from an external standpoint; it must also make it possible for the speaker herself to be able to assess it, to deem it correct or incorrect, and thus to make room for a reason explanation of her use.

It might be thought that the sceptic's assumption is uncontroversial, for it is undeniable that to say something is to act. But the sceptic's claim is not merely that to say something is to act. What the sceptic claims, on this reading, is that to use a sign meaningfully is to act

⁴² That justifications must be transparent has been noted by Goldfarb and Zalabardo. See also Guardo 2014 for an argument to the effect that the idea of non-inferential knowledge plays a crucial role in the argument.

intentionally. In other words, the sceptic's claim is that linguistic behaviour is intentional not only under propositional descriptions (namely, descriptions such as 'I am saying that p'), but also under verbal descriptions (namely, descriptions such as 'I am applying the expression 'e' to this object' or 'I am using the sentence 's' in this context'). Linguistic behaviour is intentional under descriptions that involve the signs themselves, and not merely the contents that such signs might express, or the objects they might be about. Semantic scepticism does not target the truth of the things we say, at least not directly. Rather, by making us doubt the power of our signs to reach out into the world, their contentfulness, it targets the very possibility of saying them.

To be more specific about what the sceptic has in mind—if we are to interpret her in the way I propose—let us take a few steps back and consider the uncontroversial idea that any satisfactory conception of meaning must supply a way of differentiating uses that are automatic or robotic from uses that are intelligent.⁴³ The sceptic proposes that the way in which the possibility of robotic responses can plausibly be ruled out is by ensuring that the uses of expressions of genuine speakers be able to be explained in terms of their reasons for them. She asks what, from the speaker's own point of view, counts in favour of her use of the expression 'plus' in a particular way in a given context, rather than in some other ways. (Recall that, according to Kripke, "Wittgenstein's challenge can be presented to me as a question about *myself*: was there some past fact about me—what I meant by 'plus'—that mandates what I should do now?" (1982, 15).) The answer that the sceptic thinks we are bound to give is that, in fact, nothing does: there is nothing visible from the point of view of the speaker that she could take to be in favour of answering '125' instead of '5', and which could thereby explain her

⁴³ It must be able to rule out the possibility that, in Miller's words, "a machine that, by some cosmic accident, churns out tokens of 'red' in the presence (and only in the presence) of red things" (2000, 172) will emerge as genuinely meaning *red* by 'red'.

answer. (As Kripke puts it, “the sceptic created an air of puzzlement as to my justification for responding ‘125’ rather than ‘5’ to the addition problem as queried. He thinks my response is no better than a stab in the dark” (1982, 23).) More generally, there is nothing visible from the point of view of the speaker that she could take to be in favour of applying particular expressions in particular contexts in particular ways rather than in some other ways, and which could thereby explain her applications of expressions. Anything that the speaker might initially be tempted to appeal to, such as general rules, mental pictures, algorithms, qualitative mental states, and so on, turns out, upon closer inspection, to be unable to mandate a particular use of the expression rather than other uses, unable to serve as a reason to proceed one way rather than another way, and thus unable to explain the way the speaker in fact proceeds. Every single candidate will count in favour of any deviant use that the sceptic may suggest just as strongly as it counts in favour of the use that the speaker is inclined to make. Therefore, there is no prospect, if the challenge succeeds, for offering explanations for our uses of language in terms of our own reasons for them. The immediate implication is that the speaker will no longer be able to conceive of her use of a sign as done for a reason. Unable to offer a reason for it, she might no longer be able to see it as an exercise of her agency. She might then start to experience it as something alien to her, something that might be taken to be akin to a compulsion or a reflex.

The fact that, when we meaningfully use expressions, we are exercising our agency—and thereby responding, and taking ourselves to be responding, to the reasons we take ourselves to have to apply expressions in certain ways rather than others—emerges as a substantive condition on theorizing about meaning. If our theorizing cannot meet it, our uses of signs will have to be depicted as instances of “blind” or arbitrary action:

How can I justify my present application of such a rule, when a sceptic could easily interpret it so as to yield any of an indefinite number of other results? It sees that my application of it is an unjustified stab in the dark. I apply the rule *blindly*. (1982, 17)

The entire point of the sceptical argument is that ultimately we reach a level where we act without any reason in terms of which we can justify our action. We act unhesitatingly but *blindly*. (1982, 87)

The question is what makes it possible for speakers to have a perspective on their own uses of signs that allows us to say that a speaker's use can be explained by citing her reason for it. This is one aspect of the very question that the sceptic is asking.

It is important to emphasize that this does not commit us to an interpretation of the challenge as fundamentally epistemological. Rather, what this commits us to is an interpretation of the challenge as based on the idea that meaning is a phenomenon whose epistemic and agential dimensions are constitutive of it. The insistence, which seems to be part of the standard reading of the text, that all there is to the sceptic's problem is the question of "how could there so much as be a correctness condition" (Boghossian 1989, 17n15), leaves this out.⁴⁴ A better, though much less concise, articulation of the sceptic's question would be as follows: How could there so much as be a correctness condition or standard that is met independently of the agent's perspective on it but of which it is constitutive that the uses it governs must be able to be explained by appealing to that perspective?

In the light of these two conditions, a variety of facts, or accounts of meaning, are assessed. Three of them are especially important, and I shall focus on them. According to the first one, the meaningfulness of our uses can fully be accounted for by appealing to our grasp of mind-independent abstract entities. According to the second one, it can fully be accounted for by

⁴⁴ Indeed, according to Boghossian, "once we have corrected for the distortions induced by the dialogic setting, there ought not to be any residual temptation to think that epistemological considerations are playing a critical role in Kripke's argument" (1989, 18). (He makes this remark in the context in which he is criticizing Wright for claiming that, in Boghossian's words, "Kripke is not interested in the mere possibility of correctness conditions; he is interested in the possibility of correctness conditions that may be, at least in one's own case, *known non-inferentially*" (1989, 17).)

appealing to our dispositions to give certain responses in certain conditions. According to the third one, the states of meaning and understanding are to be taken as primitive.

4. THE PLATONIST ANSWER

The Platonist answer claims that the facts that make meaningful use possible involve a separate realm of abstract entities which we are capable of grasping. As Kripke describes this answer, it claims that “the addition function is not in any particular mind, nor is it the common property of all minds. It has an independent, ‘objective’, existence” (1982, 38), which “each (...) individual grasps (...) by virtue of having an appropriate idea in his mind” (1982, 54). The idea that the objective entity must be grasped by an individual mind is thus central to Platonism. We must consequently distinguish between the objective abstract entity that is the sense or the meaning of the expression ‘round’, and the psychological state involved in the grasping of that entity and thus in the meaningful use of it. But, then, unsurprisingly, the question asked by the sceptic is “how the existence in my mind of any mental entity or idea can *constitute* ‘grasping’ any particular sense [or meaning] rather than another” (1984, 54).

On this view, we will have to grant that the abstract entities, or senses, that are grasped sort uses into correct or incorrect—this is, after all, what it is for something to be such an entity. On the face of it, then, the first condition could be met by this answer. However, the question is, again, how to account for the fact that a particular sense, rather than some other one, is grasped by an individual at a particular time. If the sceptic is right, there is no way to account for this. For no mental or behavioural feature of the individual is able to single out a sense. This suggests that, even though the entities proffered by Platonism are apt to sort uses—indeed, all possible uses—into correct or incorrect, the uses made by any individual remain unsorted, as it were, for

in order for them to count as correct or incorrect, we must be able to make sense of the corresponding entities' being grasped. So, ultimately, semantic Platonism cannot meet either of the two conditions put forward by the sceptic, Kripke thinks. The appeal to abstract entities notwithstanding, "ultimately there must be some mental entity involved that raises the sceptical problem" (1982, 54), and once raised, it appears that it cannot be answered. I shall come back to the Platonist view in the third chapter.

5. THE DISPOSITIONALIST ANSWER

According to dispositionalism, the facts that determine meaning are facts about the agent's dispositions to give certain responses in certain contexts. Roughly, the fact that I mean *round* by 'round' consists in my being disposed to apply 'round' to round items, and the fact that I mean *addition* by 'plus' consists in my being disposed, when asked questions involving 'plus', to give the sum. ("To mean addition by '+' is to be disposed, when asked for any sum 'x+y' to give the sum of x and y as the answer (in particular, to say '125' when queried about '68+57')" [1982, 22-23]). Kripke identifies at least three problems with dispositionalist answers. Together, they show that dispositionalism cannot meet either of the two conditions.

Kripke starts by noting, on behalf of the sceptic, that the suggestion that I could "justify my present belief that I meant addition, not quaddition, and hence should answer '125', in terms of a *hypothesis* about my *past* dispositions", which would require me to "record and investigate the past physiology of my brain" (1982, 23), misses the point entirely. As I said before (see especially section 3.6), hypotheses about past behaviour or dispositions are irrelevant when it comes to settling the question of how I should apply an expression in a particular context, or of whether the application of an expression to an object is correct. Furthermore, current

dispositions are also irrelevant. Appealing to considerations about my present inclination in settling that question—i.e., saying that I apply a sign in a particular way simply because I am inclined to apply it in this way—would be tantamount to committing myself to the idea that whatever seems right is right (1982, 23), and “nothing is more contrary to our ordinary view [of meaning] than is the supposition that ‘whatever is going to seem right to me is right’ (§258)” (1982, 23-24). So, the proponent of a dispositional answer “misconceives the sceptic’s problem—to find a past fact that *justifies* my present response” (1982, 24). Assuming that I want to describe the marble, when I reflect on the issue of whether I should apply ‘round’ to it, the fact that I am disposed to do so (or that I have been disposed to do so in the past) is of little help.

Kripke insists, however, that dispositions are of no help not merely because, when we reflect on the question of how an expression should be applied, it seems that we are indifferent to considerations about dispositions, inasmuch as such considerations play no role in settling the question. If this was the only reason to reject dispositionalism, then it seems as though the possibility that dispositions might nevertheless ground, albeit in a non-transparent way, standards of correct application for our expressions would remain open, which would suggest that dispositional facts might meet the first condition. And, if it turned out that dispositions were capable of meeting it, perhaps the conclusion to be drawn is that, assuming that this is possible in the case of basic expressions, we ought to revise our conception of what it is to apply expressions in a way that renders our future deliberations sensitive to considerations about our dispositions. But, importantly, dispositions cannot ground standards of correctness, Kripke claims. Such standards govern infinitely many possible uses, but dispositions are necessarily finite. As Kripke notes, “it is not true, for example, that if queried about the sum of any two numbers, no matter how large, I will reply with the actual sum, for some pairs of numbers are simply too large for

my mind—or my brain—to grasp” (1982, 26-7). The sceptic could always concoct an alternative interpretation for what my expression in fact means.

It might be thought, however, that a *ceteris paribus* notion of disposition could be devised in a way that would render the claim that dispositions ground standards of correctness defensible. But Kripke claims that any attempt to devise such a notion would be beset by circularity, for any such attempt will inescapably amount to supposing that “if I somehow were to be given the means to carry out my intentions with respect to numbers that presently are too long for me to add (or to grasp), and if I were to carry out these intentions, then if queried about ‘ $m+n$ ’ for some big m and n , I would respond with their sum (and not with their quum)” (1982, 28). Obviously, this supposition takes the notion of intention for granted. Given that the sceptic questions this very notion, she will not accept this way of proceeding as satisfactory.⁴⁵

Yet another reason for which dispositions cannot ground standards of correctness for the uses of one’s expressions, which Kripke invokes, is that one might very well be disposed to make mistakes. Thus, they cannot ground the relevant standards not only because of considerations having to do with our finitude, but also because of considerations having to do with the sort of dispositions that might be had by imperfect creatures such as ourselves, who are capable of making systematic mistakes. We would need a principle to differentiate dispositions to make mistakes from dispositions that could legitimately be deemed meaning-constituting. But any such principle would involve resources that are extraneous to the dispositionalist answer, and which, Kripke suggests, are going to rely on facts about what we mean. I shall further discuss what I take to be the most promising dispositionalist answer, which is defended by Ginsborg, in the fourth chapter.

⁴⁵ For developments of the circularity argument against dispositionalism, see Boghossian 1989, Verheggen 2015, Miller 2017.

6. THE NON-REDUCTIONIST ANSWER

Let us now examine Kripke's rejection, on behalf of the sceptic, of the non-reductionist proposal. One problem with this proposal, according to him, is the "logical difficulty" (1982, 51) exposed by the sceptic's query, that is, the idea that "it is logically impossible (...) for there to be a state of 'meaning addition by "plus"' at all" (1982, 54). The reason for this logical impossibility is that "such a state would have to be a finite object" (1982, 54). "Can we conceive of a finite state which *could* not be interpreted in a quus-like way? How could that be?" (1982, 54), he asks.

Indeed, Kripke writes:

...it remains mysterious exactly how the existence of *any* finite past state of my mind could entail that, if I wish to accord with it, and remember the state, and do not miscalculate, I must give a determinate answer to an arbitrarily large addition problem. (1982, 53)

Even though Kripke also mentions the seeming difficulty in the idea that "it [i.e., the state of meaning] is not supposed to be an introspectible state, yet we supposedly are aware of it with some fair degree of certainty whenever it occurs" (1982, 51), which might be seen as (indirectly) involving the second condition, it is, to my mind, clear that the most important problem the non-reductionist proposal faces, on Kripke's view, is the "logical difficulty" mentioned above, which renders it incapable of meeting the first condition—in other words, of explaining what makes it possible for conditions of correctness to govern indefinitely many uses, including, to go back to Kripke's own example, uses involving extremely large numbers.⁴⁶

The source of the logical difficulty involves the idea that there is a tension between the finiteness of the state and the infinite number of applications governed by the standards inherent to it. But what is it for a state to be finite? Kripke does not answer this question. The idea of

⁴⁶ Thus, I disagree with Wright, who thinks that it is primarily "the combination of first-personal avowability with disposition-like connections to behavior in circumstances which the avower need not have envisaged" (2001, 148) that renders non-reductionism unsuitable as a straight answer.

finiteness is invoked throughout his remarks on the paradox, but primarily in relation to the uses of an expression that have already been made: given that any finite number of uses is consistent with more than one meaning, what determines the meaning of the expression? This is, indeed, the question that the sceptic is asking. It is clear what it is for a number of uses or applications to be finite. But it is not exactly clear what it is for a state of mind to be finite.⁴⁷

Kripke might think that the finiteness of the state is simply a consequence of the finiteness of the mind; he says, after all, of the state that it “would have to be a finite object, contained in our finite minds” (1982, 52). It is undeniable that we are finite beings, and that the finitude of our being is manifested, in part, in the finitude of our mind. Some thoughts may be too complex for us to grasp: as Kripke points out in his discussion of dispositionalism, we may die before we fully execute our attempt at grasping them. But it does not follow from this that there is a plausible way in which the states of mind themselves are finite—that they must be able to be assimilated to spatiotemporal entities, either objects or events. It seems to me that Kripke’s insistence on finiteness in this context might indicate an allegiance, one that Kripke himself might be unaware of, to at least one incarnation of reductionism. Only from within a reductionist framework could states of meaning be viewed as spatiotemporal entities.⁴⁸ In any case, we do not need decisively to establish this allegiance. It is enough to note that it is open to a non-reductionist to deny the finite dimension of states of mind. This is enough to cast some doubt on Kripke’s treatment of the non-reductionist position as a serious candidate for an answer to the

⁴⁷ Boghossian makes a similar remark: “Kripke’s second objection to the anti-reductionist suggestion is that it is utterly mysterious how there could be a finite state, realized in a finite mind, that nevertheless contains information about the correct applicability of a sign in literally no end of distinct situations. But, again, this amounts merely to insisting that we find the idea of a contentful state problematic, without adducing any independent reason why we should” (1989, 43).

⁴⁸ Kripke denies such an allegiance to reductionism (1982, 44). The fact that he considers primitive facts as serious contenders also seems to show that he is not committed to the reductionist project, and he is interpreted by many philosophers as not being so committed (though see Goldfarb 1985 for a dissenting view).

sceptic's challenge.

Thus, as many have already anticipated, the possibility that a satisfactory non-reductionist response be offered to the sceptic remains, as far as I can tell, open. Exactly three decades ago, Boghossian wrote that "meaning properties appear to be neither eliminable, nor reducible. Perhaps it is time that we learned to live with that fact" (1989, 48). However, it does not seem to me that most of us have learned to live with it in the meantime.

7. ARE THE TWO CONDITIONS DISTINCT?

I have tried to make a case for an interpretation of the challenge that distinguishes between two conditions that operate in it. The first one is that a satisfactory conception of meaning must have the resources to explain the idea that meaningful uses of expressions are governed by conditions of correctness. Thus, if a use of an expression is meaningful, there is a standard of correctness governing it, such that the use counts as correct or incorrect in light of that standard. The second condition is that a satisfactory conception of meaning must have the resources to explain the fact that meaningful uses can receive reason explanations. The speaker's own perspective on her uses of expressions is thus central to the elucidation of the meaningfulness of those uses.

These two conditions are, on the face of it, distinct. But if one accepts that they are distinct, one might wonder whether a conception of meaning that appeals to sets of facts that are altogether disconnected from one another in order to accommodate each of the two conditions separately would be satisfactory. Perhaps, the thought goes, one could appeal to considerations about the speaker's linguistic community in order to explain the governance of her uses by standards of correctness, and to considerations about the speaker's psychology in order to explain the possibility of offering rational explanations of those uses. This might lead to a

picture on which that which ensures that the speaker has a reason for her application of an expression has no connection whatsoever with that which renders her use correct or incorrect.

As I see it, however, Kripke expects, on behalf of his sceptic, for the two conditions to be met by a single, unifying, picture of meaning. And the reason for this lies in the conception of governance by a standard—of rule-following, to use Kripke’s term—that operates in the challenge. On this conception, for one to adopt a standard (or to accept a rule) is, first, for one to allow that one’s performances be correct or incorrect in relation to the standard (or that they be cases of obeying or disobeying the rule), and second, for those actions to be viewed as explainable by one’s adoption of that standard (or by one’s acceptance of the rule).⁴⁹ The standard must not, as Matthias Haase puts it in his own articulation of the rule-following paradox, “operate behind the subject’s back” (2009, 274). If it does operate behind her back, that is, if it sorts performances into correct and incorrect without also contributing to a reason explanation of those performances, there would be no reason to think that the subject is following the standard, as opposed to behaving in a way that conforms to it, which might allow us to assess it as correct or incorrect in relation to it. Perhaps there are cases in which performances may be assessed as correct or incorrect in relation to standards that we do not follow in this way, but the point is that, in order for the possibility of rule-following to be intelligible, there must be cases in which that which renders the performance correct or incorrect also contributes to an explanation of it. If we are to make sense of the possibility of meaningfully using expressions, we must formulate a conception of meaning that depicts uses of expressions as governed by standards of correctness in this way.

⁴⁹ This is, as I see it, consistent with Boghossian’s reconstruction of what is involved in rule-following offered in Boghossian 2012.

To conclude, in this chapter I have tried to spell out the way in which I think that Kripke's sceptical challenge should be understood. More specifically, I have articulated what I take to be the two conditions that operate in the semantic sceptic's conception of meaning. First, a satisfactory answer to her challenge must explain what makes it possible for meaningful uses of expressions to be governed by standards of correctness. Second, such an answer must explain what makes it possible for speakers to have reasons for their uses. In the next chapter, I shall examine Kripke's own sceptical solution to this challenge.

II. THE SCEPTICAL SOLUTION

1. TWO INTERPRETATIONS

In this chapter, I investigate the plausibility of the idea of giving a sceptical solution to the sceptical problem. A sceptical solution is supposed to provide an alternative picture of meaning, one that is immune to the challenge raised by the sceptic. There are, broadly speaking, at least two ways of coming up with such a picture, which correspond to the two ways in which Kripke's own sceptical solution has been interpreted. According to the first way, which corresponds to what seems to be the most widely endorsed interpretation of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, the search for the meaning-constituting facts is to be supplanted by the attempt to articulate a non-factualist conception of meaning, one according to which our practice of attributing meaning to ourselves and others, and our talk of meaning broadly construed, have some purpose other than that of stating facts. On this view, the role of our practice of attributing and making judgments about meaning is that of helping us perform acts of inclusion in (or exclusion from, as the case may be) the linguistic community.

The second way of interpreting Kripke's solution has been proposed more recently, and it is best understood as maintaining that the project of uncovering the meaning-constituting facts, or of specifying what meaning consists in, is not to be renounced entirely, for the role of our meaning talk, and of our judgments about meaning, *is* that of stating facts. Instead, the project is to be reconsidered in light of a different conception of the notion of fact, and, more generally, in light of a different conception of how meaning can be said to be constituted. Proponents of this interpretation accuse the sceptic of conceiving of facts in a Platonist manner, and suggest that, if

we re-assess her challenge in light of different conceptions of fact and truth, a satisfactory answer, which allow us to say that there are meaning facts, is in view.

The two interpretations have in common the suggestion that, in our attempt to illuminate the nature of meaning, we have been hopelessly looking for entities. In this chapter, I shall examine the first line of interpretation, according to which, to repeat, the proper answer to the sceptic's challenge is to endorse non-factualism about meaning. (I shall examine the second line of thought in the next chapter.) I start by sketching this interpretation of Kripke's solution, which is supposed to supply a new approach to questions about meaning. Then, I outline and defend Miller's argument against it. I suggest that the lesson is that we should strive to articulate a better interpretation, and I sketch and assess such an interpretation at the end of the chapter.

2. THE ALTERNATIVE PICTURE OF MEANING

After developing the sceptical paradox, Kripke provides, on behalf of Wittgenstein, a sceptical solution to it. According to Kripke,

A sceptical solution of a sceptical philosophical problem begins (...) by conceding that the sceptic's negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because—contrary appearances notwithstanding—it need not require the justification the sceptic has shown to be untenable. (1982, 66)

The first stage of the sceptical solution is thus the concession that there are no meaning-constituting facts, that is, there are no “condition[s] in the world” (1982, 69)—either behavioural or mental—that might make it the case that our uses of expressions are meaningful. However, this conclusion is less catastrophic than it might seem, for, according to Kripke's sceptical response to the paradox, our ordinary practice of using expressions meaningfully, including our talk of meaning, can still be vindicated. The attempt at vindicating this practice is the second stage of the solution. It proceeds, first, through the denial of the claim that the meaningfulness of

sentences consists in truth conditions. (Consequently, the meaningfulness of other kinds of expressions, such as predicative expressions and names, does not consist in their contribution to those conditions.) Second, an alternative picture of meaning ascriptions is proposed.

The fact that Kripke's Wittgenstein proposes not only that the meaningfulness of sentences about meaning no longer be understood as consisting in truth conditions, but that the meaningfulness of *all* sentences no longer be understood in this way, has sometimes been missed by commentators.⁵⁰ But the "repudiation of the classical realist picture" (1982, 73), which Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein, is a repudiation of a general picture of meaning; it is not confined to a particular discourse or vocabulary. Indeed, Kripke devotes a few pages to "the change in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*" (1982, 71), that is, the change from the idea that "a declarative sentence gets its meaning by virtue of its truth conditions" (1982, 72) to the "alternative rough general picture" (1982, 73) of meaning, in which declarative sentences do not get their meaning in this way.

The classical realist picture, as Kripke understands (and takes Wittgenstein to reject) it, consists in two main claims. First, truth conditions play a constitutive role with respect to the meaning of expressions: the meaning of sentences consists in their truth conditions, whereas the meaning of names or of predicative expressions consists in their contribution to those truth conditions. Second, truth conditions consist in (or are constituted by, or require for their intelligibility) possible states of affairs, or possible facts. A truth condition is met, that is, the sentence expressing it is true, when the fact or state of affairs to which it corresponds obtains.⁵¹ Thus, the truth of a declarative sentence depends on the existence of an entity in the world that

⁵⁰ See, for example, Wright 1984, 102-103.

⁵¹ That these are the two main claims made by the classical realist, according to Kripke, is especially clear on pages 71-73 of Kripke 1982.

corresponds to it, and the meaningfulness of a sentence depends on the existence of a possible entity that would correspond to it if it were actualized. The notion of truth involved in the conception of meaning that is being relinquished depicts truth as a substantive relational property—more specifically, as correspondence with an actual fact. From now on, I shall refer to the truth conditions connected to this notion of truth as robust truth conditions, in order to differentiate them from deflationary conceptions of truth condition.

It is thus a requirement of classical realism that there be facts—entities in or through which objects exemplify properties or relations—to which sentences may correspond, just as it is a requirement that there be properties which predicates may pick out. But, crucially, the classical realist picture also requires that there be facts about the speaker, either about her mental or about her behavioural states, that make it the case that her sentences (as well as her predicates and names) latch on to certain entities rather than others.⁵² There must be something about the speaker that accounts for her expressions having the robust truth conditions that they have, by revealing that she is somehow connected to a determinate set of entities that are responsible for those conditions. The sceptic claims that there are no facts about a speaker that connect her use of sentences to some (possible) facts; similarly, there are no facts about a speaker that connect her use of predicates to some properties. This is tantamount to saying that we cannot make sense of her uses of expressions being meaningful.

The response that Kripke takes Wittgenstein to offer to the sceptic consists in a construal of meaningfulness that supposedly leaves the classical realist picture behind: “the picture of correspondence-to-facts must be cleared away” (1982, 79). This requires that we regard the

⁵² This is what George Wilson, who offers a detailed reconstruction of classical realism, calls “the grounding constraint” (Wilson 1994, 239). This constraint can also be seen as the consequence of the fact that meaning ascriptions must have robust truth conditions. I shall discuss classical realism in more detail in the next chapter.

activity of producing expressions in an entirely new light, by exploiting the seemingly simple idea of there being conditions in which it is justified or appropriate to use certain expressions rather than others:

...Wittgenstein proposes a picture of language based, not on truth conditions, but on assertability conditions or justification conditions: under what circumstances are we allowed to make a given assertion? (1982, 74)

This, however, is only one of the two main components of the view that Kripke takes

Wittgenstein to have suggested as a replacement for the classical realist picture. The second component consists in an account of the role or function played by our being permitted to make certain uses of expressions in certain circumstances:

...granted that our language game permits a certain 'move' (...) under certain specifiable conditions, what is the role in our lives of such permission? Such a role must exist if this aspect of the language game is not to be idle. (1982, 75)

Very briefly, instead of thinking of the meanings of sentences as consisting in robust truth conditions, that is, in relations to possible facts, we are to think of meaning as being the result of the ways in which sentences are used by speakers. Uses are to be described in light of both the circumstances in which they are allowed by speakers to be made and the roles that making them play in the lives of those speakers:

...Do not look for 'entities' or 'facts' corresponding to (...) assertions, but look at the circumstances under which utterances (...) are made, and the utility of making them under these circumstances. (1982, 77)

These recommendations are supposed to lead us to “a new approach to the problems of how language has meaning” (1982, 77). At the core of the sceptical approach is the idea that what matters to meaning is use, and what matters to the elucidation of use is the fact that not just any use is acceptable for us. Some circumstances “actually license” certain uses, while others do not (1982, 86-7). In certain circumstances we are “allowed to make a given assertion” (1982, 74), while in others we are not. Thus, expressions have assertability or justification conditions. Of course, circumstances—such as, say, there being a red marble in front of one—do not license

uses of expressions on their own. Rather, they do so in light of the ways in which the members of the community are inclined to respond to them. Thus, we might say, the set of conditions in which using an expression is allowed or permitted is determined communally. Not just any use made by an agent will pass muster with other agents, and this is the source of the contrast between uses that are justified and uses that are not justified, and thus of assertability conditions. Using ‘ ϕ ’ in a particular circumstance is justified or permitted if there is agreement with respect to the use of ‘ ϕ ’ in that circumstance. Furthermore, as we have seen, such uses must be able to be conceived as playing specific roles in the life of that linguistic community. These roles are to be investigated with respect to each variety of discourse, including meaning discourse. The investigation of the role of meaning discourse is central to the sceptical solution. But before we examine this role, let us further reflect on the idea that considerations about what is required for the use of an expression to be deemed justified by others are central to elucidating meaning.

The picture of meaning according to which the meaningfulness of our linguistic expressions is to be understood simply by exploring the conditions or circumstances in which the uses of expressions are deemed justified, and the role played by this practice, might lead one to think that there is no room, in our linguistic activity, for uses of language that purport to state facts. This would be misleading. The point is, rather, that the sentences used in our fact-stating activities, much like the sentences used in any other linguistic activity, do not mean what they do in virtue of possessing robust truth conditions; instead, such sentences can be said to be meaningfully used because, first, there are conditions or circumstances in which the community deems their use legitimate or appropriate, and, second, the practice of deeming uses legitimate or appropriate fulfils a determinate role or function. It is open to one to claim that, on such a picture, the move of stating facts by using declarative sentences is, in certain conditions,

perfectly alright, indispensable even. Indeed, Kripke seems to be making this claim on behalf of Wittgenstein (1982, 86). That is, Kripke thinks that there is still room, on Wittgenstein's picture, for fact-stating discourse. (Indeed, one might think, quite plausibly, that if an account of meaning entails that there is no room for fact-stating discourse, it does not deserve serious consideration.)

At this stage, we might feel tempted to ask what it is about a particular condition or situation that renders the use of a particular sentence to state a fact justified. If we are not careful, this question might lead us back to where we started, for it might instil in us the thought that it is precisely some entity in the world that makes the employment of the sentence justified. This thought is in the dangerously close vicinity of the idea that there is a relation between the fact and the sentence, a relation that is ultimately responsible for the appropriateness of using the sentence in the presence of that fact. Obviously, this would make room for the sceptic to re-mount her challenge, for she might ask, once again, what makes it the case that the relation involves that particular fact. But we must keep in mind, throughout our reflecting on the sceptical solution, that there is nothing about a particular situation or circumstance, considered independently of the community's perspective on it, that might legitimize using a particular expression rather than another. Indeed, the point, as it will become clearer later on, is precisely that the source of legitimacy for a use resides entirely in that perspective.

Thus, the core idea of the sceptical solution is that there is no legitimate or justified or permitted use independently of a community's agreement with respect to it. Assertability or justification conditions are simply the conditions in which such agreement occurs. The question is how to specify or describe the requirement of agreement. Usually, agreement in the application of an expression in a particular case is understood to occur when two individuals

mean the same thing by that expression. For instance, two people might agree in their applications of ‘round’ to the marble if they mean the same thing by it (and if they agree on the features of the marble, of course). This suggests that meaningfulness must be established independently of agreement—that it must be prior to it in the order of explanation. But, by bringing the idea of agreement to the fore, the sceptical solution challenges this line of thought. Consequently, it is often taken to rely on a non-semantic, purely dispositionalist, notion of agreement, which is to be understood as similarity in use, where the use is specified without presupposing its meaningfulness.⁵³ This is how the sceptical solution is often interpreted.⁵⁴

Lastly, an additional point about correctness needs to be emphasized. Recall that the sceptical challenge contains two conditions that a satisfactory answer must meet. The first one amounts to an account of the constitution of standards of correctness for the uses of expressions, which are met independently of whether the user takes them to be met. The second one amounts to the idea that uses of expressions can be explained in terms of speakers’ reasons for them. It might be tempting to think that, on the new picture, standards of correctness are constituted by facts about agreement in the community, which in turn amount to facts about the dispositions of

⁵³ There is the question, which, on this interpretation, the proponent of the solution must answer, of how to characterize the agreement in question, if the appeal to meaning is impossible. One way to go would be to say that utterances that sound (or look) the same, and which are made in similar circumstances (i.e., circumstances taken to be the same), can be said to agree. Hattiangadi objects to this possibility:

[I]f two utterances or two words can be said to be the same types of objects, we need to suppose that they conform to some objective pattern; that they have some properties of sound or shape in common. But this seems, on the face of it, not to be available to the sceptic. If there is no sense to be made of the idea that the word ‘goose’ tracks some objective (i.e. judgement independent) properties of individual birds, what sense can be made of the idea that our assignment of utterances to equivalence classes tracks objective properties of utterances? (Hattiangadi 2007, 95).

However, I do not think that the proponent of the sceptical solution is unable to address this objection. I shall articulate the way in which I think the sceptic could respond to Hattiangadi’s critique in the last section of this chapter.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., Boghossian 1989, 23-4, and Wright 1984, 103. See also Hattiangadi 2007, chapter 4. It should be noted that this interpretation is different from what Kripke calls “a social, or community wide version of the dispositional theory” (1982, 111). The latter produces necessary and sufficient conditions for a use to be correct (for a sentence to be true, for a name to refer). What we are after are the conditions in which an expression is assertable.

the other agents. But this would, again, be misleading: standards of correctness, understood in the way in which the sceptic understands them, fail so much as to emerge on this picture. Rather, particular uses, made in particular contexts, are deemed by others to be justified (or unjustified, of course) and this is all we can say about the idea of correctness. There is, in other words, a distinction between correct and incorrect use, but it is much more limited in scope than the sceptic assumes it should be.⁵⁵ As for the second condition, no sense can be made of the idea that, on the sceptical solution, the speaker meaningfully applies an expression to an object for a reason. But sense can be made of the idea that genuine speakers, unlike automata or perhaps children who are on their way to language but not yet there, experience feelings of confidence toward their own uses. This brings us to the issue of meaning ascriptions.

3. THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF MEANING ASCRIPTIONS

We are now in a position to apply this general picture of meaning to utterances about meaning, such as the uses of sentences of the form ‘A means ψ by ‘ ϕ ’’. (The picture is also supposed to apply to judgments about meaning.) Showing that there are circumstances in which we are justified in using such sentences, and that the practice of justifiably using them plays an important role in our lives, is all that is required in order to vindicate our meaning discourse, and the meaning ascriptions we make to ourselves and to others. Kripke writes:

⁵⁵ As I said in the previous footnote, the sceptical solution must be distinguished from the community-wide version of dispositionalism, according to which what one means by an expression, and thus the standard of correctness governing one’s use of that expression, is determined by communal dispositions, where communal dispositions are non-semantically characterized. Kripke notes that “a social, or community-wide, version of the dispositional theory (...) would be open to at least some of the same criticisms as the original form” (1982, 111). Such a version would state that, for instance, “for any m and n , the value of the function we mean by ‘plus’, *is* (by definition) the value that (nearly) all the linguistic community would give as the answer. Such a theory would be a theory of the *truth* conditions of such assertions as “By ‘plus’ we mean such-and-such a function,” or “By ‘plus’ we mean a function, which, when applied to 68 and 57 as arguments, yields 125 as value” (1982, 111). What we need is a conception of assertability conditions, that is, a conception of the conditions in which a use is assertable or justified.

Jones is entitled, subject to correction by others, provisionally to say, “I mean addition by ‘plus’,” whenever he has the feeling of confidence—“now I can go on!”—that he can give ‘correct’ responses in new cases; and he is entitled, again provisionally and subject to correction by others, to judge a new response to be ‘correct’ simply because it is the response he is inclined to give. (1982, 90)

In other words, according to the sceptical solution, I am entitled to utter (or judge) ‘I mean *addition* by ‘plus’” whenever I am feeling confident about using ‘plus’ in new cases, that is, whenever my inclination with respect to this expression is accompanied by the feeling of getting it right. The inclinations of competent speakers are “confident inclinations”:

It is part of our language game of speaking of rules that a speaker may, without ultimately giving [or having] any justification, follow his own confident inclination that this way (say, responding ‘125’) is the right way to respond, rather than another way (e.g. responding ‘5’). (1982, 87)

...[T]he ‘assertability conditions’ that license an individual to say that, on a given occasion, he ought to follow his rule this way rather than that, are, ultimately, that he does what he is inclined to do. (1982, 88)

There is no possibility for the responses of an individual considered in isolation from her linguistic community to be subject to correction by others; for such an individual, there is no intelligible distinction between justified and unjustified uses of expressions. For “just because someone thinks [s]he is following a rule, there is no room for a judgment that [s]he is not really doing so” (1982, 88). To put it differently, such an individual is in a position in which whatever she does may count as justified. All we can do is “pay attention to [her] justification conditions alone, [and] all we can say is that [she] is licensed to follow the rule as it strikes [her]” (1982, 89). But, Kripke claims, if someone is licensed to follow a rule as it strikes her, the notion of a rule “can have no substantive content” (1982, 89). This suggests that there is, in fact, no room for meaning on this picture. It is for this reason that a person considered in isolation cannot be said to follow any rules or mean anything.

An external perspective on one’s uses of expressions taken by others in one’s community is crucial for there to be genuine assertability conditions for those expressions, as well as for the possibility of justifiably ascribing meaning to the agent making them. Thus, we may justifiably

ascribe meaning to others whenever we take them to be responding to the circumstances in the way in which we do, and the same goes for them:

Smith will judge Jones to mean addition by 'plus' [and will justifiably use the sentence 'Jones means *addition* by 'plus'] only if he judges that Jones's answers to particular addition problems agree with those he is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure. (1982, 91)

There seem to be two aspects to the inclinations that matter for meaning ascriptions. On the one hand, there is the feeling that one can go on with a particular sign—the mark of what I earlier called “confident inclination”. On the other hand, there are inclinations to use expressions in ways which are in agreement with the inclinations of the community. The two aspects are closely connected: one acquires the feeling that one can go on with a particular sign if and only if one has the disposition to use the sign in a way that aligns with the community’s use. Both aspects are important, and they cannot be explained in more basic terms (1982, 90-91).

What is, then, the role played by sentences of the form ‘A means ψ by ‘ ϕ ’? What, in other words, is the point of this particular region of discourse? On the received interpretation of the sceptical solution, the point of using such sentences (and other sentences that are also seemingly about meaning) is not to state facts about other individuals, even though the sentences involved may very well seem to have that role:

Since the indicative mood is not taken as in any sense primary or basic, it becomes more plausible that the linguistic role even of utterances in the indicative mood that superficially look like assertions need not be one of ‘stating facts’. (1982, 73)

Rather, the point of using sentences of the form, say, ‘A means ψ by ‘ ϕ ’’, is to confer upon others, or corroborate, the status of trusted members of a linguistic community, or, as the case may be, to deprive them of that status:

When the community denies of someone that he is following certain rules, it excludes him from various transactions such as the one between the grocer and the customer. It indicates that it cannot rely on his behaviour in such transactions. (1982, 93)

Moreover, Kripke writes:

Even though (...) we depict no special 'state' of their minds, we do something of importance. We take them provisionally into the community, as long as further deviant behavior does not exclude them. In practice, such deviant behavior rarely occurs. (1982, 95)

The suggestion that meaning claims are not descriptive claims about ourselves and others, for their function is not that of stating facts, is a radical one. To make sense of it, we need to say what it is for a sentence to be used to state facts.

In critical commentaries devoted to the sceptical solution, the idea of fact-stating has often been taken to be equivalent with the idea of possessing robust truth conditions.⁵⁶ Thus, to deny of some discourse that it is fact-stating is to deny that there are entities in the world to which claims in that discourse may correspond. This has the problematic consequence of suggesting that the proponent of a deflationist conception of truth cannot make sense of the possibility of fact-stating, given that, for her, no sentences have robust truth conditions; no sentences are such that entities in the world may correspond to them. Thus, a better way of construing fact-stating appeals to the general project of describing the external world, of forming an accurate picture of it—a project in which we all, inasmuch as we are beings endowed with a capacity for cognition, participate. It is essential to the intelligibility of this project that the goings-on that we are seeking to describe be construed as independent of our attempt at describing them.

An approach to fact-stating of the latter sort is pursued by Miller (2018, 216-7), who in turn appeals to the criterion proposed by Jane Heal (1989). This criterion is twofold: it involves an appeal to the principle of non-contradiction, as well as to the idea of mind-independence.

Thus, according to Heal,

...for some utterances to be rightly construed as realistically intended statements [i.e., factual] about some subject matter it is required that those utterances be made in a way which acknowledges the principle of non-contradiction. (1989, 15)

Moreover,

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Miller 2002, 11. See also Wright 1984, Boghossian 1989, 1990.

...the mere existence and nature of my thought [or of my meaningful utterance] does not constitute the existence of what it is a thought about, i.e., does not make the thought correct. (1989, 16)

Thus, ascriptions of meaning are factual if, first, discourse about meaning is governed by the principle of non-contradiction, and, second, the mere fact that a meaning ascription is made does not constitute the meaning ascribed. There is reason to think that Kripke's picture of meaning fails to meet each of these two conditions. On the one hand, since it accepts the sceptic's conclusion, it accepts that it is possible to be confronted with two incompatible meaning ascriptions, and, moreover, for there to be no definitive grounds for claiming that one must be false. On the other hand, it does seem as though the mere fact that the members of a community make a meaning ascription, or the mere fact that a community takes an agent to mean something by a word, provides grounds for viewing the ascription as justified or legitimate, and not merely as believed to be justified or legitimate. So, by appealing to a notion of non-factualist discourse that does not presuppose a robust conception of truth and reference, we may specify what it is for some sentences to play a non-factualist role.

The idea that sentences involving semantic terms are not used to describe the world in this way renders unproblematic the discovery that there are no facts that meaning consists in. The challenge thus loses whatever force it initially had for us. But, as I intimated earlier, this result should not be understood to entail that, necessarily, meaning ascriptions do not have truth conditions. What is clear is that they do not have robust truth conditions, for no sentences whatsoever have such conditions. But they may very well have truth conditions in the deflationary sense. The picture of meaning proposed by Kripke's Wittgenstein is compatible with a deflationist or minimalist conception of truth, as Kripke himself makes it clear. The condition that must be met in order for a sentence to be true, on this picture, is not that a

particular fact, or a particular piece of furniture of the world, as it were, corresponds to it.⁵⁷

Rather, the condition that must be met is fully exhibited by the equivalence schema '*S*' is true iff *S*, where the symbol '*S*' is to be replaced by a sentence.

Let us take stock. According to the sceptic, there are, strictly speaking, no “conditions in the world” that constitute meaning. However, this is entirely compatible with our ascribing (or denying) meaning to one another, and with the intelligibility of the idea that we use expressions meaningfully. The point of meaning discourse is, primarily, that of excluding others from (or of including them in) the community. Its upshot is to effect a change in the world, rather than to describe it (1982, 93). Because of this, the sceptic’s conclusion seemingly leaves our meaning discourse intact. This account of meaningfulness, if we may call it that, has, unsurprisingly, been severely criticized.

4. THE COLLAPSE INTO NIHILISM

Kripke’s non-factualist proposal faces the risk, outlined very clearly by Miller, of collapsing into nihilism, which is the view that there is no difference—at least, no difference that might require semantic resources in order to be captured—between meaningful sounds and mere noise (Miller 2011). To begin with, any view of meaning must tell us what it is about some noises, such as ‘The marble is round’, that renders them meaningful, and thus unlike many other noises.

Inasmuch as, to repeat, it purports to offer “a new approach to the problems of how language has meaning” (1982, 77), Kripke’s view of meaning, albeit non-factualist, is not exempt from this obligation. Moreover, any account of the difference between meaningful sounds and meaningless ones must have the resources for construing the former as subject to the possibility

⁵⁷ See, once again, Kripke 1982, 86.

of being misused. Indeed, the possibility of misuse is essential to meaningfulness, regardless of the way in which the latter is accounted for. It must be possible for me to misuse the sentence ‘The marble is round’, for instance, in order for it to count as meaningful. Kripke’s Wittgenstein makes room for this: for him, to misuse a sentence is to use it or assert it in conditions in which it is not assertable. Recall that a sentence is assertable in a certain condition if the members of my community (the vast majority of them, at least), are disposed to assert it (or at least to assent to it) in that condition. Thus, if I apply ‘round’ to an object to which the speakers around me do not apply it, and if they balk at my application, then I can be said to be misusing ‘round’. And if I misuse ‘round’ often enough in this way, I can be said not to mean anything by it.

However, Miller shows that as soon as we grant this much, we make room, once again, for the sceptic’s challenge. Take again the example of Jones’s uses of ‘round’. Suppose that someone asks me what Jones means by it. Jones has been applying the expression in ways similar to the ways in which I have been applying it, or in ways in which I am inclined to apply it. I tell him that Jones means round by ‘round’, and I use the sentence ‘Jones means round by ‘round’’ to do so. Suppose that, at time t , the sceptic re-appears, and she challenges my meaning ascription. She claims that ‘Jones means round by ‘round’’ is assertable if it is before time t and Jones’s uses of ‘round’ have been in agreement with mine, or it is time t or later and Jones’s uses have been in disagreement with mine. She can raise a similar question even if the relevant agreement concerns the entire community. It does not seem that we can appeal to anything in order to rule out her hypothesis, especially if we have already granted, as the proponent of the sceptical solution must grant, that the sceptic’s challenge is successful. As Miller puts it, “even non-fact-stating language is rule-governed, and hence susceptible to the argument of the rule-following skeptic” (2011, 459).

Thus, if the sceptic's challenge is allowed to go through, as the proponent of a sceptical solution seems to suggest it should (for she allegedly accepts the sceptic's reasoning), it would seem that we cannot make sense of the possibility of misusing an expression. This is because making room for this possibility also makes room for the possibility that the sceptical challenge be reasserted. But not leaving any room for the possibility of misuse is, Miller suggests, indistinguishable from endorsing semantic nihilism, that is, the view that the utterances we make are simply noises. For it is only of noises that we can legitimately say that they are not assessable as correct or incorrect, or that they cannot be misused or mis-produced—in short, that there are no standards of correctness that govern them. As Miller puts it,

...any form of non-factualism (...) presupposes determinate facts about the semantic functions of linguistic expressions, or the rules governing their correct use, irrespective of whether those functions are conceived to be descriptive or non-descriptive or whether the rules govern description or some non-descriptive linguistic practice. (Miller 2011, 460)

As soon as we make room for a standard, we make room for the appropriateness of the sceptic's question, Miller suggests.

How might a proponent of the sceptical solution respond to Miller's argument? Her only option might seem to be that of articulating the contrast between what we have been calling "mere noise" and the sounds and marks characteristic of language use that does not require the intelligibility of the distinction between correct and incorrect. But it is not clear that this is possible. For, again, if one deflates one's conception of the use of words in a manner that does not leave room for the possibility of misusing those words, it is not at all clear that the alleged conception still counts as a conception of meaningful use, and thus it is not clear that there is any engagement whatsoever with the issue that motivated the sceptic in the first place. Fortunately, there is an alternative: that of subscribing to the view according to which the possibility of being

mistaken cannot be elucidated by appealing to more basic facts. In the next section, I shall examine whether this alternative is open with respect to Kripke's sceptical solution.

5. A REINTERPRETATION OF THE SCEPTICAL SOLUTION

The discussion surrounding the sceptical solution is typically framed around the question of whether Kripke depicts the proponent of such a solution as a non-factualist about meaning. One aspect of the solution that is usually unquestioned is the centrality of the notion of agreement. However, as I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, there is a widespread tendency in the literature on the sceptical solution to construe the notion of agreement non-semantically. Responses are said to agree if they are of the same kind, where what it is for two responses to be of the same kind does not presuppose their having a meaning, or their being endowed with content. But is this the kind agreement that Kripke has in mind?

Whenever we investigate the explanatory connection between two ideas or notions, our theoretical options are, broadly speaking, limited. Simplistically put, we might come to think that the first is explanatorily prior to the second, or we might come to think that the second is explanatorily prior to the first. But a third possibility, which is easy to overlook, is that the two notions depend on one another in a way that does not leave any room for the claim that one is prior to another. This third option is less attractive because it does not afford the degree of illumination that the other two seem to offer. For, on this third kind of view, neither of the two notions is being fully elucidated. But its unattractiveness obviously cannot settle the question of whether it is the correct path to pursue in any particular case.

I believe that this third possibility captures Kripke's view of the relationship between meaning and agreement. As I see it, at the core of the sceptical solution is the claim that the

notion of agreement is on a par with the notion of meaning, such that neither of the two is explanatorily prior to the other. On this view, the meaningful use of expressions is impossible without agreement with respect to that use, but this does not entail that the facts about agreement can fully be specified without appealing to facts about meaning. The facts about agreement are somehow entangled with the facts about meaning; neither of them is more basic. Thus, to flesh out the characterization of assertability conditions articulated in the second section of this chapter, we might say that the use of ‘ ϕ ’ in a particular circumstance is justified or permitted if there is agreement among us with respect to that use in that circumstance, or, to put it differently, if that use agrees with the uses that we make, where what it is for two uses to agree cannot be specified without viewing those uses as meaningful—as assertable or not.

Here is a piece of textual evidence in support of this suggestion. When Kripke writes that “if there is no general agreement in the community’s responses, the game of attributing concepts to individuals (...) would not exist” (1982, 96), he seems, in light of what he goes on to say, to have in mind a semantically-loaded notion of agreement. For he immediately adds that “mistakes and disagreements do occur, but these are another matter” (1982, 96). The very possibility of a mistake, which Kripke takes to be on a par with the possibility of disagreement, and thus with the possibility of agreement, pertains to the semantic realm. To be in the domain in which mistakes are possible is already to be in the semantic domain.

This interpretation is also consistent with Kripke’s insistence that “it is important to realize that we are *not* looking for necessary and sufficient conditions (truth conditions) for following a rule, or an analysis of what such rule-following ‘consists in’. Indeed, such conditions would constitute a ‘straight’ solution to the sceptical problem, and have been rejected” (1982, 87). To say that agreement in use and meaningfulness are essentially linked, in a way that does not make

one prior to the other, is precisely *not* to offer necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning. It is, rather, to adopt a non-reductionist position, according to which agreement and meaning are both our bedrock, as it were.⁵⁸ Thus, our shared inclinations are to be viewed as presupposing meaning, rather than as brute dispositions to respond in certain ways in particular circumstances. At times, Kripke is explicit about this: the “regularity” that “must be taken as a brute fact” is, in Wittgenstein’s words, “the given”, or what he calls “forms of life” (1982, 98). He also writes:

There is no objective fact—that we all mean addition by ‘+’, or even that a given individual does—that explains our agreement in particular cases. Rather our license to say of each other that we mean addition by ‘+’ is part of a ‘language game’ that sustains itself only because of the brute fact that we generally agree. (1982, 97)

...it is supposed to be part of our very form of life that we find it natural and, indeed, inevitable that we follow the rule for addition in the particular way that we do. (1982, 98n78)

Thus, it seems that it is, at the very least, open to us to understand Kripke to be saying that the brute fact that we generally agree is a semantically-loaded fact. When we agree on a use, we necessarily view that use as assertable, and we do not, indeed, we cannot view it as assertable in the absence of such agreement.

David Davies makes a similar point about the sceptical solution, which he takes to consist in the claim that there *are* semantic facts, but they cannot play any significant explanatory role with respect to our dispositions to go on in similar ways with respect to our expressions (1998, 133). On his interpretation, the sceptical solution construes these semantic facts as not reducible to either

...facts about the grasping of shared concepts or assertability conditions—for these facts belong to the same level of analysis as the semantic facts themselves, or (...) facts about people’s dispositions to agree in their inclinations to ‘go on’—for these facts are among the preconditions for the discourse in which the normatively-

⁵⁸ Understood in this way, the sceptical solution is not very far from what McDowell—according to whom the notions of practice, training, and so on, are to be understood as presupposing meaning—takes to be the right way to interpret Wittgenstein (or it would not be very far if Kripke had not abandoned the truth-conditional conception of meaning, which McDowell takes to be compulsory, in favour of the assertability view). McDowell himself acknowledges that “the upshot [between his interpretation of Wittgenstein and Kripke’s solution] is similar (...); it cannot be denied that the insistence on publicity in Kripke’s reading corresponds broadly with a Wittgensteinian thought” (1984, 243). The fundamental difference, he adds, has to do with the way in which the requirement of publicity is seen to emerge.

charged semantic facts have their place. (Davies 1998, 137).

Thus, it would be a mistake to infer from the idea that the sharing of reactions cannot be explained by citing the fact that the reacting agents mean the same thing, that the sharing of reactions must be prior to meaning, such that meaning then becomes explicable in terms of shared reactions. The mistake is tempting, for the text does seem, at times at least, to leave both interpretations open. But a charitable interpretation is superior to a less charitable one. It seems that this interpretation is the only one which is genuinely immune to the sceptic's challenge.

The question that arises is, why might this account still count as a sceptical solution? More specifically, why is it not (taken by Kripke to be) a version of the non-reductionist view considered as a potential straight solution? To begin with, the sceptical solution, thus understood, cannot be so taken because it does not construe meaning states as states of speakers. The semantic facts, which are facts about a semantic practice located in a linguistic community, cannot be reduced to, or further understood by appealing to, facts about individual speakers that make up that community. Thus, the solution does not reveal facts about individuals—about their minds or behaviours—that fit the sceptic's bill.

What about the solution's ability to meet the two conditions of adequacy put forward by the sceptic? It seems as though the idea of correct use is recast as the idea of expressions being assertable in certain conditions. So, there seems to be a sense in which uses can be said to be governed by standards of correctness, though, as I said earlier, these standards are different from the ones the sceptic was seeking. However, facts about semantic practices are not obviously the sort of facts that ordinary speakers exploit when applying expressions, and which might supply resources for reason explanations of their applications. On this picture, speakers are acting on their confident inclinations, and their uses are accompanied by the feeling that they have it right. But, on the face of it at least, such a feeling cannot count as a reason for making a use.

Moreover, there is an additional reason for which this interpretation does not supply a satisfactory conception of meaning, which is that the connection between agreement and meaningfulness remains utterly mysterious. The solution commits us to viewing them as essentially linked, but it fails to supply a conception of why they are so. In this way, it is a form of quietism, for it leaves open the general question of what makes it possible for us to use expressions meaningfully. To put it differently, it fails to answer the question of what makes semantic practices possible.

To summarize, this chapter provided an examination of the sceptical solution, viewed as a non-factualist conception of meaning. A central question is how to distinguish between factual and non-factual discourse. The most plausible way is to do so in terms of another distinction, between regions of discourse that satisfy both the law of non-contradiction and the condition of doxastic independence, and those regions of discourse which do not. This is likely what Kripke has in mind when he characterizes meaning ascriptions as non-factual. However, as Miller shows, it is not clear that the distinction between meaningful sounds and mere noise can be preserved, unless one is willing to endorse a non-reductionist view about what it is for a use to be mistaken. There is, indeed, the option of interpreting the sceptical solution as a form of non-reductionism, which I think we should pursue. On this interpretation, facts about meaning and facts about agreement are equally primitive. However, there is no prospect for further explanation. In the next chapter, I shall discuss a fundamentally different attempt at providing an answer to the sceptic, one which assigns a substantive role to Platonic entities, rather than to agreement in responses.

III. SEMANTIC PLATONISM

In the previous chapter, I sketched an interpretation of the sceptical solution as a form of quietism about meaning: a view that construes meaning as essentially connected with agreement in meaningful responses, but which ultimately leaves the nature of meaning—of the meaningful responses that are to be found within a community of creatures who agree in those responses—mysterious. There is a different, and perhaps more promising, line of interpretation of the sceptical solution, which has been articulated most prominently by George Wilson and Martin Kusch. According to it, to view the meaning ascriptions depicted by the solution as non-factual is to misunderstand the solution. Thus, on this interpretation of it, the sceptical solution does not deny that ascriptions of meaning have a fact-stating role. Instead, it proposes an alternative way of conceiving of the facts that such ascriptions purport to state. Central to each of the two views is the idea that the target of the sceptical challenge is not the general idea of a semantic fact, but rather a specific—albeit intuitively compelling—way of construing that idea under the guise of semantic Platonism.

I shall start by articulating the bare bones of semantic Platonism, by relying primarily on Wilson's conception of it. Then, I shall inquire into why it is that semantic Platonism is problematic. In his discussion, Kripke devotes very little time to this question, and so one might wonder whether Platonist views should really be dismissed.⁵⁹ I shall outline two shortcomings of the Platonist conception—one metaphysical, and one epistemological. Then, I shall outline a strategy for revising semantic Platonism, and show that it, too, is hopeless. An alternative to semantic Platonism is needed. I shall consider then the alternatives proposed by Wilson and

⁵⁹ The question is especially urgent given that, as Thomas Nagel puts it, "Platonism must always be a candidate for the truth" (1999, 205).

Kusch, and outline problems with each. Whatever the alternative to semantic Platonism is, it is not to be found in their proposals, or so I shall argue.

1. THE PLATONIST CONCEPTION OF MEANING

We have seen in the previous chapter that one of the culprits for the difficulty engendered by the sceptic's paradox is, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein's remarks, the classical realist conception of meaning. According to this conception, the meaning of a sentence is determined by its truth condition (and the meaning of a sub-sentential expression consists in its contribution to that truth condition). The notion of a truth condition at play involves correspondence with entities (1982, 72). When it comes to sentences, the relevant entities are possible facts; when it comes to predicative expressions, they are properties, such as roundness, and functions, such as addition. A property can be instantiated by infinitely many objects, and each such instantiation amounts to a fact: a possible fact if the object is merely possible, and an actual fact if the object is actual. Thus, if an expression is meaningful, there is an entity that is the standard for its correct use, and thus constitutes its meaning.⁶⁰ The entity is mind-independent; it is prior to any attempt of ours at singling it out or describing it. Its relations to speaking creatures are to be viewed as not being constitutive of, or essential to, it. This is, to repeat, the minimal characterization of classical realism provided by Kripke on behalf of Wittgenstein, which I summarized in the previous chapter. According to Wilson and Kusch, it constitutes the primary and sole target of the sceptic's attack.

⁶⁰ I often rely on talk of entities, instead of properties or facts, since I take the notion to encompass properties as well as facts, and thus to be suitable in the context in which I take 'expression' to encompass sentences as well as predicative terms. Specific formulations of classical realism for predicates, functional expressions, etc., can be found in Miller 2010, 168-9.

On this picture, our uses of expressions are meaningful by virtue of being linked to the abstract entities just mentioned. (For instance, my uses of ‘round’ are meaningful by virtue of the expression’s being linked to the property of roundness.) The standards of correctness, and the correctness or incorrectness of infinitely many possible uses governed by them, are embodied in those entities. Because the entities are construed as mind-independent, and as ultimately providing the world with its structure, this picture is often referred to as semantic Platonism, which is the label that I adopt.⁶¹ However, it is also referred to as “the classical account of extension” (Wilson 1982),⁶² and, more poetically, as “the rules-as-rails imagery” of rule-following, revolving around “the image of a rule as a rail laid to infinity, tracing out a proper course for a practice [e.g., of predicating expressions of objects] quite independently of any judgment of the practitioners” (Wright 1989, 178). On David Pears’s characterization, Platonism is the view that “the meanings of our words are guaranteed by the pre-existing structure of reality” (1988, 363). They are guaranteed by, to go back to Wright’s metaphor, the rails laid to infinity which are provided by that structure.

All of this would seem to suggest that the speaker’s contribution to the task of rendering expressions meaningful must be rather minimal, even though it obviously involves her own expressions. But it is important to note that the speaker must still single out the relevant entity. Thus, her contribution is minimal only in so far as, once she fastens her expressions onto entities, the correctness and incorrectness of indefinitely many uses that she might make is determined.

⁶¹ See Pears 1988, Wright 2001, Verheggen 2003, Zalabardo 2003, Hanks 2017.

⁶² On Mark Wilson’s characterization, this account states that “an intermediate entity (...) forges a bond between predicate and set. These Platonic go-betweens were called “senses” by Frege and “universals” by Russell. A predicate “P” will allegedly denote a universal A, which in turn fixes the set {x/x falls under A}. The correlation of attribute and language performs two functions: 1) The speaker’s “grasp” of the universal provides a necessary condition for his understanding of the predicate. The attribute represents what he shares in common with other speakers of the language with respect to the particular bit of syntax. 2) On its own, the attribute determines a set of objects in the world as extension” (1982, 555). See also George Wilson’s characterization, which consists in five main claims, and is to be found in Wilson 2008, 151-152, and Wilson 2011, 259-264.

But it is significant in so far as it is she who must bring about that fastening by singling out entities and forming the relevant attitudes or intentions toward them.⁶³ As Zalabardo expresses this idea in his characterization of semantic Platonism,

...my referential intentions with respect to the predicate ‘square’ would arise from a conscious act in which I decide to pair the predicate with the property in such a way that the satisfaction conditions of the predicate, as I mean it, are determined by the instantiation conditions of the property. (2003, 314)

Thus, there must be facts or considerations about a speaker that make it the case that she singled out a particular entity, and thereby adopted a particular standard, which govern her uses of a particular expression. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Wilson calls this “the grounding constraint” (Wilson 1994, 239; 1998, 107), and takes it to amount to the idea that “the existence of conditions of applicability for a term must be intelligibly *grounded* in facts about the speaker’s psychological and/or social history” (Wilson 1994, 239). He goes on to explain:

The properties, which constitute the standards for my use of [an expression], and which thereby determine how I should apply [it] in each instance, must somehow be ‘contained’ in any candidate for the fact as to what I meant. That is to say, the fact as to what I meant must itself partially consist in facts about me that establish which properties are to be my standards of correctness in using [that expression]. (1994, 240n4)

According to Wilson, the grounding constraint constitutes the core of the target of the challenge of Kripke’s sceptic. Indeed, what the sceptic’s attack on meaning reveals is not that there are no entities—no properties, no facts—that one might latch on to, nor that such entities

⁶³ Thus, the version of Platonism considered in this chapter is different from the view of David Lewis, which is sometimes taken to be a variety of Platonism (see, e.g., Child 2001a), but on which it is unclear whether the speaker has any role to play in the determination of the meanings of her expressions and of the contents of her thoughts. According to Lewis, “reference consists in part of what we do in language or thought when we refer, but in part it consists in eligibility of the referent. And this eligibility to be referred to is a matter of natural properties” (1983, 371). Moreover, “what we do in language or thought” is a matter of having certain states with functional roles. Thus, “believing this or desiring that consists in part in the functional roles of the states whereby we believe or desire, but in part it consists in the eligibility of the content. And this eligibility to be thought is a matter, in part, of natural properties” (1983, 375). Natural properties are the properties that necessarily constitute our thoughts and meanings, but the reason for which this is true has nothing to do with our agency, our interests, and so on. For, according to Lewis, “the reason natural properties feature in the contents of our attitudes is that naturalness is part of what it is to feature therein. It’s not that we’re built to take a special interest in natural properties, or that we confer naturalness on properties when we happen to take an interest in them” (1983, 378).

would be ineffective in providing our expressions with extensions, but rather that, granting the existence and effectiveness of such entities, there is nothing about agents that could show that a determinate entity supplies the standard of correctness for an expression. Kripke examines, on behalf of the sceptic, a variety of candidates for facts about the agents that might fix or determine the meaning of an agent's expressions; as we have seen in the first chapter, he even considers the idea that Fregean senses might supply the right conception of meaning (1982, 53-54), and argues that the facts about agents that make it the case that they grasp a particular sense rather than some other have yet to be identified, for the Fregean picture fails to supply them. As we have also seen, Kripke argues that none of the candidates can single out *addition* rather than *quaddition* as the function meant by the expression 'plus'. Each of the candidates is compatible with the *quaddition* hypothesis, and thus cannot rule it out as the meaning of that expression.

In what follows, I shall outline two additional problems with semantic Platonism, one metaphysical, and one epistemological. Identifying these two problems will help shed light on why semantic Platonism must fail. I believe that, in order properly to recognize its failure, indeed, in order to see what the root problem with semantic Platonism is, it would be helpful to appeal to an even more minimal characterization of it. On what I take to be the most minimal characterization of it, semantic Platonism relies on two main ideas. The first is that the structure of the world is independent of our minds, or of how we take the world to be structured. The second idea is that for an agent's expressions to be endowed with meaning is for her uses of those expressions to be governed by standards of correctness determined or supplied by the entities that provide the world with its structure.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ I am borrowing this characterization from David Pears and William Child. See Pears 1988, Child 2001a.

1.1. The metaphysical problem with semantic Platonism

The most immediate issue that a Platonist conception of properties must face involves the deeply puzzling idea that properties are viewed as transcendent, as entities that are not located in space and time, and which objects instantiate. I shall not be concerned with this matter here, however, for I am considering Platonism only as a distinctively semantic doctrine—thus, I am interested only in how it fares with respect to the elucidation of the semantic domain. Inasmuch as it offers a philosophical conception of meaning, semantic Platonism must be able to answer the question of what makes it possible for expressions to have the meanings they in fact do. To see in more detail what sort of answer semantic Platonism might provide, let us begin by reflecting on cases in which we try to endow our expressions with meaning through acts of ostension, that is, by pointing at objects. Take the expression ‘ ϕ ’. According to the Platonist conception of meaning, if ‘ ϕ ’ is to be governed by a standard of correctness, an entity must somehow be singled out or recruited in order to provide that standard. There are, it seems to me, two main paths available to the semantic Platonist. I shall discuss each in turn.

The first one is the one that Wilson pursues, and which he thinks can be retraced to Kripke’s remarks. According to it, the agent singles out the property by intending that *it*, rather than some other property, provide the standard. The agent must be able to isolate the relevant entity in order to form the relevant intention:

...if I mean addition by ‘+’, there must be facts about me that have somehow ‘singled out’ the addition function for me and have done so in such a fashion that I have been able to form the intention, *concerning this very function*, that *it* is to determine correct applications of my use of the term. (Wilson 1998, 102)

He thinks that this path is unsuccessful, however, due to what he characterizes as “a kind of indeterminacy argument” (1998, 111n12), which he takes to be divided into two parts (1998, 105). On the one hand, the sceptic establishes that fixing standards of correctness for non-

primitive terms is possible by appealing to primitive terms. Of course, this assumes that the standards of correctness for those terms have already been fixed. On the other hand, the sceptic establishes that the standards of expressions for primitive terms cannot be fixed. What exactly is required for them to be fixed? And why is it that they cannot be fixed?

As Wilson puts it, if ‘ ϕ ’ is a primitive term for an agent S, “then, the sceptic claims, the properties P_1 - P_n [i.e., the entities that supply the standard of correctness for ‘ ϕ ’] must be *non-linguistically* ‘singled out’ for S as the *de re* subject of her meaning-constituting intentions, and the sceptic tries to show that we can make no sense of this” (1998, 105). Later in the same paper, he writes:

...if a set of mind and language independent properties were to be established as the standard of correctness for a term ‘T’, then users of ‘T’ would have to have *some kind of pre-linguistic grasp* of properties-in-the-world that allowed them to form the semantical intentions that purportedly establish certain of the properties as the standard in question. (...) [W]e can make no sense of the idea that properties can be pre-linguistically ‘singled-out’ in this way (...). (1998, 109-110, italics added)

But, again, why exactly can we not make sense of this idea? Wilson does not say very much about this.⁶⁵ He seems to think that any attempt at singling out properties non-linguistically, by forming *de re* intentions about them, is bound to remain indeterminate, because, for any such attempt, alternative interpretations, that is, alternative properties being latched onto, are possible. Indeed, “no facts about the speaker suffice to determine one ‘interpretation’ out of an indeterminate number of possible alternatives, as the one with which the speaker’s putative intention is concerned” (1998, 111n12). Thus, the speaker’s attempts at singling out a property are bound to fail, for, as the passage above suggests, they must be executed without involving language, but they cannot be executed without it.

⁶⁵ As noted by Verheggen 2003.

To see why this is the case, consider again the example of the red marble. Is it possible for an agent to single out *roundness*, which the object instantiates or satisfies, as the target for the meaning of the expression ‘round’? Recall that the singling out must not involve language. It might be thought that the property can be singled out in perception.⁶⁶ An agent can represent roundness in the required way by perceiving a round object, and, perhaps, by focusing her attention on its roundness. Her intention to fix roundness as the meaning of the expression ‘round’ might thus succeed in this way, it might be thought, though the details of such an account remain to be worked out. The problem is that focusing one’s perceptual attention on the roundness of an object in front of one is compatible with having a variety of thoughts and intentions about that object; it is thus compatible with adopting a variety of standards or policies for that expression. Is the intention to endow the expression with meaning about the roundness of the object, or about its shape, or about its corporeality, or about its concreteness? For each of these properties a different *de re* intention would have to be present. So, perception cannot, on its own, supply the standard.

I have been taking for granted that roundness can, indeed, be represented in perception. But the full force of the problem is revealed once we consider again the sceptic’s deviant hypothesis. What makes it the case that the property isolated is that of *roundness*, rather than that of *rouquareness*, where something is rouquare if and only if either it is round and observed before some future time *t* or it is square?⁶⁷ What makes it the case, therefore, that ‘round’ comes

⁶⁶ Any view according to which perception involves content maintains that certain properties of features can be represented in perception. See, e.g., Burge 2010.

⁶⁷ This example is similar to the *grue* case famously formulated by Nelson Goodman (1954). Something is grue if and only if either it is observed before some future time *t* and is green, or it is not observed before *t* and it is blue. Kripke reconstructs the example as follows: “past objects were grue if and only if they were (then) green while present objects are grue if and only if they are (now) blue” (1982, 20).

to be applied correctly to round things, rather than to rouquare things? It might again be insisted that one is attending to the roundness of the object, and not to its rouquareness, and so it is the property of roundness that is represented and thus fixes the meaning. But how can this insistence be justified? Each round object observed before t is also rouquare. Each object that has a round shape also has a rouquare shape. So, whenever we attend to the property of roundness, we also attend to the property of rouquareness. We, then, cannot isolate a property by merely attending perceptually to the object.

It must be noted at this stage that the intentions that Wilson requires the agent to form must involve a grasp of, as he puts it, “properties-in-the-world”. By that, I take him to mean that they must be grasped or conceived as features that can be instantiated in the world, and which are thus independent of her. In order to form an intention of this sort, one must already view the world and its objects as mind-independent, that is, as a world. In order to view the world as a world, rather than as an extension or a prolongation of oneself, it is not enough that one be able to represent various features of one’s environment in one’s perception, nor that one be able to react to that environment based on such representations. To view the world as a world, one must recognize it as imposing an external constraint on one’s responses, in a way that renders those responses correct or incorrect. The possibility of viewing the world as a world thus seems to presuppose the idea of a standard of correctness. I shall further flesh out this argument in the last chapter, which is why I do not go into more detail here. For the time being, let us take note of the following. That such a recognition of the world as a world can be had prior to being able to use expressions and form thoughts that are about the world should not be taken for granted. (Let us recall that, even though my focus is on the meaningful use of expressions, semantic Platonism is a doctrine that encompasses all varieties of contentful engagement with the world, thus it

applies not only to language, but also to thought.) Indeed, it is plausible that to assume that one is capable of recognizing the mind-independence of properties, which seems to be involved in the grasp of such properties, is simply to assume that one already has the capacity for language and thought, the very capacity the constitution of which we are attempting to explain. I shall, as I said, return to this issue in the fifth chapter.

So, to put it slightly differently, the main trouble with this first path is that it turns out that isolating the property or entity requires one to rely on expressions (or concepts) that already are governed by standards of correctness. But, then, the question we are trying to answer will arise again for these expressions. We are thus confronted with a regress problem: we must rely on further expressions in order to explain what makes the standards of correctness for *these* ones possible; we must rely on further properties in order to single out *these* ones. So, while it might seem that we can solve what looks to be an indeterminacy problem by using meaningful expressions, there does not seem to be a way of avoiding the regress. The project of making sense of an agent's adopting a standard of correctness by forming an intention toward a particular entity cannot succeed in this way.⁶⁸

There is, however, a second path available to the semantic Platonist. She might say that isolating the entity that supplies meaning for our expression 'φ' requires the exercise of our natural ways of responding to the world, rather than the employment of our capacity to form *de re* intentions about the entities that structure that world. Our nature, as it were, somehow determines or singles out the relevant property: it is the property that can be viewed as the object or target of our dispositions to respond to the world. Thus, if we are presented with several

⁶⁸ It is important to emphasize, once again, that it does not fail because the sort of entities required for it to succeed do not exist. Even if such entities existed, they would not be able to endow expressions with meaning. Thus, the plight of the *semantic* Platonist is different from the plight of the metaphysician who adheres to Platonism about properties. See also Wilson 2003, 175.

round objects, we will react to their roundness, and thus to *roundness* itself, for instance by moving them all into one pile. Our doing so is apt, the thought goes, to single out the property of roundness, and thus to allow it to play the role of the intervening entity between an expression and the domain of round objects. On this view, our nature is somehow attuned to the structure of the world, and our responses naturally latch on to it.

The problem, of course, is that our natural reactions are, in each case, necessarily compatible with more than one way of conceiving of the objects, and so with more than one property. Thus, they cannot isolate the relevant property, and so they cannot, on their own, supply any standards of correctness whatsoever. The argument for the failure of our natural dispositions to single out properties, which I briefly reviewed in the first chapter, and to which I shall return in the last chapter, applies to this proposal. Now, they could help provide such standards, of course, if the natural reactions themselves were specified in semantic terms, as representational reactions. For instance, we might include among the natural reactions that are apt to single out properties the inclination to conceive of roundness as such, or to represent round objects as round. Such an inclination obviously hinges on a standard of correctness operating through it. Therefore, adopting this view would commit us to the idea that we are naturally equipped to respond to the world in ways that are correct or incorrect, that is, that are normatively responsive to that world. No effort is required from our part to enter the normative realm, as it were. It does seem, however, that we will be faced with a problem similar to the one we encountered on the first path, when we appealed to intentions to single out objects: we must presuppose that determinate standards of correctness, the very constitution of which we are attempting to explain, already operate in our responses. If we pursue this line, we do not even need to appeal to a reality of mind-independent abstract entities in order to make sense of the

possibility of meaningful uses. Indeed, no sense will be made of such uses; they will simply have to be taken for granted.

1.2. The epistemological problem with semantic Platonism

Another challenge that any semantic Platonist account must meet is that of ensuring that speakers' actual uses are properly connected with the aforementioned entities. It is not enough that the correctness or incorrectness of any possible use be determined through a standard previously adopted by the agent. Actual uses must be guided by the entity. Thus, there must be something present in the agent's mind when she makes the application, something that connects that application to the relevant entity, and which we might call, following Pears, a "mental talisman" (1988, 209). Mental talismans are supposed to guide speakers in their uses of language in new cases. They are akin to a footprint left by the Platonic entity within the mind.

The trouble here is that the idea of such a mental talisman is, as Pears argues, incoherent. A talisman of this sort would have to be something that the agent may consult prior to applying her expression. It plays the role of a mediator between the speaker's application of an expression and the entity which supplies the standard that governs it. It "is something that actually occurs in his mind and gives [the speaker] infallible guidance. This thing, whatever it is, is supposed to lock him on to the fixed rails of correct use because its meaning is instantly self-intimating" (Pears 1988, 469). But there is nothing that can occur in the mind and bear instantly self-intimating meaning. Whatever might seem to be able to play the role of a mental talisman will turn out not to be able to do it. For whatever is in the mind—whatever may play the role of an item before the mind that can be consulted by the agent—may be taken in more than one way, and so it may be viewed as justifying more than one application of an expression. This is

precisely one of the claims established by Wittgenstein's remarks. Take again the example of expressions for colour words, such as 'green', and consider the suggestion that a mental talisman, such as a sample of green, is brought to mind when the word is grasped and whenever the word is used. Now,

...ask yourself, what shape must the sample of the colour green be? Should it be rectangular? Or would it then be the sample of green rectangles?—So should it be 'irregular' in shape? And what is then to prevent us from viewing it—that is, from using it—only as a sample of irregularity of shape? (1953, §73)

Any item in the mind can entitle one to more than one way of applying an expression in a particular context. As Pears puts it, “nothing could possibly fill the post [of a mental talisman], because any single thing in anyone's mind would always be connectible with more than one set of applications” (Pears 1988, 468). The idea of a mental talisman, which ensures that our uses are properly connected to the entity that yields the standard of correctness, is unintelligible.⁶⁹

It might be argued that the problem highlighted above relies on ignoring one plausible way to ensure that actual uses of an expression are guided, *via* the agent's mind, by the entity that supplies its meaning, namely that of taking the mind to be capable directly to grasp, or directly to be in contact with, that entity.⁷⁰ In other words, it ignores the possibility that entities (properties, universals, etc.) be directly present to the mind, or that an agent's mind be capable of intuiting the relevant entity, or of bringing it to consciousness, whenever applying an expression. On this view, there is no intermediary item between the mind and the Platonic entity. Instead, “I have in mind an item with sorting power—something to whose very identity a normative link to the objective world is essential” (Zalabardo 2003, 320).⁷¹ There is thus no distance between the

⁶⁹ See also the discussion of the guidance conception of understanding in the first chapter.

⁷⁰ This idea is developed in Zalabardo 2003.

⁷¹ As Zalabardo notes, there is a sense in which this view is in the vicinity of semantic non-reductionism, for it takes for granted the idea of a primitive item that sorts uses into correct and incorrect.

mind and the entity: the two are in direct contact whenever the agent applies an expression to an object.

It must be noted that, on this view, there is still a self-contained object brought before the mind that guides our uses. But it would seem that any object brought before the mind, in so far as it needs to be consulted, is subject to the same problem. Any such object can be taken in more than one way upon being consulted; it can be relied on, by the agent, to justify more than one application of an expression. At the root of the epistemological trouble is, then, the idea of an item before the mind that pre-exists the application of the expression—to borrow McDowell’s metaphor, it just stands there “like a signpost” (Wittgenstein 1953, §85)—and which must be consulted prior to the application in order to guide it. But items before the mind, items that can be consulted in this way, can always “guide” in more than one way, depending on how the agent takes them. The very idea of such an item is incoherent.

It might be insisted, in response, that it is precisely in the nature of an entity of the sort proposed that it cannot be taken in more than one way—that the correct interpretation of it is somehow forced on the subject. The problem here is that, as McDowell notes, “we have gone through the motions of giving ourselves a regress-proof conception of acting on an understanding. But really all we have equipped ourselves with is a quasi-magical conception of how the understanding determines what we are to do in acting on it” (2010, 166-7). It is quasi-magical because it conceives of the mind—the *locus* of such items—as “the mysterious seat or origin of meaningfulness” (2010, 167), from which meaningful uses of expressions somehow flow. McDowell discusses in some detail the problems with this idea, and I shall not rehearse

the discussion here.⁷² What is worth noting is that, if we are to pursue this path, Platonism provides no illumination; rather, it seems to deepen the mystery of meaning.

1.3. An attempt at amending Platonism

It might be thought that the above considerations show that semantic Platonism must be revised, rather than fully renounced. We might preserve, the thought goes, the idea that semantic features involve relations to external, mind-independent entities, without requiring that such relations be grounded in the ways recommended by either of the two paths outlined in our discussion of the metaphysical problem. Following Peter Pagin and Kathrin Glüer, we might take a different, more technical, approach to the problem of the determination of meaning, one which seeks an account that has two components: a determination base, populated by meaning-determinants, and a determination relation (or principle or function), which correlates or pairs meaning-determinants with meanings.⁷³ On the Platonist view, the determination base is populated by mind-independent entities, such as properties and functions. The determination principle, at least on Wilson's construal of the view, is the following: for an expression *e*, the property paired with it, which supplies the standard of correctness for that expression, is the one singled out or grasped by the agent for whom the expression will thus become meaningful. We have seen earlier, when we discussed the metaphysical problem with semantic Platonism, that this principle fails to endow expressions with meaning. But, it might be thought, perhaps some other principle will do the job. Is it possible to arrive at a conception of meaning that would allow us to say that a set of mind-independent entities determine the standards of correctness that are essential to meaningful uses?

⁷² Again, see McDowell 2010.

⁷³ See Pagin 2002, 154-62, and Glüer 2017, 70-4.

Proponents of naturalistic accounts of meaning, which seek to specify the relations between expressions and extra-linguistic entities in non-semantic, non-intentional terms, might be most inclined to exploit the possibility of some alternative principle. Indeed, they might claim that what we need is a principle of determination that does not rely on the agent's own conception of, or attempts to single out, the entities. Rather, the principle must execute the task of singling out the relevant entities in a way that is independent of the agent *qua* agent, though not independent of the agent *qua* organism located in an environment. One possibility would be to maintain that the causal relations operating between the organism and features of its environment will somehow do this by themselves. Another possibility is to think that the teleological notion of function will, in some way, supply the principle. The details do not concern us here, for it will become clear very quickly that taking this path will not lead us very far. To see why, we must start by noting that any item in the determination base, regardless of how such items are conceived, is compatible with the assignment of more than one meaning by the relevant principle. Indeed, the considerations that rule out the possibility that behaviours or natural responses isolate the relevant property, which I have reviewed when I discussed the metaphysical problem with semantic Platonism, also show that any principle that does not presuppose that certain semantic facts hold is compatible with more than one assignment. For, it might be asked, what prevents us from claiming that, for instance, the property of roundness, or the function of addition, understood as mere mind-independent entities, can be taken to ground expressions' meaning *rouquareness* and *quaddition*? Recall that we are to view any property or function as a mere entity. But any entity, as long as it is understood as devoid of meaning, can serve to justify more than one assignment of meaning. We can see, then, that the line of reasoning pursued in the previous two sections can be generalized: take any determinant of

meaning, and any principle of determination—any principle that does not take for granted some facts about meaning—and there will be more than one assignment of meaning that is compatible with them.

Here is another way of getting at what I take to be the same idea. Unless we provide a satisfactory justification—one that will have to be metaphysical in nature—for the principle of determination, that is, the principle that relates expressions with items in the determination base, and thereby confers meaning on those expressions, there will be a certain arbitrariness to its selection.⁷⁴ However, such a justification must itself not presuppose facts about meaning, on pain of rendering the justificatory task circular. (Recall that what we are after is the answer to the question of what makes it possible for expressions to be used meaningfully. To answer the question by saying that meaning makes this possible is to make very little progress, if any.) At this stage, it would seem that what we need to ask is whether such a justification is at all possible. In other words, is it possible to justify our principle of determination for meaning without taking certain facts about meaning for granted?

Take, for example, the principle that the meaning assigned to an expression is determined by some biological function of the system that produces or uses that expression, which is a rough formulation of the idea behind teleological theories of the determination of content.⁷⁵ If this principle delivers for our terms extensions that are radically different from what we take ourselves to mean by those terms, it will be relinquished. This suggests that the principle can be defended, indeed that it can be vindicated, only from inside meaning, that is, only from an independently established conception of what we mean by our expressions. The attempt to rescue semantic Platonism by revising it in the way suggested will unavoidably rely on such a

⁷⁴ This might be what Pagin has in mind in 2002, 161.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Millikan 1984.

conception. But, again, it is an elucidation of this conception that we are after. We may thus conclude, for now, that the attempt at revising semantic Platonism by renouncing certain claims distinctive of it—in particular, the determination principle it relies on—fails.

2. RESISTING SEMANTIC PLATONISM

On certain (non-standard) interpretations of it, the sceptical paradox is an argument to the effect that the conception of meaning on which it relies, to which I have been referring as semantic Platonism, needs to be abandoned and replaced with some other conception of meaning. Thus, the paradox does not show that there are no meaning facts, but only that there are no meaning facts if one has a certain conception of such facts, namely a Platonist conception. It is this conception that is the source of the paradox.⁷⁶

According to Wilson, the fact that this view is the sceptic's target has been missed by most commentators because the dialectic between the sceptic and Kripke's Wittgenstein has been consistently misunderstood. The source of the misunderstanding is the failure to distinguish between two different sceptical theses, which go as follows. The first sceptical thesis states that nobody means anything by any expression; this is the radical sceptical conclusion (RSC) endorsed by the sceptic. The second sceptical thesis states that there are no facts about agents apt to single out entities as suppliers of standards of correctness for their expressions; this is the basic sceptical conclusion (BSC). The first thesis is much stronger than the second. According to Wilson, Kripke's Wittgenstein, unlike the radical sceptic, resists the former while subscribing to the latter. Recognizing that Kripke's Wittgenstein resists the radical conclusion is, Wilson

⁷⁶ Proponents of this interpretation are Wilson 1994, 1998, 2003, 2008, Byrne 1996, Davies 1998, and Kusch 2006.

thinks, crucial for a proper reconstruction of the argument to be found in Kripke's book. So, what is the argument, exactly?

Wilson takes Kripke's Wittgenstein to be showing not that there are no facts about what expressions mean, but rather that classical realism—what I have been calling semantic Platonism—is false. It is only if one thinks that classical realism is compulsory that one will adhere to the conclusion that the idea of meaningfully using expressions is erroneous (RSC). The sceptic seems to take classical realism to be compulsory. But Kripke's Wittgenstein does not. Indeed, he takes the argument advanced by the sceptic to indicate precisely that classical realism is optional, and to reveal the need to reject it. Rejecting it is tantamount to rejecting the idea that extra-linguistic abstract entities supply standards of correctness to our linguistic expressions. But rejecting this idea, while providing grounds to endorse BSC, that is, the claim that “there are no facts about [an agent] that fix any set of [entities] as the standard of correctness for [her] use of [an expression]” (Wilson 1998, 107), does not establish that there are no semantic facts. Indeed, it is here that the radical sceptic and Kripke's Wittgenstein fundamentally diverge. Kripke's Wittgenstein offers an alternative way of construing meaning in non-classical realist, but nevertheless factual, terms. Or so Wilson argues.⁷⁷ I shall now consider his positive view.

⁷⁷ The dialectic, according to Wilson, is the following:

- (1) The grounding constraint
- (2) BSC
- (3) The denial of RSC
- (4) Therefore, the denial of the classical realist thesis.

This is very different from the dialectic typically attributed to Kripke's Wittgenstein, which is the following:

- (1) The classical realist thesis
- (2) The grounding constraint
- (3) BSC
- (4) Therefore, RSC.

2.1. Wilson's view

Recall that, according to Wilson, if semantic Platonism—classical realism, in Wilson's own terminology—is to be made to work, the grounding constraint must be met, that is, there must be facts about a speaker that single out a determinate standard of correctness, supplied by a mind-independent abstract entity, as the standard that governs the speaker's uses of an expression. On Wilson's interpretation, Kripke's Wittgenstein shows that there are no such facts. Thus, semantic Platonism is false. The denial of semantic Platonism amounts to the denial of the claim that Platonist standards of correctness, that is, standards of correctness grounded in mind-independent entities, such as properties or functions, ever govern our uses of expressions. What conception of meaning does Wilson offer instead?

It is not easy to grasp Wilson's positive view—which he attributes to the solution offered by Kripke's Wittgenstein, but which he also seems to endorse—especially since there are certain aspects of the view that seem to indicate contradictory commitments.⁷⁸ There seems to be, however, one idea to which Wilson returns throughout his writings devoted to Kripke's challenge, which has to do with the relationship between the meaningfulness of a term and the recruitment, by the subject, of a standard of correctness that is supposed to govern the use of that term. He writes:

The mistake of the classical realist (...) according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, occurs at the very outset. The meaningfulness of a term and the fact about what it means are not engendered by the *constitutively prior* recruitment of independently existing properties to serve as standards of correctness for a term. (1998, 110, italics added)

⁷⁸ Miller, for instance, points out that there are passages that suggest that Wilson thinks that the sceptical solution involves a deflationary conception of truth, as well as passages that suggest precisely the opposite (Miller 2010, 172-3).

On this view, expressions are not endowed with meaning through the constitutively prior recruitment of properties. In other words, the constitutive link between the recruiting of a property that is supposed to serve as a standard of correctness for an expression, and the meaningful use of that expression, must be such that the first cannot be prior—constitutively prior—to the second. However, later on, Wilson ends up casting this idea in different terms, which emphasize the temporal, rather than the constitutive, dimension of the relation. He starts by taking the rejection of semantic Platonism to be tantamount to the denial that our uses of an expression are governed by “a property or set of properties serving as its pre-established standard of correctness” (2003, 181-182). We must offer, he thinks, a conception of meaning on which uses of expressions are meaningful independently of “antecedently recruited” (2003, 182) properties. He later concludes that we must altogether deny that “the meaning of a term semantically determines in advance whether or not the term, so meant, applies to various actual and possible candidate items” (2003, 171).

Ultimately, the root of the difficulty with semantic Platonism, on Wilson’s view, has to do with the requirement that properties be non-linguistically singled out in order to serve as standards of correctness. However, we should note that rejecting this requirement is compatible with the idea that properties might be linguistically singled out, and that they might serve as standards in this way. Similarly, the denial of the constitutive priority of the recruitment of properties in relation to meaningful use of expressions is compatible with the two being constitutively on a par. So, from the rejection of semantic Platonism, it does not immediately follow that the meaning of a term cannot be said to determine in advance whether it applies to various possible items.

And yet, Wilson seems to suggest that “in the light of the rejection by Kripke’s Wittgenstein of classical realist semantic determination, what we mean by addition is something that gets settled only over the course of time” (2003, 186). It gets settled as the expression is applied—in ways that are correct or incorrect, depending on whether or not they are legitimized by the relevant, socially-constituted, criteria. Thus, the domain of correct uses is determined gradually, with each use, rather than all at once. The meaning of a predicate “depends upon (a) the assertability or justification conditions that the community accepts in practice for (basic) sentential completions” of it, and “(b) the characteristic role or utility of the predicate” (2011, 271). The claim that a certain condition justifies a certain use of a term, and thus that a use of a term is correct, “presupposes that the community is implicitly in agreement or, at least, is in a position to reach agreement” about it (2011, 271). However, crucially, Wilson insists, this is not to say that “an equation of ‘ $j+k=l$ ’ means the same as ‘We mostly agree in getting l when we compute the sum of j and k .’ If a community of game players agree in accepting the rule of chess (in these words), ‘The King in chess moves one square in any direction,’ then the words themselves simply express that familiar rule of chess” (2011, 270). Importantly, Wilson also does not say anything about how it is possible for “the results that get accepted” in this way, that is, the results about which there is agreement, to be “themselves timeless or tenseless statements” (2011, 271), which he thinks they must be, given that “the truths that they express make no reference to time nor to the particular instances” in which we use the expressions (2011, 271).

However, one cannot at the same time construe correctness as a matter of agreement and simply declare that ‘ $j+k=l$ ’ does *not* mean the same as ‘We mostly agree in getting l when we compute the sum of j and k ’.⁷⁹ One owes us an account of what is it about us agreeing with

⁷⁹ This is made especially clear in McDowell 1984.

respect to the use of an expression that turns that expression into something contentful, something that, to go back to Wilson's own example in the quote, does express the relevant rule of chess. Surely, Wilson recognizes this. Ultimately, I suspect that Wilson's proposal, or at least one aspect thereof, might be best interpreted as similar to the interpretation of the sceptical solution articulated at the end of the second chapter, according to which there is a fundamental connection between meaning and agreement, such that meaning is not possible without agreement, and facts about agreement are not more basic than facts about meaning. If so, we are dealing again with a form of quietist non-reductionism.⁸⁰ As Wilson claims, "no analysis or reduction of meaning in terms of facts from categories (a) and (b) [mentioned on the previous page] is envisaged" (2011, 272). Earlier, he says that

...the requirement [of agreement with our own use] is a *primitive* requirement. It is established by our first and fundamental procedures in ascribing meaning, and it is not based upon a 'theory', e.g., about what speech behaviour happens to be correlated with meaning [something] by some term. (1994, 254)

However, just as with the sceptical solution, we may still wonder about the extent to which the view engages with the question of what makes meaning possible. I turn to Kusch next, who offers, while taking himself to be following Wilson, a more detailed conception than Wilson himself provides.

2.2. Kusch's view

I shall start with a brief overview of Kusch's project. Kusch's ultimate goal is to defend the sceptical solution as the correct conception of meaning. He offers his own interpretation of this solution, by contrasting it with the view of meaning that he takes to lead to the sceptical paradox,

⁸⁰ Miller, in his attempt to understand Wilson's view, also considers the possibility that Wilson might adopt a non-reductionist position, but thinks that non-reductionism is ruled out as a sceptical solution, given that the sceptic has considered and dismissed the idea of primitive meaning states. See Miller 2010 for more discussion.

and to which he refers as meaning determinism.⁸¹ According to meaning-determinism, an agent means something by an expression in virtue of having a mental state, which is immediately known by the agent, is intrinsic to her, guides and justifies her uses of the expression, and somehow contains all the possible correct applications of the expression.⁸² This picture requires that there be meanings able to be grasped. The meaning of a sentence is a proposition, and the meaning of a predicative expression is the contribution it makes to propositions expressed by sentences in which it appears. We understand expressions by grasping their meaning. Propositions are the primary bearers of truth conditions. They are true if they correspond to facts. This is, again, an extremely rough attempt at spelling out Kusch's conception of meaning determinism, which he takes to be the sceptic's target.⁸³

According to Kusch's interpretation of the dialectic in Kripke's text, the meaning-determinist picture of meaning cannot be made to work, because there are no facts that can underpin it, and no mental states that can play the required role. It must be replaced with a fundamentally different picture, which, among other things, relinquishes the idea of expressions standing in relations to external entities. The core of the new picture is, according to Kusch, the idea that meaningfulness is explained in terms of assertability conditions, which are "rough and ready conditions for when it is appropriate, justifiable, permitted, or obligatory to make assertions of a certain type" (2006, 27). Thus, "the meaning of declarative sentences is given by rough and ready assertability conditions" (2006, 174), rather than by truth conditions. Indeed, "the significance or meaning of *all assertions* must be analysed in terms of assertability conditions" (2006, 28). It cannot be analysed in terms of truth conditions—understood, to

⁸¹ Meaning determinism is a more elaborate version of what Wilson calls 'classical realism'.

⁸² Thus, on Kusch's picture, the grounding constraint must be met by a mental state of the agent.

⁸³ See Kusch 2006, 11 for a list of the claims characteristic of meaning determinism.

repeat, as correspondence with possible facts—given that the sceptic succeeds in showing that “there is no way in which Jones can latch on to the addition function and make it the referent for ‘+’” (2006, 28):

The meaning-sceptical alternative (...) is to see linguistic inclinations as ‘primitive’. (...) We cannot further explain Jones’s inclination regarding plus-queries by drawing on concepts such as meaning, intention, grasping, or interpretation. To give up meaning determinism is to recognize that none of these concepts can be used to explain linguistic behaviour. (2006, 38)

Moreover, “assertability conditions for declarative sentences essentially involve communities” (2006, 174). There are conditions in which it is appropriate, justifiable, permitted, or obligatory for an agent to utter signs of a certain type only when there are other agents who can react to the utterances, who can take them to be appropriate, justifiable, permitted, or obligatory. Thus, agreement in reactions is fundamental. Such agreement occurs below the semantic level. We do not agree in our responses *because* we grasp the same propositions (2006, 39), but rather because our normatively-loaded responses align. This is what explains our linguistic behaviour. Linguistic inclinations are acquired through training. They are inclinations to use and respond to expressions in certain ways. They include inclinations to use expressions such as ‘correct’ to characterize certain responses, to say ‘I have got it’ during training, and to make ascriptions of meaning to oneself:

Training a child in the use of a word creates, in the child, inclinations and dispositions to use the word in certain ways and not in others. It also creates, in the child, inclinations and dispositions to declare certain uses of the word ‘correct’ and certain other uses ‘incorrect’. (Kusch 2006, 33)

It is not just Jones’s (or our) inclination to give particular answers to particular addition problems that is to be regarded as primitive. Equally primitive is his inclination to say ‘I have got it’ when being taught how to apply a (for him) new word, and his inclination to self-ascribe meaning addition by “+”. Here, too, the inclination is prior to, not dependent on, any interpretation of previous practice, previous intention or previous grasp of a concept. (2006, 38)

Because these linguistic inclinations align to a great extent, we draw the distinction between correct and incorrect uses of expressions in similar ways.

Let us now ask what, more specifically, makes it the case, on this picture, that one means round by 'round' or that the application of 'round' to the red marble is justified in light of the assertability criterion according to which 'round' applies correctly to round items, rather than unjustified in light of the assertability criterion according to which 'round' applies correctly to round items that are not red. In other words, how does Kusch's view meet the first condition put forward by the sceptic? Recall that any alternative conception of meaning must still accommodate the idea of meaningful expressions having conditions of correct application.

Kusch writes:

[T]o say that an expression has 'correctness conditions' is to say that there are circumstances under which the expression is applied correctly and circumstances under which the expression is applied incorrectly. Evidently, to be meaningful an expression must have correctness conditions. (2006, 42)

How does his account make room for this? What, , makes it justified to apply 'round' to the red marble?

As we have seen, it would be mistaken, according to Kusch, to think that the answer to these questions must involve a search for a state of meaning or understanding had by the agent of the sort proffered by meaning determinism. However, this does not entail that the answer does not have something to do with the agent's mind. On the new picture, when faced with the sceptic, the agent is justified to insist that she means *round* by 'round', and thus that she should apply 'round' to the marble, provided that she is entitled to self-ascribe that meaning. For this to be the case, "it suffices that [the agent] feels confident on how to go on, that [s]he is willing to be corrected by others, and that currently no objections are there to be considered" (267n21). Her feeling of confidence about her uses of 'round', her willingness to receive correction, and the absence of objections to her uses coming from others, are apt to justify her self-ascription of meaning. The same line of reasoning would apply to the example deployed by Kripke, involving the function of addition.

It must be emphasized that, for Kusch, it is not sufficient that others do not object to one's uses in order for one to be taken to be justified in self-ascribing meaning to oneself, and thus to be taken genuinely to use expressions meaningfully. The feeling of confidence, and the willingness to correct oneself, that is, to change one's uses in light of others' reactions, are necessary ingredients for the legitimacy of the self-ascription. Consequently, we are entitled to assert that an agent means something by an expression when she is confident in her applications, willing to accept correction from others, and, furthermore, her applications are in agreement with the applications that others—indeed, ourselves—would make. The discovery that the agent is not sensitive to others' attempts at correcting her would indicate that the assertion that she means something by her words is unjustified. Similarly, repeated protests from others concerning her applications would render our assertion illegitimate. Importantly, such protests would likely also shatter her confidence in her uses.

Thus, for Kusch, “normative considerations enter through intersubjective comparisons and thus through assertability conditions for meaning attributions” (2006, 33). The normative domain amounts to “the realm of normative talk where the distinction between “seems correct” and “is correct” is paramount” (2006, 33). The possibility of intersubjective comparisons is what allows for such a distinction to be intelligible. But, Kusch thinks,

...the sceptical solution is not a form of reductivism; it is not trying to reduce normativity to regularities, be they communal regularities of performances or communal regularities of sanctions. And since the sceptical solution is not attempting to get rid of normativity, it does not need to smuggle it in either. (...) The sceptical solution does not try to reduce normativity, it relocates it: normativity is not a feature of a meaning-determining mental state, it is a feature of how we relate to one another. (2006, 199-200)

Kusch insists that meaning ascriptions, both to oneself and to others, are factual. He has a minimal understanding of factualism, based on a minimalist conception of the notions of *truth*, *fact*, and *proposition*—thus, whether something is true does not depend on whether it stands in a certain relation to an entity in the world, and whether something is a fact does not depend on

there being such an entity. Kusch thinks that “what constitutes meaning attributions as descriptions is that meaning attributions fit with our assertability conditions for ‘description’” (2006, 175)—in other words, that it is appropriate to assert that to make a meaning ascription is to describe something about oneself or others. What we are thereby describing, however, are not states of meaning or understanding pertaining to the agent, at least not in the way in which meaning determinism conceives of such states. If it is intelligible to speak of states of meaning and understanding, they must be understood as essentially involving the agent’s ability to relate to others: to be guided by them (“We are guided by others; we justify our use of sentences on the basis of publicly available criteria” (2006, 174)), to be corrected by them, and to be considered by them a trusted member in linguistic transactions.

However, to go back to the sceptic’s alternative hypothesis, if I were to mean quaddition rather than addition by ‘+’, where the quaddition function differs only over extremely large numbers, it would still be the case that I feel confident in my uses of it, I am willing to accept corrections, and there are no objections coming from fellow members of my linguistic community concerning the uses I have made and I am about to make. Moreover, I would feel equally confident in making utterances of the sentence “I mean *addition* by ‘addition’”. There would be no protest from others, because it is part of this scenario that I would use the word ‘addition’ to pick out the function of quaddition. So, it does not seem that considerations about how we relate to one another, despite their being normative, as Kusch claims they must be, are able to answer the sceptic’s challenge.

This might be taken to suggest that semantic notions are, after all, indispensable for making sense of the idea that we mean determinate things by our expressions. But this in turn implies that it is not merely the inclination to use sentences ascribing meaning in certain

contexts, and to draw the distinction between correct and incorrect uses in certain ways, that is to be viewed as primitive. Equality primitive may be the inclination to mean certain things by certain expressions. This suggests, again, that the ‘bedrock’ is the semantic domain, and not merely the normative domain, as Kusch seems to suggest. We shall consider another view that seeks to reduce the semantic domain to the normative domain in the next chapter.

More importantly, while Kusch’s conception of meaning might seem attractive, only someone who does not find the sceptic’s query compelling could find it satisfactory. As Kusch himself notes, Kripke’s sceptical view “is descriptive about normativity: it tells us how we operate with normative concepts and what their proper location is. But it does not tell us how we ought to respond when our own calculations—or meaning attributions—differ from those of others” (200-201). This makes one wonder to what extent Kusch’s notion of normativity is recognizable as such. For our plight, the plight of someone who is confronted by the meaning sceptic, is precisely that of having to settle the question of how to use an expression in a case in which our own inclination would seem to differ from that of someone else. The plight would be no different if those with different inclinations, that is, those who insist that we do not apply ‘round’ to the red marble (while granting that it is red and that it is a marble), were the majority of the members of our linguistic community. Imagine a scenario in which we find ourselves, quite suddenly, inclined to apply a word in a way that our entire community disagrees with. Would the mere fact of this disagreement settle the question for us? Would it still not be possible, indeed plausible, for us to ask ourselves how we should apply the expression, even after we have learned that the majority of the members of our community thinks that it should be applied in a certain way? It seems to me undeniable that it would.

The sceptic forces us to take a deliberative standpoint with respect to our uses of expressions. She forces us to question the meaning ascription we make to ourselves, and in light of which our uses make sense—for instance, the ascription that we mean round by ‘round’. Recall that, for Kusch, in order for an agent to give a satisfactory answer to the sceptic’s challenge, indeed to any challenge about her use of an expression, “it suffices that [the agent] feels confident on how to go on, that [s]he is willing to be corrected by others, and that currently no objections are there to be considered” (267n21). The trouble is that whatever confidence we might have felt prior to being faced with the sceptic seems to have dissipated. Indeed, the sceptical question is gripping precisely because it undermines our confidence in the legitimacy of our particular uses. The recognition that none of the *prima facie* intuitive responses can do the work they are required to do, that we lack the justification that we thought we have, only deepens this loss of confidence. Thus, to say that the feeling of confidence and willingness to be corrected are the ingredients for an answer to the sceptic is, in the end, to fail to take the sceptic’s question seriously.

In this chapter, I tried to offer an outline of semantic Platonism, and to show that it is hopeless. I did this by outlining two arguments against it, and by examining a potential attempt at revising it. I take these arguments to be no more than alternative ways of articulating the meaning sceptic’s concerns, rather than independent lines of attack against semantic Platonism. Then, I investigated two alternatives to semantic Platonism, and showed why neither of them can work. The question whether or not a viable alternative to semantic Platonism can be had still remains.

IV. MEANING AND PRIMITIVE NORMATIVITY

In a series of illuminating papers, Ginsborg offers a thorough treatment of the challenge of the semantic sceptic, which I shall examine in this chapter. Ginsborg claims that there is some confusion in the challenge, but argues that, once the confusion is dispelled, this challenge is worthwhile, even urgent. She then offers an answer to it, one that purports to be fundamentally different from a sceptical solution, in part because it provides a partially reductionist explanation of the phenomenon of meaning—it provides the facts that the sceptic seeks. This explanation relies on a novel way of conceiving of normativity.⁸⁴

I shall argue in this chapter that, despite its undeniable appeal—explained, in part, by the fact that it uncovers a theoretical possibility which has been hitherto unrecognized—Ginsborg’s answer to the sceptic is ultimately unsatisfactory. My strategy will be to show that her proposal faces a dilemma. On the one hand, if we subscribe to the interpretation that is the most faithful to the text, it will turn out that it is able to meet the second condition that I have outlined, but not the first. On the other hand, if we pursue a charitable amendment of the proposal in order to make room for the first condition, we shall discover that, under this interpretation, the proposal is no longer able to meet the second condition; this renders the amendment unacceptable. Ginsborg’s answer lacks the materials for meeting the two conditions at the same time, and so it cannot offer an adequate solution to the sceptical problem.

⁸⁴ The papers that I shall focus on are Ginsborg 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012.

1. SETTING THE STAGE FOR GINSBORG'S VIEW

Recall that there are two conditions of adequacy that a satisfactory answer to the sceptic must meet. First, the answer must account for the idea that meaningful uses of expressions are governed by standards of correctness. Second, it must account for the idea that meaningful uses are made by speakers for reasons. The first requires that we construe uses of expressions third-personally, while the second requires that we consider the agent's point of view on those uses. As we shall see, at the core of Ginsborg's answer to this question is the rather ingenious suggestion that the notion of correctness pertaining to standards that objectively govern the uses of an expression must be distinguished from the notion of correctness involved in the agent's perspective on those uses, and which renders them non-arbitrary. The latter notion is more basic, and makes it possible for the second condition to be met prior to the first.

Recall also that Kripke investigates a range of candidate facts and argues that none of them is able to meet the above conditions. In particular, the dispositionalist conception of meaning, according to which the meaning-determining facts are facts about dispositions to utter particular expressions in particular circumstances, is shown to be unable to meet either of the two conditions. Kripke deems the dispositionalist proposal "an equation of performance and correctness" (1982, 24), which suggests that he takes it to leave no room for the possibility that a particular performance be correct or mistaken. In addition, he says that "as a candidate for a 'fact' that determines what I mean, it fails to satisfy the basic condition on such a candidate (...) that it should *tell* me what I ought to do in each new instance" (1982, 24), which suggests that he takes it to leave no room for the possibility of intelligently applying an expression. Ginsborg thinks that a straight answer, one that basically amounts to a richer version of the dispositionalist view, can be given. Indeed, when it comes to articulating her overall conception of meaning, her

“primary reason for preferring the middle ground [between reductive dispositionalism and non-reductionism] lies in the solution it promises to Kripke’s skeptical problem” (Ginsborg 2011b, 238). The question is whether this promise can be fulfilled, which is, as I said earlier, the question that I shall try to answer in the remainder of this chapter.

2. GINSBORG’S SOLUTION

To begin with, Ginsborg helpfully distinguishes between two general approaches to questions about the nature of meaning, and so to the project of elucidating the meaning-determining facts, namely reductionism and non-reductionism, and she represents her view as an attempt to chart a middle ground. On the reductionist approach, the nature of meaning can fully be brought out by using a vocabulary that does not presuppose the idea of meaning; the meaning-determining facts can fully be specified in non-semantic and non-intentional terms. Dispositionalism is an instance of this approach. One philosopher who pursues it is Horwich. According to Horwich, the meaning-determining facts amount to considerations about dispositions to accept certain expressions in certain circumstances (Horwich 1998). Crucially, he takes the notion of acceptance not to presuppose semantic phenomena.

According to the non-reductionist approach, the nature of meaning cannot be elucidated in terms that do not presuppose it. The terms of any satisfactory elucidation will necessarily include semantic notions (such as the notions of truth, meaning, reference, etc.). This approach, which is pursued by Stroud, among others, does not require that we deny that our natural dispositions play a crucial role in the task of shedding light on our capacity to use expressions meaningfully, but only that we recognize that “the very general contingent facts which make language and communication possible [including our natural dispositions] must themselves be

understood in intentional [i.e., semantic] terms in order to be seen to have that role” (Stroud 2000, viii). Ginsborg aptly calls Stroud’s view “austere nonreductionism” (Ginsborg 2011a).

Ginsborg expresses two dissatisfactions with standard (reductive) versions of dispositionalism, such as Horwich’s.⁸⁵ First, she claims that dispositionalist views fail to accommodate the normativity of meaning, which is, she thinks, “the most serious objection” (2011b, 241) against them. On her view, the normativity of meaning amounts to the idea that “meaning stands in a normative relation to use not because your meaning something by a term now creates a commitment with respect to future use, but because it makes it intelligible to characterize your uses of the term as correct or incorrect” (2011b, 243-4). She thinks that dispositionalist views cannot render such characterizations intelligible, and thus cannot satisfactorily meet the first condition. As we shall see, according to Ginsborg, they cannot meet it not because they cannot fix the extensions of expressions, as the sceptic seems to be suggesting (Kripke 1982, 26-28), but rather because more is needed for a use to be subject to normative assessment, or to be deemed correct or incorrect. Second, she complains that dispositionalist views do not leave any room for the claim that “meaning, in the relevant sense, requires understanding” (2012, 134). Dispositionalist views are, Ginsborg claims, unable to supply a criterion for differentiating the automaton from the genuine speaker. According to her, we should expect our conception of meaning to supply such a criterion. Thus, as it will become clear later on, Ginsborg accepts a version of the second condition on satisfactory answers proposed in the first chapter. What she objects to is the idea that the differentiation of the

⁸⁵ It is worth noting that Horwich, unlike Ginsborg, thinks that the suggestion that the extension of a term is determined by our disposition to apply that term in ideal conditions is hopeless, because a specification of such conditions will necessarily presuppose facts about the expression’s meaning (Horwich 1995, 360-1). This makes Horwich’s view somewhat non-standard.

genuine speaker from the automaton requires that we view the speaker as having reasons for her uses of language. Let us explore these two constraints in more detail.

First, on what we may consider as the received view, the idea of applying an expression correctly is simply equivalent to the idea of applying it to an object in its extension.⁸⁶ To my mind, Ginsborg should be understood as resisting this equivalence, given that she thinks that the mere presence of a semantic feature in a use, such as the fact that the application of an expression is made to an object in its extension, might not entitle us to describe it as genuinely correct just yet.⁸⁷ Following in Gideon Rosen's footsteps (Rosen 2001), Ginsborg drives a wedge between ascriptions of semantic features, which are descriptive, and ascriptions of correctness, which are not. She writes:

...it is one thing to say that we can describe a person's use of an expression as correct only if it has certain semantic features, for example if it amounts to her saying something true or to her referring correctly. But it is another thing to say that the ascription of correctness can simply be replaced with the ascription of one of these features, so that 'correct' just stands in for, say, 'true'. (2010, 1182)

Ginsborg's way of conceiving of semantic correctness opens to her the possibility of taking standard dispositionalist views to be perfectly capable of explaining why it is that expressions have the extensions they do⁸⁸ while at the same time taking them to be incapable of explaining the fact that uses of expressions made by agents are correct or mistaken. As she sees it, "the notion of a disposition as such does not license any normative characterization [as correct or mistaken] of the behavior to which one is disposed" (2011b, 244). So, while it might be in virtue of the fact that the expression 'plus' is applied to triples (x, y, z) in which z is the sum of x and y that it is correctly used, we must keep separate the ascription of correctness to those uses from

⁸⁶ See, e.g., Boghossian 1989, 32.

⁸⁷ Verheggen offers a different interpretation of Ginsborg's view in Verheggen 2015 and Myers and Verheggen 2016.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., 2011a, 160-162.

the claim that they involve giving the sum.⁸⁹ While Verheggen is, to my mind, right to suggest, contra Ginsborg, that any attempt to explain the fact that expressions have the extensions they do in purely dispositional terms is bound to fail, let us grant Ginsborg, for now, that such attempts may not fail.

The second complaint that Ginsborg raises against dispositionalist views targets, as I said earlier, the inability of such views to account for the idea that uses of expressions must be able to be conceived as non-arbitrary from the perspective of the speaker. It is a familiar point that facts about dispositions to apply expressions in particular ways in particular contexts are not available to speakers themselves. Dispositionalist views neglect the agent's point of view, and thus cannot make sense of the difference between a genuine speaker and, to appeal again to Miller's way of putting it, "some machine that, by some cosmic accident, churns out tokens of ['round'] in the presence (and only in the presence) of ['round'] things" (2000, 172)—presumably, dispositions are involved in both cases. In sum, then, according to Ginsborg, dispositionalist views, albeit apt to fix extensions for our expressions, cannot accommodate the idea that uses of these expressions are correct or incorrect, nor the idea that they involve understanding.

However, Ginsborg claims that these difficulties should not drive us toward the total rejection of dispositionalism, and most certainly not toward austere non-reductionism, which, according to her, "denies the possibility of any general account of meaning" (2011a, 166).⁹⁰ A middle-ground view can be fleshed out by developing a new notion of normativity, that is, *primitive* normativity. Its primitiveness is the consequence of the fact that the correctness at play "does not depend on conformity to an antecedently recognized rule [or meaning]" (Ginsborg

⁸⁹ See also Ginsborg 2011a, 171.

⁹⁰ Ginsborg conflates austere non-reductionism, the view that meaning cannot be elucidated in terms that do not presuppose it, with quietism, which I take to be the view that a general conception of meaning cannot be had.

2011b, 233). How are we to make sense of the idea that correctness does not require conformity to a prior rule or meaning, and how are we to do this while resisting the pressure to construe it as amounting to mere regularity? Moreover, how does introducing this notion make it possible to meet the two conditions, which standard dispositionalist views cannot meet?

The answer to these questions begins with the claim that some dispositions essentially involve a sort of awareness on the part of the individual having the disposition, namely the awareness that the responses yielded by the disposition are appropriate. Crucially, they are so not in virtue of conforming to an existing rule or standard, but rather, the appropriateness involved in this variety of awareness is basic; it cannot be explicated in terms of rules or standards. I shall refer to such dispositions as “normative dispositions”. It is normative dispositions that make the use of meaningful expressions so much as possible, according to Ginsborg; it is because our dispositions are normative that we can be speakers and, more broadly, followers of rules. On this view, in order for one’s utterances to become meaningful, the individual must take them to be appropriate in the contexts in which they are made. She must take them to be as they ought, where the ‘ought’ in question does not emanate from general considerations about what one has reason to do, nor does it follow from considerations about semantic facts alone, which renders Ginsborg’s position opposed to the idea that meaning involves distinctively semantic prescriptions.⁹¹ It is a primitive ‘ought’, an instance of primitive normativity.⁹²

The agent’s adopting the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate toward the responses to the world that her dispositions yield is what allows her to become capable of using expressions

⁹¹ See Whiting 2007 and 2009 for a defence of this idea.

⁹² From now on, whenever I use ‘ought’ in this chapter, I should be understood as referring to the primitive sense of it that Ginsborg fleshes out.

meaningfully, as well as of following rules. The content involved in the attitude is the same in each case: it has the form *this is appropriate to that* (2011a, 172). The presence of this content, to repeat, does not require any recognition of conformity to a standard or meaning, indeed it does not require recognizing standards or meanings as such. For it is not in virtue of its meaning, or its conformity to some existing standard, that a particular response is taken to be appropriate. Rather, particular responses are taken to be appropriate *simpliciter*. And once they are so taken, they can legitimately be viewed as meaningful, that is, as bearing semantic features. Still, appropriateness is more basic than any of these features—it is what turns responses into candidates for truth, reference, and so on. Appropriateness must thus be contrasted with lack or absence of appropriateness, as opposed to inappropriateness. More specifically, the responses that are taken to be appropriate are to be contrasted with “the broader class of responses which lack the feature of being appropriate. This includes not just (what we would call) cases of incorrectness or being mistaken, but also cases where the question of correctness does not arise” (2011a, 169n17).

We are now in a position to articulate more clearly Ginsborg’s conception of the constitution of meaning, as well as her answer to the sceptic’s question. An agent means something by an expression in virtue of her normative disposition with respect to that expression, where, as we have seen, a normative disposition is a disposition whose manifestations, both possible and actual, involve an awareness, or a potential awareness, of their appropriateness, that is, the manifestations involve an attitude with the content *this is appropriate to that*. To return to our example, I mean *round* by ‘round’ in virtue of my disposition to apply it to round things and to adopt the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate towards such applications. The difference between Ginsborg’s normative dispositionalism and other dispositionalist views is that, on

Ginsborg's view, the relevant, meaning-determining, dispositions are only those that involve a primitive normative attitude. Because the primitive normative attitude requires the deployment of only one kind of normative content, namely the kind involved in the awareness of the appropriateness of one's responses—for "all other contents are, so to speak, constructed by means of this consciousness, out of the raw material of our nonintentionally characterized responsive dispositions" (Ginsborg 2011a, 172)—it allows us to say that there is a sense in which meaning is essentially normative, and that the reductionist project cannot *fully* be executed; it can be executed only in so far as semantic facts can be reduced to facts involving the attitude of primitive normativity. The question that must be answered next is whether the view meets the sceptic's two conditions.

3. ARE THE SCEPTIC'S CONDITIONS MET?

Let us start with the second condition, which Ginsborg takes to be more basic than the first. As I explained it in the first chapter, it requires that a satisfactory answer to the sceptic be able to account for the idea that speakers have reasons for their applications of expressions. Because primitive normativity essentially involves the idea of an attitude, it might be thought that it can account for this. The presence of such an attitude in a subject is what entitles us to view her as understanding the expressions that she is disposed to utter, and thus as having reasons for uttering them. It entitles us to view her as a genuine speaker.

However, because the relevant 'ought' is located below the semantic domain, it must also, inasmuch as reasons involve propositional contents, be located below the domain of reasons. In her detailed discussion of a modified version of the scenario of Wittgenstein's builders (1953, §2), in which a builder's assistant responds to the sounds made by the builder by

bringing the items that correspond to those sounds while taking herself to be responding appropriately to them, which is, Ginsborg maintains, what is required in order for the response to be meaningful, she claims that “the awareness of the appropriateness of [the builder’s] response is not a matter of his taking himself to have a reason to respond as he does in the light of the builder’s shout” (2011a, 169n16). Indeed, Ginsborg makes it clear that she conceives of the second condition as requiring that the answer to the sceptic have the resources to depict uses of language as different from stabs in the dark, in a way that allows us to distinguish the genuine language user from the automaton, or the response that involves understanding from the robotic one. However, she does not seem to think that the second condition is plausible if it requires that uses be conceived of as done for reasons.

But if primitive normativity does not yield reasons, does it really allow us to depict uses of expressions as not akin to stabs in the dark, as non-arbitrary? In other words, is this weaker construal of the condition legitimate? To my mind, we must grant that it is. For one way in which the intermediary, middle-ground aspect of Ginsborg’s conception is manifested is in her rejection of the dichotomy between having a (propositionally structured) reason for a particular use and using the expression arbitrarily. On her view, a response can be governed by a normative constraint—in this case, the constraint of the ‘ought’ in the consciousness of primitive normativity—without there being a reason that recommends it, precisely because the consciousness of primitive normativity is located, as it were, below the level of rules, norms, and reasons. For, ultimately, Ginsborg’s ambition is that of carving a novel notion of normativity, one that is genuinely distinct, and more basic than, that of normativity as traditionally understood. This is why the ‘oughts’ of primitive normativity are to be conceived of as more

basic than the ‘oughts’ supplied by reasons.⁹³ If a response is accompanied by the consciousness of primitive normativity, we are entitled to deem it non-arbitrary, even if we may not be entitled to conceive it as done for a reason. The speaker is thus revealed as necessarily being in a position to have a normative perspective, that is, a perspective imbued with primitive normativity, on her uses. The assessment (if we may call it that) of uses involved in this normative perspective will not concern their correctness or incorrectness, but only their appropriateness or lack thereof.

What of the other condition that a satisfactory answer must meet, according to which meaningful uses of an expression must be able to count, independently of the speaker’s perspective, as correct or incorrect? Recall that, according to Ginsborg, the explanation for the fact that an expression has the extension it does can be formulated with the resources of a standard dispositionalist theory. Nevertheless, such an explanation is not, Ginsborg thinks, sufficient for making sense of the idea that uses of expression are subject to normative assessment or, in other words, that they are governed by standards of correctness. One cannot specify what it is for an expression to be correctly (or mistakenly) used in purely dispositional terms, by saying, for instance, that it is for it to be (or not to be) used in the way required by one’s basic disposition, because dispositions do not *require* anything of us; they are not “the kind of thing which can be normatively conformed to or contravened in the way characteristic of rules and meaning” (2011b, 245). But Ginsborg also thinks that a specification of what it is for an expression to be correctly or mistakenly used can be offered by invoking normative dispositions.

Here is a rather lengthy passage that reveals this:

If your meaning addition [by ‘plus’] is understood in this way, then, I suggest, it allows us to make sense of a given response being correct or incorrect. For we can intelligibly describe your various possible responses on any occasion not only as cases of your giving or not giving the sum, or of your actualizing or not

⁹³ Hattiangadi seems to ignore this ambition in her recent discussion of Ginsborg’s view (Hattiangadi 2017, 653).

actualizing your disposition to give the sum, but as your doing or not doing what you are disposed to regard as appropriate to the context. *And the idea of your doing or not doing what you are disposed to regard as appropriate gives what is needed for you to count as responding correctly or making a mistake.* If, in responding to the “plus” question, you forget to carry and say “115” instead of “125,” then you not only did not do what you were disposed to do, but also did not do what you were disposed to regard as appropriate. This, I suggest, is sufficient to give content to the idea that you made a mistake. Conversely, if nothing interferes with your disposition and you respond with “125,” you have done what you are disposed to regard as appropriate, and this makes it possible to think of your response as correct. (2011b, 245, italics added).

Is this a satisfactory account of the possibility of distinguishing between correct and mistaken uses of an expression? In order for it to be so, the domain of correct uses of expressions must coincide with the domain of uses made to objects in their extensions. That is, the account must make it the case that, for instance, to apply ‘round’ correctly requires applying it to round items. This seems to suggest that the conception of semantic correctness that Ginsborg advances, according to which one is mistaken when one is not doing what one is disposed to take as appropriate, would require that the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate be present, or that agents are disposed to adopt it, when, and only when, expressions are in fact applied to objects in their extensions. Some of Ginsborg’s claims seem to be, at the very least, compatible with this restriction. For instance, she writes:

[W]e (...) recognize it as a condition for the meaningfulness of expressions *überhaupt* that their users are disposed to adopt a certain attitude—the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate—towards a certain set of possible uses (namely, the set of uses to which they are disposed, and which can retrospectively be identified as the extension of the expression). (2012, 138)

On the other hand, any plausible conception of the attitude of primitive normativity must, inasmuch as it depicts an *attitude*, construe it as potentially involving a gap between its content and the world. That is, it must be possible that the attitude be adopted by agents in cases in which their responses to the world are incorrect. Thus, we must be able to make sense of my being disposed to adopt the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate not only toward my applications of ‘round’ to round things, but also toward applications of ‘round’ to things that appear to me to be round without being so. If, for whatever reason, I do not apply the expression ‘round’ to a non-round object that seems round to me, there is a sense in which I am not doing what I am

disposed to deem appropriate, and so there is a sense in which, on Ginsborg's conception of what it is for something to be a mistake, I can be said to have made one, even though I clearly did not.

Consider another example. I am disposed to apply the expression 'cat' to cats, but I am also disposed to apply it to small raccoons on the streets of Toronto. It is not implausible that I adopt the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate toward these applications just as naturally as I adopt it toward my applications of 'cat' to cats. After all, from my point of view, there is no noticeable difference between the two cases. But, then, this is not a case in which I am not doing what I am disposed to regard as appropriate, which suggests that it is not a case in which my use can be characterized as mistaken. Indeed, it seems to be a case in which I am doing precisely what I am disposed to regard as appropriate, since it involves my applying 'cat' to objects in the world that I take to be cats.

Moreover, there is an additional reason for Ginsborg to subscribe to the view that the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate must be able to accompany, at least in some cases, responses that are mistaken, which has to do with the fact that she conceives of this attitude as a mark of the cognitive. She says that "our natural responses to objects amount to cognition of them in virtue of incorporating a legitimate claim to their own normativity, where this claim does not itself depend on cognition of those objects, but must be taken as primitive" (Ginsborg 2015, 4). Crucially, the domain of cognitive responses must be conceived as potentially wider than the domain of responses which are correct, on pain of rendering the conception of cognitive goings-on inadequate. An adequate conception must depict agents as capable of handling expressions in semantically incorrect ways, or mistakenly, while taking themselves to be handling them in the primitively appropriate way. It must, in other words, be sensitive to one of the fundamental

features of our cognitive engagement with the world, which is that we may be wrong when we think we are right.

To summarize, the problem goes as follows. It might seem, on the one hand, that Ginsborg must ensure that the primitive attitude is present only when expressions are applied to objects which are in their extension. Failing this, the cases in which an expression can be said to be correctly used, which are determined by considerations involving the attitude of primitive normativity, may not align with the conditions in which that expression is applied to objects in its extension, which are determined by basic, non-normative, dispositions. This leads to an inadequate conception of correctness. But, on the other hand, the claim that the primitive normative attitude is present only when expressions are applied to objects which are in their extension should be rejected, given that it fails to capture an essential aspect of our cognitive engagement with the world.

While this might seem to suggest that Ginsborg's attempt at an answer is outright hopeless, a more charitable, and so a more promising, interpretation of Ginsborg's proposal is within reach, one which exploits the distinction between the idea of an agent's being disposed to take a use to be appropriate and the idea of a use being appropriate. In the next section, I shall explore the possibility that, on Ginsborg's view, it is facts about appropriate uses, and not facts about appropriateness-involving attitudes, that render intelligible the distinction between semantically correct and mistaken use.

4. A REVISED CONCEPTION OF APPROPRIATE USE

On the one hand, it seems that it is the simultaneous adoption of a certain normative attitude toward one's uses that is the characteristic ingredient of the dispositions that play a meaning-determining role. For example, Ginsborg writes:

...someone counts as grasping the add-two rule in virtue of being disposed to count by twos with the consciousness of primitive normativity, where both the disposition and the consciousness of the appropriateness of its actualizations are more basic than, and thus explanatorily prior to, the fact of her grasping the rule. (2011b, 248)

On the other hand, Ginsborg often writes as if it is appropriateness itself, and not merely our adopting appropriateness-involving attitudes, that determines meaning: “on the position I shall defend”, she claims, “expressions have meaning only in virtue of there being ways in which they ought to be applied” (2012, 132), and not in virtue of there being ways in which one takes them to be appropriately applied. What makes it the case that a certain expression ought to be applied in certain ways and not others?

The answer involves facts about the previous uses of an expression, which play an essential role in determining how the expression ought to be used in a particular context. For instance, she claims that “the ‘ought’ in question is conditional on the circumstances in which you used the word ‘plus’ in the past” (2011b, 232). As Ginsborg puts it later in the same paper, “normativity depends on facts about the context” (2011b, 235), where “the context [is] created by your previous uses” (2011b, 247). In an even more recent paper, she insists that, “regardless of what you meant when you used the ‘+’ sign in the past, the appropriate way to go on from the sequence of your past responses to ‘+’ questions is to respond to ‘68+57’ with ‘125’ and not ‘5’” (2018, 161-162). Her suggestion seems to be that tokens of expressions, considered independently of what we mean by them, are not mere lifeless sounds in the air or marks on the paper, that is, items that are normatively dead or inert: they bring about normative constraints,

and they do so in a way that does not involve or depend on their being meaningful. The way in which an expression ought to be used at a particular time is somehow dictated by its previous uses, independently of any semantic features they might exhibit.

It is common, following Wittgenstein's reflections on meaning, to construe uses of expressions as *either* bare sounds or bare marks on paper *or* meaningful items, that is, as either being dead or as having life (Wittgenstein 1958). Ginsborg's move can be viewed as an attempt to show that the contrast between sounds (or marks) that are dead and sounds (or marks) that are alive does not align, contrary to what a non-reductionist might think, with the contrast between descriptions of a use that fail to specify its meaning and descriptions that do specify it. Some descriptions of a use that fail to specify its meaning might capture something that, in so far as it is normatively loaded, is not dead. Some sounds or marks might be alive even though their meaning is not discernible, or even present. Their being alive consists, in this case, in their engendering normative constraints, and in making it possible for us to be moved toward a particular application in a way that cannot further be explicated. To go back to our example, I ought to apply 'round' to the red marble simply because such an application fits my previous uses of 'round'—it does so *not* in virtue of the uses collectively conforming to a general standard, such as a rule, meaning, or concept, but rather, according to Ginsborg, it fits independently of any facts about what I meant.

One might still wonder what makes it the case that the present application of 'round' to the red marble normatively, albeit non-semantically, accords with my past applications of 'round', while the withholding of 'round' fails to accord with them. Ginsborg considers the scenario in which someone does mean *quaddition* by '+', the sceptical hypothesis (as Kripke formulates it) being true of that person in this case. Despite the fact that she is disposed to

answer ‘5’ to the query ‘ $68+57=?$ ’ and to take herself to be responding appropriately when she does so, which suggests that ‘5’ is the correct answer in that case, Ginsborg insists that “it is still the case that [she is] not responding as [she] ought in the primitive sense. Assuming that the ‘+’ queries [she has] encountered so far have all involved numbers that are less than 57, the appropriate thing to say in the context created by [her] previous uses of ‘+’ is not ‘5’ but ‘125’” (2011b, 247), even though, to repeat, ‘5’ is the semantically correct answer in light of what she means. This shows that, as we anticipated in the previous section, it is possible for one’s sense of appropriateness to go wrong, as it were—to misfire. One could fail to recognize the appropriate use of ‘round’ in a particular circumstance, and one could fail in this way even as one adopts an attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate toward one’s answer. But if the presence of an attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate is not necessarily a mark of the response’s appropriateness, then the latter cannot straightforwardly be constituted by the former. The appropriate uses of one’s expressions cannot be taken to be determined by one’s appropriateness-involving attitudes or dispositions. But then, how are they determined?

As with any dispositionalist line, there seem to be, at the very least, two strategies that might be pursued.⁹⁴ The first strategy is to try to save the individualist aspect of the view by appealing to the idea of ideal conditions, which would allow one to maintain that the agent’s being disposed to take a use to be appropriate *does* render it appropriate, but it does so only in cases in which these conditions are met. The second strategy is to abandon the individualist aspect and maintain that the appropriateness of a use involves facts about the appropriateness-involving attitudes of the community. If the agent’s attitude of taking a use to be appropriate

⁹⁴ This is clearly explained by Boghossian (Boghossian 1989, 35).

aligns with the attitudes of her community, then, and only then, it can be taken as a mark of appropriateness.

We should understand Ginsborg's proposal as an attempt to pursue the second strategy, for she does, repeatedly, appeal to the idea of a community.⁹⁵ This appeal has been largely ignored in previous discussions of the view.⁹⁶ Consider Ginsborg's treatment of the wayward child, who continues a series of numbers in the way we would expect her to continue it, but only up to a certain point, at which she produces an unexpected response while also insisting that she goes on in the same way as before.⁹⁷ Imagine, following Ginsborg's version of the case, which is slightly different from Wittgenstein's, that we show to such a child the series '2, 4, 6, 8, ... 38, 40' and ask her to continue it. Imagine further that she responds with '43', and that, "her intuition that '43' is appropriate (...) is just as strong as the normal child's intuition about the appropriateness of '42'" (2011b, 250).⁹⁸ If the mere presence of a normative attitude toward a particular use were sufficient to confer appropriateness upon that use, then the response '43' would have to count as appropriate. But Ginsborg maintains that the child ought to say '42' and not '43', and she motivates this claim by invoking a "pretheoretical intuition," one which, importantly, "we all share" (2011b, 240). Indeed, nothing other than a pretheoretical intuition will do, partly due to the primitiveness of the attitude. For it is partly because of this primitiveness "that the conflict [with the contrasting intuition of the wayward child] would not be resolved by appeal to any neutral principle" (2011b, 250). But even if no such resolution is forthcoming, there is a sense in which we are entitled to our claims to the primitive normativity

⁹⁵ See Miller 2017 for an investigation of the first strategy in relation to Ginsborg's view. Miller argues that this strategy is unsuccessful.

⁹⁶ Adrian Haddock mentions it only briefly (Haddock 2012, 166), but does not discuss its implications.

⁹⁷ I borrow the expression 'wayward child' from Goldfarb 1985.

⁹⁸ See also Wittgenstein 1953, §185.

of our responses, Ginsborg thinks, for such claims constitute the necessary conditions for thought and language. For “it is only if we endorse the pretheoretical intuitions on which I am relying that we can make sense of there being justification in terms of rules in the first place” (2011b, 249). And, the thought goes, something being a condition of the possibility of our activity of justifying claims cannot legitimately be thought to be in need of justification. At the very least, it cannot legitimately be thought to be in need of the same type of justification that it makes possible.

Thus, the appropriate uses of expressions are, ultimately, those toward which there is a communal disposition to adopt, in light of the previous uses of those expressions, the primitive attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate. Furthermore, as I mentioned before, our collective claims to the primitive appropriateness of our responses are legitimate in light of “our pretheoretical intuitions about particular cases” (2011b, 249). And if we take the case of an ordinary child, who continues the above series with ‘42’ (and not ‘43’, as the wayward child does), we can say that she is entitled to do so not because she takes herself to be doing what is appropriate, even though she might, but rather in virtue of our sharing a communal attitude to that effect: “There is nothing to legitimize the child’s claim to the appropriateness of ‘42’ except our own intuition that ‘42’ is appropriate” (2011b, 249). And so, the appropriateness of particular uses of expressions is ultimately constituted by our sharing a normative perspective, grounded in communal normative dispositions, toward those uses.

However, the notion of appropriate uses to which I have been trying to give substance, on behalf of Ginsborg, remains disconnected from Ginsborg’s account of correctness, which, as we have seen, is articulated exclusively in terms of the appropriateness-involving attitudes of an individual agent. But we have also seen in the previous section that there are problems with this

account. Perhaps we could overcome them if we brought to bear the idea of appropriate uses and revise the account of correctness in light of this idea. The crux of the revision would go as follows: What counts as a mistake, and so what allows us to make sense of the distinction between correct and incorrect uses, is to be conceived in terms of not doing what is appropriate, instead of being conceived in terms of not doing what one is disposed to take to be appropriate. A similar move must be made with respect to our conception of the extension of an expression, which must be construed as determined by communal, rather than individual, dispositions to use that expression.

In light of these amendments, a use counts as semantically correct if and only if, first, it is the use that the community is disposed to make, and, second, it is appropriate. A use is appropriate if and only if it is a use toward which there is a communal disposition to adopt the taking-to-be-appropriate attitude. This has the appearance of a two-stage reduction of facts about agents using expressions meaningfully to facts about shared dispositions and accompanying attitudes of primitive normativity toward uses. Therefore, it accomplishes Ginsborg's goal of reducing the semantic domain to a domain that is, at least in part, normative. It also makes room for a satisfactory conception of what it is to be correct or mistaken, since it makes it possible for the agent's attitude of primitive appropriateness to fail to track genuine appropriateness, by failing to align with communal attitudes.

But, as a result, we must also revise Ginsborg's claim that:

...when the skeptic asks what it was about you in virtue of which you previously meant addition rather than quaddition, you can say that it was your being disposed to give the sum rather than the quum and, in so doing, to take yourself to be doing as you ought in the primitive sense. (2011b, 245)

Instead, according to the amended view, considerations that are exclusively about you cannot, on their own, establish what you meant, and so they cannot establish whether you apply your words correctly or not. The communal attitudes must be appealed to. This move may strike one as

familiar, for it is a more elaborate version of the view that the meanings of expressions, and the distinction between their correct and incorrect uses, are ultimately fixed by considerations about the responses of other individuals in one's community. Still, we are now in a position in which we may claim that correctness standards that govern the uses of expressions, and which make intelligible descriptions of such uses as correct or incorrect, can be had. The question is whether such standards are adequate.

We have reason to be doubtful. As Boghossian argued almost three decades ago,

...many of the mistakes we make are *systematic*: they arise because of the presence of features—bad lighting, effective disguises, and so forth—that have a generalizable and predictable effect on creatures with similar cognitive endowments. (...) [A]ny of my dispositions that are in this sense systematically mistaken, are bound to be duplicated at the level of the community. (1989, 37)

To go back to one of our earlier example, we could imagine that other individuals in my community will also be disposed to apply the expression 'cat' to a small raccoon on a street of Toronto, and to take themselves to be doing what is appropriate. And so, we have no reason to expect communal dispositions, be they normative or not, to supply satisfactory standards of correctness for expressions.

But suppose we grant that there is reasonable hope for the task of supplying such standards to be executed. (After all, we have already granted Ginsborg that dispositions may be able properly to fix the extensions of our terms.) Does this suggest that her account can, after all, offer a straight solution to Kripke's sceptic? Recall that the sceptic formulated two distinct conditions: the first concerns standards of correctness, while the second (on Ginsborg's conception of it) concerns the possibility of plausibly maintaining that uses of language are not robotic or arbitrarily made. But it is difficult to see how any version of a view according to which the standard of correctness governing a use are fixed by considerations about others' attitudes toward that use, and so according to which meaning is fixed by the ways in which

others respond, can meet the second condition. On the revised view, considerations about the agent's own attitudes, or about the agent's own perspective, no longer play a role in the constitution of meaning for that agent's expressions. For, as we have seen, the idea of an agent's use being correct becomes reducible to the idea of its being appropriate, which is in turn reducible to the idea of a communal tendency to adopt the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate. Therefore, there is no longer any requirement that the agent making a particular use be in a position to have a normative perspective on that use. The revised version of Ginsborg's view seems to have lost a significant portion of the appeal of the initial version.

5. FURTHER OBJECTIONS

Ginsborg might respond by rejecting the attempt to revise her way of distinguishing between correct and mistaken uses of expressions. She might insist that making sense of this distinction, and of the possibility of our assessing uses as correct or incorrect, need not involve an appeal either to the idea of appropriate use or to the notion of the attitude of taking-to-be-appropriate. All it requires is the notion of a bare disposition to respond to uses of expressions in particular ways. Such a disposition can fix the extension of that expression, and, Ginsborg might suggest, it can, given the standard conception of semantic correctness, account for the distinction between correct and incorrect uses. This response would require that Ginsborg give up on the idea that the explanation of the extensions of expressions in dispositional terms cannot make room for the idea of being mistaken. It would also require that she maintain that the notion of primitive normativity be involved only in the satisfaction of what she takes the second condition put forward by the sceptic to be, namely that the account of meaning be able to distinguish between the automaton and the genuine speaker.

Ginsborg may insist that the second condition could still be met, for one must view the relation between one's own response and that to which one is responding "not just as causal but also as normative (...) [and one must take it] not only to elicit, but also to make appropriate, the response" (2011a, 169) in order to count as a genuine speaker. But it is not clear why the required attitude would need to have normative content at all in this case. Presumably, any basic awareness of the relations between one's uses of expressions and the external world is sufficient to distinguish the automaton, who lacks it, from the genuine speaker, who may have it. Ginsborg's insistence to the contrary will be deprived of its force, especially given that it involves a notion of normativity that remains, to some extent, mysterious, and which no longer contributes to the elucidation of the possibility of being mistaken.

Another objection that might be raised against the proposed revision states that to treat Ginsborg as a communitarian is to misunderstand her view, for she insists that the primitive norms she takes herself to uncover are not "socially instituted" (2011a, 173, n. 21), and so they do not presuppose the existence of a social practice or custom. She also claims that the adoption of the attitude of primitive normativity toward certain responses does not require training (2011a, 178-179). This might be taken to suggest that it cannot be the communal accord in the adoption of a primitively normative attitude toward a particular use that determines the appropriateness of that use. Instead, the communal accord in the adoption of the attitude can, at best, only be a *mark* of its appropriateness, which is constituted independently from it. Indeed, on this interpretation, facts about appropriate uses are metaphysically primitive; there is nothing that can legitimately be said to determine them. To return to our example, it is simply a primitive fact that the application of 'round' to the red marble ought, in light of the previous uses, to be made.

Perhaps this is what Glüer and Wikforss have in mind when they suggest that the notion of primitive normativity uncovers an “objective normative reality” (Glüer and Wikforss 2018, n32).

However, this requires that we think of ourselves as creatures who are, in some sense, blessed, inasmuch as our biological make-up, which is responsible for our brute reactions to the world, by and large ensures, in a rather miraculous way, that we are connected to this reality, and that we are so without any cognitive effort on our part. Perhaps more troublingly, this interpretation of Ginsborg’s view does not seem to help us make any progress whatsoever in the elucidation of meaning that the sceptic (and Ginsborg, following her) are after. Ginsborg dismisses austere non-reductionism because it fails to elucidate the nature of meaning. But what elucidation can a view that relocates the bedrock within the domain of primitive normativity provide? We seem to be in the awkward situation in which we have simply replicated—perhaps even enhanced—the initial mystery. For, it seems to me, the objective normative reality that we are appealing to is no less mysterious than the semantic reality that Ginsborg refuses to accept as bedrock.

I have examined Ginsborg’s view and I have tried to show that it lacks the resources for a satisfactory response to the sceptic. I would like to conclude this chapter by briefly exploring a suggestion about the sceptic’s challenge. It might be thought, at this stage, that our exploration of the idea of appropriate uses, and of its prospects as a satisfactory answer to the sceptic, has shed additional light on the tension between the sceptic’s two conditions, and that it might simply be impossible for the two conditions to be met simultaneously. Recall that, on the one hand, the first condition demands that the correctness of a particular use be constituted independently of the agent’s perspective on it. On the other hand, the second condition demands that the agent have a reason for her use, on pain of rendering the use an instance of arbitrary

behaviour. It appears that the first condition pulls us away from the agent's perspective, while the second one draws us back to it. And so, it might be tempting to claim that this inescapable oscillation is a symptom of the fact that the sceptic's conception of meaning is incoherent, and so it must be left behind by giving up on one of the two conditions. However, I do not believe it is incoherent. Indeed, I believe that Ginsborg is right to seek a straight solution, and to take both conditions seriously. In the next chapter, I shall begin articulating the Davidsonian view that might meet both conditions.

V. MEANING AND TRIANGULATION

The steps that we have taken so far can be taken to reflect, in part, the enormous difficulty of articulating a satisfactory conception of meaning in light of the sceptical challenge put forward by Kripke. We have seen, for instance, that the sceptical solution to the challenge, which revolves around the notion of communal agreement, is unsatisfactory, that merely appealing to external, self-standing entities that might be able to be grasped by one's mind and thereby endow one's expressions with meaning is useless, and that our own dispositions, even when complemented by normative attitudes toward their manifestations, cannot constitute the basis for an adequate conception.

In this chapter, I shall try to show, by drawing on Davidson's work on meaning, that the difficulty is not insurmountable. My focus will be on Davidson's later reflections, which revolve around the idea of triangulation. But first I shall articulate the bare outlines of his earlier view on radical interpretation, and I shall give some reasons for thinking that we must turn to his later account of triangulation in order to arrive at a compelling Davidsonian conception of meaning. Then I shall explain his account of triangulation and try to address two prominent objections that have been raised against it in recent years, namely the objections raised by Burge and Glüer.

Then, in the next chapter, I shall try to spell out why, from within the—thoroughly non-reductionist—conception of meaning afforded by the triangulation argument, the sceptic's line of attack will seem without force. However, given the non-reductionist aspect of this answer to the sceptic's challenge, it might strike one as somewhat deficient. I shall strengthen the case for its plausibility by discussing a recent re-articulation, proposed by Boghossian and Wright, of the semantic sceptic's attack as an attack directed primarily at non-reductionist views. I shall offer

some considerations in favour of the thought that the attack in question is not effective against the Davidsonian conception of meaning.

1. RADICAL INTERPRETATION

In the introduction to one of his collections of early articles, Davidson claims that his primary interest is in the question of what it is for words to mean what they do. He thinks that “we would have an answer to this question if we knew how to construct a theory” that meets two conditions. The first one is that “it would provide an interpretation of all utterances, actual and potential, of a speaker or group of speakers.” The second one is that “it would be verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker” (Davidson 1984, xiii). Thus, Davidson’s primary aim is to elucidate a method that would allow an interpreter to construct a theory of meaning for a speaker whose language the interpreter does not understand. Such an interpreter is, due to her ignorance, a radical interpreter—she is an ordinary, everyday, interpreter in all other respects—and the exercise in which she is engaged is an exercise in radical interpretation. In order for the exercise to be fruitful, the interpreter must lack knowledge of the speaker’s states of mind; allowing her to have such knowledge would be tantamount to giving up on the project of elucidating the method of interpretation from scratch. So, in his early work, at least, Davidson’s suggestion is that we answer the question of what it is for words to mean what they do by focusing on the words of a particular alien speaker, and by reflecting on what it would take for an interpreter to arrive at a theory which would allow her to understand these words.⁹⁹

This might seem like an unusual strategy to pursue in order to answer the aforementioned question, which is, after all, a foundational question about the nature of meaning. Ordinarily, we

⁹⁹ See, especially, Davidson 1973, 1974a, 1975, 1976.

do not investigate the nature of a phenomenon by focusing all our efforts on the question of how we might find out about it. Indeed, we usually keep the metaphysics of a phenomenon, which is an inquiry into its nature, separate from its epistemology, which is an inquiry into the ways of discovering truths about it. Davidson insists, however, that things are different when it comes to meaning, and this is because meaning is essentially public. Facts about meaning are essentially discoverable, and “what no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence [about meaning] cannot be part of meaning” (1979, 235).¹⁰⁰ Because the decipherability of meanings is not a matter of luck, the evidence in favour of what someone means by her expressions is essential to her meaning it.¹⁰¹ The most promising path to the elucidation of this evidence requires, as I have said, that we consider the case in which an alien language, spoken by someone whose thoughts—beliefs about the world, motivations, and so on—are foreign to us, is being deciphered. If we offer a complete picture of the procedure followed by such an interpreter, we shall also offer a complete picture of the evidence for what we mean by our expressions, and thus, Davidson seems to think, of meaning itself. By elucidating evidence, we get at essence.

According to Davidson, the form of the theory of meaning that would do the job of making it possible to understand a speaker’s utterances is that of a Tarski-style theory of truth. The theorems entailed by the axioms of the theory would reveal the meaning of any possible

¹⁰⁰ He writes,

As Wittgenstein has insisted, not to mention Dewey, G.H. Mead, Quine, and many others, language is intrinsically social. This does not entail that truth and meaning can be defined in terms of observable behavior, or that it is “nothing but” observable behavior; but it does imply that meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior. That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language. (2005b, 56)

Also, “meaning is not something that each of us harbours, and which others may or may not discover, but which could exist forever uncommunicated” (1993a, 82).

¹⁰¹ As Glüer puts it, meaning is “an evidence-constituted property” (2011, 8).

declarative sentence of her language by specifying its truth condition. For, on the conception of meaning to which Davidson subscribes, and which was initially articulated by Gottlob Frege, to understand a sentence is to know the condition in which it would be true.¹⁰² The concept of truth is taken by Davidson as primitive, for “truth is as clear and basic a concept as we have” (1987, 155). Moreover, Davidson thinks that we can detect when someone holds a sentence true without understanding the sentence. Thus, the thought goes, the radical interpreter is able to notice when the speaker holds sentences true, and to pair the sentences being held true with the circumstances, as she conceives of them, in which they are held true. By themselves, these observations, no matter how extensive, cannot guide the interpreter in her attempt at understanding the speaker. The only way in which the attempt could get going, according to Davidson, is for the interpreter to treat the sentences held true by the speaker—or, at least, as many of them as possible—as though they were true. This is because the only way in which one can get started on the project of understanding another person is by viewing her as someone whose beliefs are by and large true and whose actions are by and large rational. This is a very rough formulation of Davidson’s famous principle of charity, which is a principle constitutive of interpretation.

Davidson offers several formulations of the principle throughout his work. His earliest one states that, in order to be able to view utterances as meaningful, one must assign “truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right” (Davidson 1973, 137). Ten years later, he describes the goal of interpretation as that of rendering the speaker intelligible. As he puts it, “we interpret so as to make an agent *as intelligible as possible*, given his actions, his utterances, and his place

¹⁰² Davidson’s conception of meaning ends up being very different from Frege’s. Among other differences, Davidson, unlike Frege, rejects the appeal to any meaning entities, as we shall see.

in the world. About some things we will find him wrong, as the necessary cost of finding him elsewhere right” (1983, 152, italics added). We simply cannot begin to make sense of another unless, in the basic cases at least, we see her as responding to the things in the world to which we are responding, and as forming the judgments about those things that we are forming.

Intelligibility requires a vast background of agreement.

This is a distressingly quick summary of Davidson’s conception of radical interpretation, but it will have to do for now.¹⁰³ I have offered it in part because this conception will be relevant when I shall consider objections to the triangulation argument, which is, to repeat, the focus of this chapter. More importantly, having a rough idea of Davidson’s earlier work on radical interpretation helps us see that the transition toward the triangulation argument marks what I take to be a significant shift in focus within the Davidsonian project.¹⁰⁴ To begin articulating this shift, let us start by noting that, according to Davidson, a theory of the kind that the radical interpreter constructs when seeking to understand an alien speaker need not be something that those who succeed in communicating with the speaker in fact know. The elucidation of the construction of such a theory is not supposed to be viewed as a way of answering the question of how, as a matter of fact, interpreters succeed in understanding speakers. Instead, it is meant to answer the question of what would be sufficient to understand speakers. And, in a similar vein, this answer is not supposed to be viewed as a way of approaching the question of what speakers in fact know about their language.¹⁰⁵ Rather, the theory captures or describes the competence of

¹⁰³ For a clear reconstruction of this conception, see Glüer 2011, chapter 2.

¹⁰⁴ Although, as Verheggen and Robert Myers argue, “not only is the triangulation argument perfectly compatible with the arguments concerning radical interpretation; it also provides them critical support” (2016, 2).

¹⁰⁵ Arpy Khatchirian recently suggested, on behalf of Davidson, and contrary to Lepore and Ludwig (2005), that “in proposing that a meaning theory is to take the form of a truth theory, we are proposing to explain a speaker’s knowledge of her own language as partly consisting in knowledge of the truth conditions of her sentences” (2018, 2). She argues that if we take the meaning theory to be merely a theory that would be sufficient for an interpreter to understand a speaker, we will lack resources to justify the claim that the meaning theory is, necessarily, a theory of truth. I am sympathetic to the idea that the speaker’s perspective was a central aspect of Davidson’s focus, but I also

speakers.¹⁰⁶ As Davidson himself puts it later on, “the point is not that speaker or hearer has a theory, but that they speak and understand *in accord* with a theory—a theory that is needed only when we want to describe their abilities and performance” (1994a, 113, italics added).

However, this might make it seem as though Davidson’s account of meaning will at best provide us with a conception of what it is to use words *in accord* with (the rules of) a theory, rather than a conception of what it is to *follow* the (rules of the) theory, as it were—in our familiar terminology, a conception of what it is to use words in accord with some standard, rather than of what it is to follow that standard in using them. Recall the two conditions put forward by the sceptic. The first one requires that there be a distinction between correct and incorrect use, which is something that the theory is supposed to yield: its axioms will specify the extensions of names and predicates, and its theorems will specify the truth conditions of sentences. Of course, the theory may be able to account for the distinction between correct and incorrect uses adequately only if the truth conditions for sentences (and the correctness conditions for names and predicates) that the theory specifies succeed in giving the meaning of those expressions, which they can do only if the expressions whose meaning is specified (or if sense-preserving translations thereof) are *used* in the specification.¹⁰⁷ The second one, however, requires that our account of meaning captures the idea that, from the speaker’s perspective, her uses of

think that the justification for the claim that the meaning theory is a theory of truth cannot be complete, or even satisfactory, without exploiting the resources of the triangulation argument.

¹⁰⁶ Also, in light of the above, it should go without saying that the answer is not a way of approaching the question of how one learns one’s first language. See, e.g., Davidson 1999a, 54. However, inasmuch as it models the competence of speakers by supplying a finite set of axioms, it does show how learning a language is possible.

¹⁰⁷ Thus, in the case of a speaker who has the names ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’ in her repertoire, but who does not assent to the sentence ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’, we would have to ensure that the axiom for each name employs the name, which rules out any theory that states as one of its axioms that ‘Hesperus’ refers to Phosphorus. See McDowell 1977 for an elaboration of this point. It is worth noting that this already suggests that, in order for the conception of meaning espoused in the radical interpretation papers to be successful, non-reductionism—in the guise of the idea that “you cannot say what a sentence means without repeating the sentence” (Stroud 2017, 136)—must be a central ingredient of it.

expressions are not arbitrary—they can receive reason explanations. But, again, it might seem that the reflection on the construction of a theory of meaning by a radical interpreter, even though it is supposed to answer the question of what it is for words to mean what they do, is not going to shed much light on the speaker’s own perspective on the use of those words. As Davidson recognizes early on, “it is not at all clear how a theory of interpretation can explain a speaker’s uttering the words ‘Snow is white’” (Davidson 1975, 161) in a particular context. In order to explain this, we need to shed light on her perspective on the utterance of those words in that context.¹⁰⁸ So, Davidson’s project, at least as it is articulated in these early papers, might appear not to have the resources for a complete answer to the meaning sceptic.

However, this conclusion would be misleading. As I have been suggesting, the remarks on radical interpretation, contained in the so-called radical interpretation papers,¹⁰⁹ do not exhaust Davidson’s reflections on the nature and determination of meaning, for there are also the triangulation papers, which come later, and which shift the focus onto the speaker’s perspective.¹¹⁰ In these papers, Davidson further develops his approach to the issue of the constitution of meaning, in a way that revolves around what came to be known as the triangulation argument.¹¹¹ His aim is to establish that meaningfully using expressions requires, as a necessary condition, repeated simultaneous interactions with a second individual as well as with objects and events in their environment. So, in order for someone to have a language—in

¹⁰⁸ And, presumably, to much more than this, for, as Jennifer Hornsby puts it, “linguistic communication requires much more of people than semantic knowledge” (2005, 111).

¹⁰⁹ I am borrowing this label from Kathrin Glüer (2017, 76).

¹¹⁰ Davidson’s reflections on triangulation have been by and large ignored. Notable exceptions of philosophers addressing the argument, in addition to Myers and Verheggen, are Jason Bridges, William Child, Peter Pagin, and Dorit Bar-On. See Bridges 2006; Child 1994, 2001b, 2007; Pagin 2001; Bar-On 2013.

¹¹¹ The dominant view in the literature on Davidson is that there is a break between the radical interpretation papers and the triangulation papers. See Verheggen 2017b for an argument to the effect that this view is incorrect.

order for the construction of a theory of meaning for her utterances by another individual to be so much as possible—she must have triangulated.

According to the dominant interpretation of the argument, it is deployed by Davidson to establish not only that triangulation is needed for meanings and contents to be fixed, but also that the triangulation argument is needed for the concept of objectivity to be acquired. These are viewed as two distinct tasks.¹¹² Verheggen argues, however, that the tasks are in fact not distinct: someone who lacks the concept of objectivity, or who does not have an appreciation of the distinction between what seems to be the case and what is the case, is not in a position in which her thoughts or expressions can have their contents determined (Verheggen 2007).¹¹³ In what follows, I shall rely on, and try further to develop, this interpretation of Davidson. For him, triangulation “is not a matter of one person grasping a meaning already there, but a performance that (when fully fleshed out) bestows a content on language” (2001a, xv). The relevant kind of performance is that of an individual who is aware of the possibility of meaningful uses being mistaken. More broadly put, it is the performance of a creature who is aware of her own fallibility. The perspective of the speaker thus plays an essential role in the bestowing of content on her performances. This is why I believe that Davidson’s later work on meaning is especially suited for articulating an answer to the sceptic, which I hope to do in the remaining of this chapter.¹¹⁴

¹¹² For instance, Glüer thinks that the idea of triangulation is deployed in a variety of arguments, among which are the argument from content determination (2011, 235-9), and the argument from objectivity (2011, 239-41).

¹¹³ See also Verheggen 2013 and Chapter 1 of Myers and Verheggen 2016.

¹¹⁴ Verheggen also articulates an answer to Kripke’s sceptic on behalf of Davidson in Myers and Verheggen 2016, 88-90, and in Verheggen 2017a, 119-20. Her answer is based on an interpretation of Kripke’s challenge that views “the problem of accounting for the trivial normativity of meaning as the fundamental one” (Myers and Verheggen 2016, 88). The trivial normativity of meaning is the idea that “for expressions to have meaning, they must be subject to conditions of correct application. These conditions describe the semantic relations that obtain between words and features of extra-linguistic reality. For instance, if ‘green’ means green, then ‘green’ is applied correctly to all and only green things” (Myers and Verheggen 2016, 42). As it should be clear by now, my interpretation of

2. THE TRIANGULATION ARGUMENT

Before beginning to articulate the argument, it is worth overviewing Davidson's explicit take on Kripke's text. Davidson first discusses Kripke's sceptical problem in "The Second Person" (Davidson 1992a). He resists the deployment of the idea of rule-following in his attempts to shed light on meaning. He gives several reasons for why he thinks that "we ought to question the appropriateness of the ordinary concept of following a rule for describing what is involved in speaking a language" (1992a, 113). One has to do with learning and his contention that, in acquiring a language, one does not "learn any rules at all" (1992a, 113). However, what Davidson means by this is that the acquisition of one's first language may not involve the internalization of already established lexical rules. Rather, for Davidson, there is a sense in which one is responsible for one's lexical rules, as we shall see. Another reason has to do with the fact that "we normally follow no procedure in speaking" (1992a, 114). However, rule-following, at least in the way in which we have been conceiving of it, that is, as an instance of acting, need not involve following any sort of procedure. Yet another reason given by Davidson involves the idea that the notion of rule-following seems to presuppose or entail that "meaning something demands (as opposed to sometimes involving) a convention, custom, or institution" (1992a, 114). But it should be obvious by now that the notion of rule-following does not presuppose or entail this. To summarize, the conception of rule-following developed in the first chapter does not presuppose that becoming a speaker (or a rule-follower in general) requires the learning of (pre-existing) rules, nor that applying an expression (or a concept) is a matter of abiding by a procedure, nor that conventions (of any kind) are necessary for meaning, concepts,

Kripke's challenge is different, for I take the possibility of offering reason explanations for uses of expressions to be central to it.

or rule-following in general. It only involves two conditions: first, the idea that, in order for something to be a case of rule-following, it must be governed by a standard that renders the performance correct (or incorrect), and second, the idea that the agent's performance must be able to receive a reason explanation that appeals to or involves that standard.

Still, Davidson seems to think that Kripke's sceptical problem has a "relatively simple answer" (Davidson 1992a, 111), according to which the mere fact that one seems to understand another counts in favour of the meaning attribution that made the appearance of understanding possible. He writes, "the longer we interpret a speaker with apparent success as speaking a particular language, the greater our legitimate confidence that the speaker is speaking that language" (Davidson 1992a, 111). But this suggests that he mistakenly construes Kripke's problem as being about what justifies the attribution of certain meanings rather than others, instead of being about what constitutes these meanings.¹¹⁵ It might (once again) be thought that a treatment of Kripke's problem cannot be found in Davidson's writings. But Davidson himself appears to have realized eventually that his remark misrepresents Kripke's problem. Nearly a decade later, he revisits it and offers a sketchy, and seemingly uncharitable, diagnosis of Kripke's solution as, roughly, equating meaning with "going with the crowd" (Davidson 2001b,

¹¹⁵ For further discussion of this misconstrual, see Kusch 2006, and Myers and Verheggen 2016, chapter 3. It might be thought that these remarks are not an indication of any such misconstrual, but rather they are a consequence of Davidson's alleged "interpretivist" or "interpretationist" stance, according to which what a speaker means by her expressions is determined by (or is to be equated with) how a hearer or interpreter understands those expressions. I disagree with this reading of Davidson's texts. The fact that, for Davidson, the proper account of the constitution of meaning involves, as will become clearer, considerations about what it takes to understand and to be understood by another does not entail that what one means is simply whatever one is taken to mean by an interpreter. Glüer, who also opposes this reading, notes that, while on interpretationist views, such as Daniel Dennett's (Dennett 1989), interpretation is metaphysically prior to meaning—it "takes explanatory, or metaphysical, priority over meaning" (Glüer 2011, 135)—on Davidson's view the relation between interpretation and meaning goes the other way: "it is the way meaning is determined that explains interpretability" (Glüer 2011, 135). Of course, if we understand interpretationism in the way suggested by Child, according to which "the basic interpretationist idea is that we *can* gain an understanding of the mental by reflection on interpretation" (Child 1994, 9), Davidson is clearly an interpretationist—more specifically, a constitutive interpretationist, for an understanding of the mental calls for such reflection.

3). More importantly, given that, as I have indicated, he does offer an answer to the question of what it is for words to mean what they do, it is plausible to think that a treatment of Kripke's problem can be extracted from Davidson's work after all. But Davidson's account of the constitution of meaning is articulated as a way of addressing what seems to be a different problem, though, as we shall see, the difference between them will turn out to be not as significant as it initially may seem.

2.1. Externalism

Davidson's starting point is the idea that there is a constitutive connection between the contents of our utterances and thoughts and the kinds of goings-on that externally prompt those utterances, such that "in the simplest cases words and thoughts refer to what causes them", and that "the situations which normally cause a belief [or utterance] determine the conditions in which it is true" (Davidson 1991a, 196-7)—in other words, they determine its content.¹¹⁶ This is not to say, however, that Davidson thinks that all of the causal goings-on involved in the production of utterances play a constitutive role with respect to their meaning. His contention is merely that, in the simplest cases, which involve utterances through which one describes objects and events located in one's environment, the type of external item, that is, the type of object or event to which a type of utterance is *typically* related is partly constitutive of what the speaker means by it.¹¹⁷ Of course, Davidson's point is not that, for every type of expression, such a causal connection with a kind of external item must have been established. Rather, his claim is that there must be "direct exposures that anchor thought and language to the world" (1991a,

¹¹⁶ In an earlier paper, Davidson says that "we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief [or utterance] to be the causes of that belief" (1983, 151).

¹¹⁷ See Davidson 1991a, 201.

197).¹¹⁸ For, he thinks, “without direct causal ties of language to the world at some points no words would have a content—there would be no language” (1993c, 177). The question that the triangulation argument seeks to answer is the question of the possibility of the anchoring of thought and language to the world, and of the nature of the exposures that are required for it.

That Davidson is a proponent of externalism is often ignored in the contemporary literature. As Bridges notes, his is a distinctive variety of externalism, inasmuch as, unlike many externalists, Davidson does not adopt externalism merely as a way of elucidating the individuation of meaning for specific types of linguistic expressions, such as natural kind expressions. Rather, he is, in his own words, an “all-out externalist” (Kent 1993, 6). Bridges calls Davidson’s externalism “transcendental”, because it holds “that causal relationships to things outside the body are metaphysically necessary conditions for thought [and language]” (Bridges 2006, 291). Moreover, Verheggen argues that the idea that causal relationships are necessary conditions for thought and language, albeit seeming to operate as an assumption, is vindicated by the argument. This is because, as we shall see, the full articulation of the argument has the resources to support the claim that external features, features that can be triangulated upon, must be counted by any plausible account of meaning as among the meaning-constituting facts.¹¹⁹

Davidson does motivate the externalist starting point at times. For instance, he thinks that externalism is “the only alternative to subjectivism” (2001b, 2), which is the view that

...all knowledge of the world depends on objects or phenomena that are directly present in individual minds, objects such as sense data, impressions, ideas, raw feels, or propositions, objects that might be just as they present themselves to us even if the world were very different than it is. (2001b, 1-2)

¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, he writes, “of course, very many words and sentences are not learned in this way; but it is those that are that anchor language to the world” (1988, 45).

¹¹⁹ See Myers and Verheggen 2016, Chapter 3, for a defence of this claim.

This view, Davidson thinks, unavoidably results in scepticism, in our inability to make sense of the possibility of knowing the world. Nevertheless, subjectivism seems to be a view about knowledge, whereas externalism is a view in philosophical semantics—a position belonging to the metaphysics of meaning. So, it might be asked, how could externalism be the alternative to subjectivism? The answer, which will have to remain undeveloped, is that renouncing all commitment to subjectivism requires that we give up the idea of epistemic intermediaries between ourselves and the world—in other words, that we construe the relationship between mind and world as immediate. Such a construal is possible only if we adopt a conception of the constitution of content that immediately involves the world. Externalism is one way to do just that. For, Davidson says, externalism depicts the connection between language and the world as “not inferred, constructed, or discovered, but there from the start” (2001b, 2). It does so by construing the causal relations between some utterances (and thoughts) and elements of the world as constitutive of the meaningfulness of utterances (and of the contentfulness of thoughts). (The subjectivist need not deny the existence of such relations; what she denies is that we can elucidate meaning by attending to them.) As we shall see in the next section, answering the question of how to determine, for a kind of utterance or expression, its typical cause turns out to be enormously more difficult than it might initially seem.

2.2. The aspect problem

According to Davidson, there are at least two conditions that must be met, or at least two problems that must be solved, in order for the typical cause of a type of utterance to be adequately singled out. For, as he puts it,

...the cause is doubly indeterminate: with respect to width, and with respect to distance. The first ambiguity concerns how much of the total cause of a belief [or of an utterance] is relevant to content. (...) The second

problem has to do with the ambiguity of the relevant stimulus, whether it is proximal (at the skin, say) or distal. (Davidson 1999a, 129-130)

To see what Davidson has in mind here, let us consider a very simple scenario, in which an individual produces an utterance of ‘ ϕ ’ whenever she is causally affected by a round item, such that we can record this regularity, and take it to legitimize the claim that ‘ ϕ ’ involves predicating *roundness* of the object in front of the individual. However, as Davidson intimates in the passage quoted above, the list of candidates for what might count as a typical cause of uttering ‘ ϕ ’ is extensive, to say the least. On the one hand, it includes not only round items, but also intermediary elements of the causal paths between them and the individual’s perceptual apparatus, as well as, more dramatically, intermediary elements of the causal paths between them and the Big Bang. Let us call this the *distance* problem. On the other hand, it also includes other features that typically characterize the round items encountered by the individual, such as, say, having a shape, or having a colour, or being delicious, or simply being an object. Let us call this, following Verheggen, the *aspect* problem.¹²⁰ Thus, according to Davidson, even if we succeeded in establishing that the typical cause of a type of utterance seems to be items of a certain kind, which are located at some distance from the individual, there would be many, potentially endless, other regularities that we could record, because there are indefinitely many aspects pertaining to those items to which an individual could be viewed as causally responding. Given our commitment to arriving at the meaning of ‘ ϕ ’ by investigating the causal connections in

¹²⁰ See Myers and Verheggen 2016, 18-22. Verheggen is the first one to have insisted on, and to have elaborated on the significance of, the difference between the two problems for a proper understanding of Davidson’s view. In a similar vein, but in an altogether different context, Peter Godfrey-Smith distinguishes between ‘vertical’ causal factors and ‘horizontal’ causal factors. He discusses the example in which we wish to locate fire as the privileged cause of a state. He writes, “Vertically, we need to pick the property or class fire out from various other classes of things, like the class of fires large enough to see, and out from larger classes including fires, dramatic vaporizations, things merely glowing, and the like. Problems with the horizontal axis are more familiar. Horizontally, we need to know how far back along the causal chain to locate the object of representation. Why is the state related to fire, rather than the structure of ambient light, or the presence of fuel at ignition temperature, or patterns of excitation on the retina?” (1989, 536).

which the utterance of ‘ ϕ ’ is involved, it seems that what we should say is that ‘ ϕ ’ is about objects that are round or coloured or textured or delicious, or, perhaps, that it is simply about objects as such.¹²¹ But this would be tantamount to admitting that causal regularities cannot by themselves supply a principle of selection for the relevant, meaning-constituting cause.

Therefore, it cannot be the case that uses of expressions are meaningful simply in virtue of being involved in causal relations with the external world. We might, of course, be tempted to say that the individual utters ‘ ϕ ’ whenever she appears to observe (or perceive, or represent, or notice, and so forth) a round item. This might go a long way toward correctly specifying the expression’s meaning, but the trouble is that we would no longer be relying exclusively on causal resources; indeed, we would be presupposing that the individual has a perspective on her environment that is already imbued with content.

Note that, so far, we have been approaching the problem from outside, that is, from a standpoint that is external to the individual. It might be thought that we have not exhausted the resources available to us, for these resources do not amount to facts about the external chains of causes. Alternatively, it might be thought that, even though the resources specific to the external standpoint do not seem to allow us to make sense of the possibility that the individual’s utterances be meaningful, reflection on the individual’s own point of view, on her own awareness of her responses, might provide us with a way to make sense of that possibility. I shall discuss each of these two proposals in turn.

First, what might the resources available from an outside standpoint that we have not yet exploited? Here it might be thought that the totality of the behavioural responses of the

¹²¹ What is more, we might notice that the creature produces an utterance of ‘ ϕ ’ in other contexts, in which there are no round items present, such as those in which the lighting is poor, or those in which she is tired or sleeping, and so on, which poses yet another problem, widely known as the disjunction problem. I take the disjunction problem to be a species of the aspect problem.

individual, both actual and potential, is apt to indicate what they are about, such that a more thorough investigation of those responses will provide a clue to the kinds of things to which she is responding. This brings us back in the vicinity of the inquiry pursued by Kripke's sceptic, a part of which deals precisely with the suggestion that there must be behavioural dispositions that establish what one means by an expression, and thus how one ought, in light of that meaning, to apply it in some determinate circumstance. As we have seen in the first chapter, what the sceptic shows is that these dispositions are themselves equivocal, or, to borrow Davidson's term, that they are characterized by a fundamental ambiguity. For none of them is able to rule out the sceptic's hypotheses, or to restore one's confidence in the application that one was about to make, given that each of them has more than one aspect, or can be taken in more than one way. Indeed, any aspect, dispositional or otherwise, that one might point to can be viewed as lending support to the sceptic's interpretation just as well as it can be viewed as lending support to one's own. To go back to Davidson's problem again, any attempt to point to a cause, be it distal or proximal, as the provider of meaning, can be viewed as yielding more than one meaning, as compatible with more than one interpretation; any such cause can be described or specified in more than one way, considered under more than one aspect.

So, to summarize, the aspect problem, which is, initially at least, a problem about the ambiguity of external causes, also (and unsurprisingly) permeates the domain of behavioural responses to those causes, given that, for now at least, we are to think of these responses in terms that do not presuppose content. Just like features of the world around us, reactions to these features have more than one aspect, and therefore can be taken or characterized in more than one way. One's responses cannot disambiguate the causes that led to them, for they are, themselves, ambiguous. This is what Davidson is getting at in the following passage:

Since any set of causes whatsoever will have endless properties in common, we must look to some recurrent feature of the gatherer, some mark that he or she has classified cases as similar. This can only be some feature or aspect of the gatherer's reactions (...) in which case we must once again ask: what makes these reactions relevantly similar to each other? Wittgenstein's problem once again. (Davidson 2001b, 4-5)

Thus, for Davidson, it would seem that neither the question of how far away from the individual the relevant cause is located nor the question of the relevant aspect, which arguably persists even after we have a specification of the location of the cause, can be answered, or at least they cannot be answered when we are dealing with an individual in isolation.¹²² (As we shall see, the situation changes radically when the individual is able to interact with another.)

Still, we have not yet considered the individual's own point of view, or her perspective on the world, as well as on her own responses to that world. After all, it seems that, in order to be capable of meaningful responses—in order to be able to produce meaningful utterances and to have genuine thoughts—the individual herself must actively take some causes of her responses to be the same as others; she must actively settle in some way on some aspect that a series of items that causally affect her have in common, and thus treat those items as the same in light of that aspect. Davidson claims, however, that we cannot make sense of the possibility of an individual actively taking some causes, or some items in the environment, to be the same as others.¹²³

¹²² The uselessness of causal relations becomes even more obvious in light of Davidson's distinction, crucial for his overall view of human agency, between statements of causal relations and causal explanations. The former are extensional, while the latter are not. Because of this, "it makes no literal sense (...) to speak of an event causing something as mental, or by virtue of its mental properties, or *as described in one way or another*" (1993b, 196, italics added). Because there is a clear sense in which the truth of a statement about a causal relation between two events is entirely independent of any conceptual connections between the descriptions of the events in question, "it makes no sense to speak of an event being a cause 'as' anything at all" (1993b, 188). All descriptions, that is, all the ways in which the event (or object) could be conceived of, are revealed as metaphysically on a par. If it makes no sense to speak of something being a cause under some aspect as opposed to some other, then it also makes no sense to speak of an object or event causing a reaction *as* a cat, or *as* a feline, or *as* a moving object, or *as* a furry animal, etc.

¹²³ I emphasize the fact that this interpretation of Davidson is not the standard one. Most often, commentators have taken Davidson to claim that, for someone to have a language, two independent tasks need to be accomplished, namely the determination of meaning and the acquisition of the concept of objectivity.

The argument for this claim goes as follows. To take some items to be the same as others is to view them as sharing some determinate feature. In order to settle on a feature, the individual must be in a position to recognize that that feature is instantiated or possessed by items independently of whether she takes them to instantiate it, and, consequently, that she might be wrong in taking it to be instantiated in any particular case. To express the point in more general terms, the individual must be able to recognize there might be a gap between the external world and her perspective on it. To recognize this gap requires a grasp of the idea of an external world as well as of the idea of a perspective on that world. On the one hand, to grasp the idea of an external world is to appreciate that things stand in a certain way regardless of how they might be taken to stand. On the other hand, to grasp the idea of a perspective is to appreciate that the way in which things might be taken to stand can be mistaken, hence the possible gap between the external world and one's perspective on it. To recognize this possible gap is, again, to recognize that merely possessing a perspective on something does not guarantee the accuracy of that perspective; it is, thus, to have a grasp of the notion of truth. For, ultimately, to take some causes to be the same as others is to believe, or to take it to be true, that they are the same as others, which is to be contrasted with merely behaving in ways that are compatible with it being true that they are the same as others. These ways might allow us to attribute to the individual, from an external standpoint, categorizations of the world that align with her behaviour. But, by themselves, these ways do not show that the individual herself categorizes the world in this way. In order to think this, we must also think that the individual is aware that her categorizations might be mistaken.

Furthermore, according to Davidson, an individual cannot have a grasp the idea of truth (or of the idea of being mistaken, or of the distinction between how the world is and how it is

taken to be, and so on) by herself, in complete isolation from others. Any distinction that she may draw between “appearance and reality, mere seeming and being” (1991b, 209) will be, in a sense, entirely up to her. This is to say that there is no intelligible distinction between seeming and being, no possible gap between what seems to be the case and what is the case. Thus, she is not in a position to produce meaningful utterances or to think genuine thoughts. In short, in order to take some things to be the same as others, the individual must possess the concept of truth, or objectivity, and thus be aware of the possibility of being mistaken—in her thoughts or in her applications of expressions. But she cannot acquire this concept in solitude, Davidson thinks. Thus, she cannot take some causes to be the same as others; she cannot settle on determinate aspects of the world as the aspects under which she conceives of the world.¹²⁴

It has been suggested that Davidson has not done enough to dissuade a certain critic, namely the critic “who thinks that grasp of the subjective-objective distinction [and thus of the concept of truth] would be available to a sufficiently sophisticated individual which reflected on its past and future” (Child 1994, 53).¹²⁵ An individual who reflected on its past and future, the thought goes,

...could be confronted by a mismatch between a current series of perceptions and a generalization well established on the basis of past experience; surely that could provide the resources for making a distinction between how things now seem and how they really are. (Child 1994, 19).

However, what complaints of this sort seem to assume is that the individual already has a rich conception of herself in the world, which is antecedent to her grasp of the aforementioned distinction. For instance, we are told that she is already in a position to recognize a mismatch

¹²⁴ See also Myers and Verheggen 2016, 20-4.

¹²⁵ Or, alternatively, to a sufficiently sophisticated individual who “conceived of the course of its experience as being jointly causally explained by its position in the world and objective states of affairs” (Child 1994, 19). I think that this way of describing the individual suggests that she must already have a conception of the world as independent of herself. See also Myers and Verheggen 2016, 29-31, for a response to objections similar to the ones raised by Child.

between generalizations that she has already devised and a certain perception or series of perceptions of hers. What could such a mismatch consist in? There seem to be two possibilities here. On the one hand, the mismatch could amount to a contradiction. In this case, propositional content would already be involved in the two states which fail to match, and there would be no reason for her not to count as already having attitudes. However, accepting this line of thought, inasmuch as it would require accepting that content is prior to one's grasp of the notion of truth, would force Child, for instance, to give up on the Davidsonian claim, which he seems to accept, to the effect that "a state of a creature is a belief only if the creature is equipped to think of it as a belief" (1994, 17), and thus to think of it as a case of taking something to be true. On the other hand, if the mismatch amounts to something other than a contradiction, it is hard to see how it could be true that it would "*surely (...)* provide the resources for making a distinction between how things now seem and how they really are" (1994, 19, italics added). After all, one can settle a mismatch between two items by intervening on one of the items that fail to match. Consider, for instance, a case in which I use a scissor to carve a piece of puzzle in order to make it fit some other piece. Whether the pieces of puzzles have a larger role, such as that of contributing to a coherent depiction of a scene, need not be relevant for the project of rendering them compatible. A mismatch of this sort can be dealt with without any consideration of the idea of a mind-independent world.

Another kind of critic might suggest that actively taking some things to be the same as others does not require grasping the distinction between things seeming the same and things being the same—it does not require grasp of the idea of truth. Differently put, the suggestion is that a belief, or perhaps a representational state, can be had by a subject who fails to grasp the distinction between representation and reality. This objection might be seen as especially

pressing given that Davidson repeatedly emphasizes the significance of natural dispositions for the elucidation of thought and meaning. He insists, for instance, that “what makes [linguistic] communication possible is the sharing, inherited and acquired, of similarity responses” (1990a, 61). Undeniably, we are naturally disposed to respond to our environment in similar ways—to class together certain things and not others, to treat certain things as similar and not others. As the triangulation argument makes perspicuous in ways that will become clearer later on, without the sharing of these natural dispositions communication through language, and thus thought, would not be so much as possible; there would not be such a thing as meaning or content. But, then, it might be thought that sameness, and so standards of correctness, could somehow be constituted in light of an individual’s natural dispositions alone. On this picture, there would still be a sense in which the individual must contribute to the constitution of such standards—thus, we might still be in a position to say that the world, on its own, does not dictate any standards—but the contribution would involve capacities that are in place well before she grasps the concept of truth.¹²⁶

Perhaps we could imagine that sameness could somehow be established in this way. However, we might still inquire into our reasons for thinking that the sameness involved in the solitary individual’s taking some causes as the same as others is not bound to be something that we might better characterize as solipsistic sameness. Solipsistic sameness could be described, approximately, as sameness-for-the-individual.¹²⁷ To the extent that she could acquire, through the exercise of her natural capacities, a perspective on the causes of her responses, it would be a

¹²⁶ I take Burge’s view, which I shall discuss in more detail later in this chapter, to be an instance of this line of thought. I shall also discuss the way in which I think we should respond to Burge’s criticisms of Davidson.

¹²⁷ I take this description to reflect our perspective on such an individual, and not the way in which the content of the putative attitudes of such an individual may be structured. An individual able to entertain thoughts that involve the content *same-for-me* must in principle be able to entertain thoughts that do not make reference to herself.

perspective from which they would appear to be a part of an environment that is construed as entirely *for* her, and which is fully subordinated to her own ends and projects, rather than as elements of a world that is independent of her. As Davidson puts it,

If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show [what] it is reacting to, or thinking about (...). The solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say, from the solipsist's point of view it has no size, *it is not a world*. (Davidson 1992a, 119, italics added)

Thus, for an individual considered by herself, there is no reason not to think that the aspects under which causes are taken to be the same are essentially linked to her own basic ends and pursuits. Importantly, such aspects have the degree of robustness that can be furnished by those basic ends and pursuits. In the absence of the appreciation of the distinction between the world and her perspective on it, there is no room, within such a perspective, for the world—as opposed to an environment that is essentially *for* the individual, a space that simply affords her with possibilities for basic action—to even make an appearance.¹²⁸ However, the opponent might still claim that, inasmuch as causes, external features, would be taken to be the same under some aspect, solipsistic sameness could be said to involve governance by standards of correctness. After all, the individual's responses might still be said to count as correct or incorrect depending on whether or not the causes themselves instantiate that aspect. This might seem to suggest that

¹²⁸ Christine Korsgaard depicts the world in which the animal lives, where the category of the animal stands in contrast with the category of the being endowed with reason, along similar lines. As she puts it,

The animal finds herself in a world that consists of things that are directly perceived as food or prey, as danger or predator, as potential mate, as child: that is to say, as things to-be-eaten, to-be-avoided, to-be-mated-with, to-be-cared-for, and so on. To put it a bit dramatically—or anyway, philosophically—an animal's world is teleologically organized: the objects in it are marked out as being “for” certain things or as calling for certain responses. (Korsgaard 2009, 31)

Indeed, Korsgaard thinks that, for the animal, “perceptual representation and desire and aversion are not strictly separate” (2009, 31). Perception already tells the animal what to do, rather than limiting itself to depicting what the world is like. Korsgaard also notes that, “exactly how any given kind of animal's representations give rise to his actions is a matter for further investigation, both philosophical and empirical” (2009, 31). While it is clear that human beings are creatures endowed with reason, it is also clear that, “were we to find another animal with this kind of self-consciousness, it would be a rational animal” (Korsgaard 2009, 42n21). I take the triangulation argument to show that the transition to reason cannot be borne by a creature who does not interact linguistically with another.

the aspect problem can after all be solved by the individual herself, and thus that triangulation is not needed for her responses to be governed by standards of correctness.

At this stage, what we need to do is to remind ourselves of the content of the notion of governance that we are seeking to elucidate. Given that, as it was granted, the individual has yet no awareness that her responses might be mistaken, in what sense are they governed by a standard of correctness? As we have seen in the first chapter, the notion of governance that we are after does not amount to the idea of there being standards of correctness that sort responses into correct and incorrect; the responses themselves must be able to be viewed (and explained) as done for reasons that (partly) involve the standard. Thus, for one's responses to be governed by a standard of correctness is, in part, for that standard to be recognized as an external constraint, as independent of oneself and of one's own pursuits.

These considerations allow us to articulate the aspect problem in a more precise way. The problem of fixing the relevant aspect of an object or response has been depicted as the problem of making it possible for the individual to pick out the aspect of an object or event, a going-on in the world, to which she is responding. We might distinguish between two ways in which this could be done. On the one hand, the going-on might be viewed as an element of an individual-bound environment, or as a component of a representation of the world as entirely *for* the individual—as something that is, in some sense, not entirely distinct from her and her pursuits. On the other hand, the going-on might be represented as an element of a mind-independent reality, or as a component of a conception of the environment as a world. Davidson thinks that we cannot make sense of the idea that a going-on is viewed as an element of a mind-independent reality if the individual viewing it as such is not aware of her own fallibility with

respect to the representation of that reality.¹²⁹ Thus, his claim is that to actively settle on an aspect in this sense—to form a belief, to make a claim, etc., about the world—is, in some sense, not only to take, but also to view oneself as taking, a cognitive risk.¹³⁰ His aim is ultimately that of elucidating this feat.

It is worth emphasizing that, for Davidson, it is the aspect problem that is the fundamental problem. For one, it persists even though the distal cause of a reaction might be fixed. An account of the determination of distal causes does not, on its own, yield an account of meaning. Causal relations are extensional, while meaning is intensional. For another, even though Davidson himself does not seem to have recognized this, the aspect problem bears important structural similarities with Kripke's sceptical problem. Both Davidson and Kripke endeavour to make philosophical sense of the possibility of content. The semantic sceptic's destructive undertaking is, as we have seen, primarily targeted at demolishing the idea that there is something about oneself that determines what one means by an expression and guides one in one's uses of it. Davidson's treatment of the aspect problem, on the other hand, can be seen as deploying the same strategy, but orienting it, initially at least, toward the external world, the world of outside causes. What his reflections on the aspect problem show is that there is nothing about the external features of the world that does the work which the sceptic suggests needs to be

¹²⁹ We need to distinguish this claim from the stronger claim to the effect that the contents of a creature's intentional states cannot be fixed unless the creature has the concept of objectivity, or unless she has grasped the distinction between mere seeming and being. The stronger claim is defended by Verheggen on behalf of Davidson. She argues that "only those who possess the concept are in a position to disambiguate the causes of their utterances [or other responses] in that only they can solve the aspect problem" (Myers and Verheggen 2016, 21). The weaker claim is that a disambiguation of the cause cannot result in the individual's viewing the cause as an element of reality if the individual does not have the concept of objectivity.

¹³⁰ He writes, "If I believe that what I am seeing is a giraffe, I am employing the concept of a giraffe in the sense that I am classifying what I see. I could not believe I see a giraffe if I did not know that some things are correctly identified as giraffes and some things are not. To know this is to know that some classifications are true and some false. If I were not aware of the possibility of misclassification, I would not be having a propositional thought" (2003, 698).

done. Thus, we might view the two arguments as working in tandem: first, Kripke's sceptic establishes that nothing internal to the individual can be said to determine meaning; then, Davidson establishes that nothing external to her can do the job either. The fundamental thought behind Davidson's response to this predicament, approximately put, is to say that, ultimately, it is the individual herself that does it, though, crucially, as we shall see in the next section, she can do it only together with another.

2.3. Preliminaries for a solution

Davidson's solution to the aspect problem revolves around the claim that it becomes possible for an individual to produce meaningful utterances (and to have genuine thoughts) when there is a second individual with whom she can engage in a distinct kind of interaction. The two individuals can be viewed as supplying the base points of a triangle, the apex of which is provided by some feature of the world that causally affects both of them. This arrangement makes possible what Davidson calls "triangulation", which is the simultaneous, repeated interaction of two individuals with one another as well as with features of the world they share. In Davidson's words, triangulation is "the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more individuals to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses" (2001a, xv).¹³¹ The notion of triangulation, understood to encompass cases of linguistic communication, is at the core of his account of the determination of meaning and content, as well as of what I take to be a Davidsonian treatment of the sceptical problem. Distinct from (and prior to) linguistic triangulation, there is what Davidson calls primitive or basic triangulation, which is ubiquitous

¹³¹ The idea of triangulation was introduced in Davidson 1982 and developed throughout his later writings, including in Davidson 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1994a, 1999a and 2001b.

among a variety of creatures and does not involve the use of language; it is, in this respect, a simpler process.¹³²

The role of primitive triangulation is not only to provide a contrast to linguistic triangulation. As Verheggen suggests, reflecting on it also sheds further light on the aspect problem itself, by showing what exactly is required to disambiguate causes and thereby fix meanings and contents.¹³³ For as soon as primitive triangulation occurs, that is, as soon as an individual interacts non-linguistically with another as well as with a shared item in the world, we might take ourselves to have grounds for claiming that the cause of their responses has already been established: it is the one located precisely at the intersection of the “lines” of the triangle formed by the two individuals reacting to the world. But this suggestion would be too quick. While we are perhaps in a position to say that the response produced by the two individuals is to a distal item in their common world, the question of the relevant aspect of that item remains open, for there are—indeed, there continue to be—endless aspects that one could settle on; there are endless ways in which the item could be conceived.

What could settle the causes of one’s responses, then? For Davidson, primitive (non-linguistic) triangulation is necessary for causes to be settled. However, it is not sufficient. For “mere [triangular] interaction does not show how the interaction matters to the creatures involved” (1992a, 120). The triangular interaction “must be made available to the interacting creatures” (1992a, 120). In primitive triangulation, one is in a position to observe the reactions of another individual to the environment, as well as to start correlating or associating—in a way that does not yet amount to forming beliefs—stimuli in the environment with those reactions.

The two individuals

¹³² See, e.g., Davidson 1991a, 128 and Davidson 2001c, 292.

¹³³ See Myers and Verheggen 2016, 16-20.

...each correlate their own reactions to external phenomena with the reactions of the other.¹³⁴ Once these correlations are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomenon when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectations; the reactions do not correlate. (1991a, 129)

Crucially, the failure of an individual's expectations does not introduce, nor is it equivalent to, error; it merely introduces the possibility of error, that is, it provides an opportunity for the individuals to enter the realm in which error is intelligible. For this to happen, the individuals must "take cognitive advantage" (1992a, 120) of the triangular setting. But, again, what is it to take cognitive advantage of the triangular setting?

One way of answering the question is as follows. Two individuals take cognitive advantage of the situation if the seeming tension between their reactions transforms into disagreement about how things stand in the world, disagreement which is then pursued through conversation—through dialogue about those things. What is mere friction within a common environment, mere failure of responses to align, must turn into a dispute between two minds about some aspect of that environment. And if friction turns into dispute, the two creatures turn into cognizers: into beings whose aim is to get things right about the world.

It is essential to disagreement that it can occur only against a background of agreement, as Davidson has always insisted.¹³⁵ The possibility of disagreeing about some particular feature of the environment, some aspect of a shared object or event, depends on there being agreement about how things stand with respect to large areas. For instance, you and I cannot disagree on whether the object in front of us is round unless we agree that there is something in front of us that has a mass, a location, a colour, and so on. We cannot disagree about one thing unless we are in agreement about many other things. Some of the things that we must agree on are that the features of objects are unaffected by our assessments of them, that we are both trying to discern

¹³⁴ This is, Davidson thinks, "the simplest interpersonal situation" (1991a, 129).

¹³⁵ See, e.g., Davidson 1974a.

these features, and that, if our perspectives on these features conflict, we cannot both be right. Thus, the possibility of agreement (and disagreement) requires that the two individuals grasp the concept of truth, or that they can distinguish between mere seeming and being. The question is, how might they do this?

If we expect a straightforward answer to the question of the transition from not having the concept of truth to having it—from not having language and thought to having it, from not being in the realm in which error is intelligible to being in that realm—that consists in a complete reconstruction of the steps involved, we are expecting something that cannot be provided. As Davidson says, trying to provide it is tantamount to searching, *per impossibile*, for a way of capturing the intensional in non-intensional terms. Still, he does offer materials for a treatment of this question, which include, as I have already suggested, the thought that the concept of truth, and, more generally, the solution to the aspect problem, can be arrived at only if the two individuals confront the world together. Let us examine this thought in more detail.

2.4. Triangular transactions

To begin with, it is crucial to note that Davidson has always insisted on the idea that one important characteristic of the triangular interaction is the fact that individuals *simultaneously* react to each other and the shared aspect of the world.¹³⁶ This is, in part, because the triangular transactions, namely the transactions characteristic of full-blown or linguistic triangulation, are supposed to be more than a series of dealings with the world and, separately, with another individual. If the presence of the second individual merely provided an opportunity for the first to engage in dealings of a sort similar to her dealings with external items, whatever transactions

¹³⁶ See, e.g., 1993c, 176-7, and 1999a, 128.

might unfold would not be of a fundamentally different kind than one's basic transactions with the world. The aspect problem, which cannot be solved by the individual through her dealings with the world alone, obviously could not be solved through her dealings with another individual—not if the latter are of the same variety as the former. Thus, the failure to recognize the special nature of distinctly triangular transactions might give one the impression not only that the triangular arrangement fails to add anything of substance to the scenario, but also that it makes the feat that we are seeking to shed light on even more difficult to comprehend.

So, one way of characterizing triangular transactions is by attending to the nature of the engagement of the two individuals with one another, which must unfold as each of them also observes external items. To say that the two actively engage with one another is to say that they seek to view one another as intelligible beings with a perspective on the world. This requires that each of them seeks to find “a great deal of reason and truth” (1974a, 153) in the other.¹³⁷ This engagement is obviously very different from the one distinctive of their dealings with the external environment. For observing things in the external environment does not require that one seek to find reason or truth in them, though it does involve the awareness that one might be wrong about what one finds. “When we try to understand the world (...) we necessarily employ our own norms, but we do not aim to discover rationality in the phenomena” (1991b, 215). However, crucially, without observing things in the external environment, one cannot engage with the other in a proper way. For one cannot so much as try to find truth in another perspective, or to maximize the intelligibility of that perspective, without discerning the facts that are the object of that perspective, and thus without engaging with the world at the same time.

¹³⁷ For “we cannot recognize as thought phenomena that are too far out of line. (...) It is only when we can see a creature (or ‘object’) as largely rational by our own lights that we can intelligibly ascribe thoughts to it at all, or explain its behavior by reference to its ends and convictions” (1990b, 97).

Crucially, if one cannot try to find truth in a perspective, or to maximize its intelligibility, one cannot so much as recognize it as a perspective. Hence, the need for the transactions to be triangular.

In the case in which neither of the two triangulating creatures has language and thought, and thus neither of them has a genuine perspective on the world that may be discerned by another, Davidson's thought is that the only way in which they could take advantage of the triangular setting—the only way in which they can enter the realm of triangular transactions and shape their perspectives on the world—is by doing something that we may characterize as confronting the world together. Such a confrontation must involve, to put it metaphorically (though in a way that Davidson may find congenial, as we shall see) a meeting of their minds. Thus, one way to understand triangular transactions is as transactions in which the two minds, in their joint confrontation of the world, meet. (This is not to say that their minds must pre-exist such a meeting; rather, their minds are constituted through such a meeting.) Two minds can meet only through dialogue, only by producing expressions or signs that have meaning. And producing meaningful expressions and signs requires that the aspects of the world to which they are reacting be settled. Thus, these aspects are singled out by the individuals' utterances about those very aspects. As Davidson puts it,

...unless the base line of the triangle, the line between the two agents, is strengthened to the point where it can implement the communication of propositional contents, there is no way the agents can make use of the triangular situation to form judgements about the world. (1999a, 130)

This is, of course, a gradual process, and many utterances must be made before any of them can be said to be genuinely meaningful. Moreover, many beliefs and other attitudes must have their contents fixed at the same time. This is because of “the essential interdependence (...) of various aspects of the mental” (Davidson 1995a, 9). For, in Davidson's words,

...many concepts are fairly directly connected, through causality, with the world, but they would not be the concepts they are without their connections with other concepts, and without relations to other concepts, they would not be concepts. (2001d, 137)

Thus, the contents of one's utterances and attitudes can only be determined holistically.

To summarize, minds constitute themselves not only against the world, but also against one another. For it is only in and through dialogue that two minds can think the same thought and recognize that they do. But one might ask, why must the two individuals think the same thought and recognize that they do? Why must minds meet in this way?

Davidson's answer seems to be that one cannot acquire the distinction between mere seeming and being without being faced with a perspective on the world that belongs to another individual. But in order to be faced with such a perspective, one must be able to recognize it as such. One cannot view something as a perspective unless, as I said before, one finds a great deal of reason and truth in it. And one cannot find a great deal of reason and truth in someone's perspective unless one thinks many of the same thoughts and shares many of the same ends. But, of course, thinking many of the same thoughts and sharing many of the same ends with another individual is not enough for her perspective to be recognized as a perspective. For the alignment may simply be a coincidence. In order for one to recognize a perspective as such, one must also recognize the shared dimension of many of the thoughts and ends—in other words, one must recognize agreement as such. This recognition is of the essence of what makes a meeting of minds, or a genuine engagement with another's perspective, possible. For a meeting of minds is more than an accidental alignment of those minds. It requires not only that the individuals' thoughts share a content, but also that the sharing of the content be recognized by both individuals as such. Minds—contentful perspectives—are the sorts of things that can be recognized only by meeting them in this way.

This is why it is impossible for a mind to meet itself. It is impossible for triangular transactions, or anything like them, to unfold between one's present point of view, as it were, and a previous point of view of one. This is because the prospect of mutual recognition, which is essential for an encounter with another perspective to be what it is, is ruled out in these cases: one's previous self cannot recognize one's present self; one's previous point of view cannot recognize one's present point of view. Of course, once an individual is a speaker and thinker, she can systematically scrutinize the contents of her attitudes and utterances, and she can even talk to herself. But, whatever one's own critical reflection on oneself and on one's own attitudes may amount to, whatever form the dialogue with oneself might take, it is a fundamentally different sort of activity from triangular transactions, which involve two minds directly and simultaneously engaged with one another and a shared world. The triangular transaction cannot fully be replicated by a single creature.¹³⁸

Moreover, the world is such that one can have a conception of it only if at least part of that conception has been articulated for, and grasped by, another—only if at least part of that conception has been an element of a meeting of minds. On its own, the world is silent: as we have seen, it fails to provide meaning to our utterances and contents to our attitudes, for it fails to reveal the aspects that matter to one. These aspects must be exposed, articulated by individuals, revealed in their uses of language. However, individuals themselves cannot do this on their own; they can do it only by engaging in triangular transactions with each other and, simultaneously, with the world:

The role of the [second creature] in determining the content of the [triangulator's] attitude [and utterances] is not just the 'determine' of causality. For in addition to being a cause of those thoughts [and utterances], what makes the particular aspect of the cause of the [triangulator's] responses the aspect that gives them the content they have is the fact that this aspect of the cause is shared by the [second creature] and the [triangulator]. Without such sharing, there would be no grounds for selecting one cause rather than another as the content-fixing cause. (1991a, 203)

¹³⁸ A similar point seems to be made by Haase 2014, 362.

Still, it might seem here that we are simply moving in a circle. For, according to Davidson, it is in virtue of triangular transactions with others and, simultaneously, with the world, that our expressions have the meanings they do. But such transactions, in order to be meaning-endowing, must themselves involve meaningful utterances, that is, they must themselves involve uses of expressions governed by conditions of correctness. This might appear to be tantamount to the claim that our uses of expressions are governed by conditions of correctness in virtue of their being governed by such conditions. Davidson's answer might thus be taken to be a species of the non-reductionist picture briefly considered by Kripke himself in his discussion of candidates for a straight solution, according to which meaning states are primitive. But this would be misguided. While Davidson's non-reductionism seems, on the face of it, consistent with the view that a meaning state might be "simply a primitive state, not to be assimilated to sensations or headaches or any 'qualitative' states, nor to be assimilated to dispositions, but a state of a unique kind of its own" (Kripke 1982, 51), this is as far as the similarity between the two goes. However, before we explore, in the next chapter, the question of Davidson's non-reductionism, and of the alleged circularity that characterizes his view, it will be useful to consider in some detail two recent objections to his triangulation argument.

2.5. The first objection: perceptual representation

Let us start with Tyler Burge's objections, which are formulated from within a conception of intentionality that is widely endorsed in contemporary philosophy of mind (Burge 2010).

According to this conception, the notion of representation is legitimized by its putative usefulness in scientific inquiry into animal and human minds; it is, therefore, a theoretical notion.

Consequently, representationalists maintain, debates about the presence of representational states are to be settled by appealing to the results of scientific investigation.¹³⁹

Burge's objections are not raised in relation to the constitution of linguistic meaning, but rather in relation to the constitution of objective representation broadly construed. To represent objectively is "to represent some of the basic mind-independent features of the environment veridically, as they are" (Burge 2010, 12). Recall that we are considering the triangulation argument in the context in which we are addressing the question of what makes it possible for an utterance to be a case of objective representation, representation of aspects of the environment as elements of an independent world. Burge's claim is that objective representation is achieved through the interaction of a biological organism endowed with a perceptual system, for which it is essential that it have the capacity for perceptual constancies, with her environment.¹⁴⁰

Perceptual constancies are capacities systematically to represent a given particular or attribute as the same despite significant variations in proximal stimulation—despite a wide variety of perspectives on the particular or attribute. (2010, 274)

According to Burge, it is not impossible for a solitary individual, an individual who has never interacted with another, to respond to her environment in a way that is governed by genuine standards of correctness, and thus triangulation may not be needed for that.

Burge discusses Davidson's proposal at length, and argues that Davidson is wrong to think that the individual must grasp the distinction between what is the case and what seems to be the case, or that she must appreciate the possibility of being mistaken, in order to be able to

¹³⁹ Burge says that "science establishes that an individual has perceptual states" (2010, 260), which are essentially representational.

¹⁴⁰ More specifically, Burge thinks that, in the most fundamental cases, perceptual representation is the product of "subindividual conditions and environmental conditions. Subindividual conditions are unconscious, automatic, relatively modular aspects of perceptual systems and belief forming systems. Environmental conditions are twofold. They are the actual properties and relations in the environment that the individual interacts with and discriminates. And they are patterns of causal relations between the environment and the individual's perceptual and cognitive capacities, relations that ground individuals' sensory discriminations (including pre-perceptual discriminations) and that fulfill individuals' biological and practical functions" (2010, 24).

represent the world objectively (2010, 264-81).¹⁴¹ All that is required to represent the world objectively is a perceptual system. Having a perceptual system, he thinks, is necessary and sufficient for having a representational point of view. A representational point of view is, for Burge, tantamount to a perspective on the environment. In order for something to count as a point of view or perspective, it must be able to count as correct or mistaken. But, crucially, the possibility that a point of view be correct or mistaken does not require that the individual whose point of view it is have any awareness of the possibility of a mistake. According to Burge, it is possible to have a mistaken perspective on something not only without realizing that one's perspective is mistaken, but even without so much as having an awareness of the fact that one has a perspective. As he puts it, an individual can have "a representational point of view or perspective that can itself incur mistakes," and this is enough for "the notions of correctness and error in representation [to] have a grip" (2010, 270). And, "a mistake 'as seen from the creature's point of view' is simply a non-veridical (...) representation by the creature" (2010, 270). Thus, to repeat, in order for something to be a mistake as seen from the individual's point of view, it need not be seen (or be able to be seen) as a mistake by the individual. A mistaken perspective is simply a perspective that fails to match reality, but in order for the possibility of matching reality to be intelligible—in order for it to be a perspective—the individual whose

¹⁴¹ Burge takes Davidson to belong to a tradition that he calls "individual representationalism", at the core of which is the thesis that "an individual cannot empirically and objectively represent an ordinary macro-physical subject matter unless the individual has resources that can represent some constitutive conditions for such representation" (2010, 13). On this view, also endorsed by Gareth Evans, Peter Strawson, and Willard van Orman Quine, "individuals qualify as engaging in objective empirical representation by having resources for explaining what they are doing. The individual's own representations incorporate within themselves conditions that can be used constitutively to explain objective representation of the environment" (2010, 13).

perspective it is need not take itself to be in the business of representing reality—or anything else, for that matter.¹⁴²

Still, it is essential to a representation that it have veridicality conditions.¹⁴³ Veridicality conditions are “conditions on being accurate or true” (2010, 27). They are constituted by representational contents (2010, 38), which are abstract entities (2010, 42) that help type-individuate particular psychological states—more specifically, “abstract kinds that fix conditions under which a psychological state is veridical” (2010, 379). For instance, the representational content the marble is round would type-individuate the psychological state of Octavia, my cat, if she were to represent the marble as round. This state is veridical if and only if a certain condition obtains, namely the fact that the marble is round. The question, of course, is what makes it the case that a certain state has a certain representational content—differently put, what makes it the case that a certain state can be rendered veridical by a certain condition, rather than by some other one. For Burge, the answer to this question is, in a sense, straightforward: it involves the workings on the visual system, which processes the proximal stimulation of sensory organs, and which yields representations of the objects and properties that are causally responsible for that stimulation.

¹⁴² For Burge, having a perspective is different from discriminating items in the environment, for the latter capacity, unlike the former, does not require the construction of representations of distal objects by the organism; it is simply a response to proximal stimuli (see, e.g., 2010, 9-10).

¹⁴³ Burge would seem to resist any attempt at reducing the vocabulary of representation to a more basic vocabulary. He writes, “the notion of a representational state cannot reasonably be taken to be *prima facie* defective or in need of supplement or help. It has long earned its explanatory keep. What philosophy can do here is to clarify, explore, connect” (2010, 298). He also thinks that, despite the fact that the notion of representational state is “explanatorily irreducible, ineliminable” (2010, 85), our task is to answer the question of how such states are possible. For, he says, “it is not acceptable to leave things with this antireductionist point. There must be systematic specific constitutive connections involving causal patterns between the specified (or simply indicated) physical conditions and representational perceptual states. The constitutive explication of these connections must not leave what is obviously a close, non-accidental connection between the two seeming brute, surd, or coincidental” (2010, 85).

Indeed, according to Burge, the workings of the perceptual system exhibit systematicity, which the science of perception seeks to discover and account for. This systematicity is revealed by what Burge calls “formation principles”, which are “psychological principles that describe, in an explanatory way, (...) laws or law-like patterns” (2010, 92) by which the perceptual system abides.¹⁴⁴ They reveal the manner in which the perceptual system of an individual solves, in a way that is bound to be inaccessible to the individual, the distance and aspect problem that Davidson outlines. In Burge’s own words, “these laws or law-like processes serve to *privilege* certain among the possible environmental causes over others” (2010, 92). Thus, the cause is disambiguated, and the content-constituting cause is selected, by the individual’s perceptual system. Crucially, however, this process allegedly affords the individual an objective representation of that cause: it is the individual herself who represents her environment, and not just her perceptual system. Burge’s account of the representational content yielded by perceptual systems is extensive, and I shall not go into more detail than this, for I believe there is no need. Granting that the perceptual system is indeed governed by law-like processes in the way in which he suggests, and which is elucidated by the science of perception, the question that we should ask is what reason we have to think that these processes culminate in representations that are objective, by which I mean that features of the environment are represented by the individual as intrinsic features of objects, and thus elements of a mind-independent world, rather than as relational features, which depict objects as elements of an environment that is essentially *for* the individual. To go back to Davidson’s question, what grounds do we have for thinking that, from

¹⁴⁴ They “have the force of inductive principles” (2010, 92). Moreover, “there is no sense in which the principles are “accessible” to the perceiver or the perceiver’s perceptual system” (2010, 94). They “describe and explain laws instantiated in transformations in the system. (...) Thinking of them as applied by the system hyper-intellectualizes the system” (2010, 97).

the point of view of the individual, the environment is a world, rather than simply a space *for* the individual?

To articulate the issue more clearly, consider again Davidson's two problems, the distance problem and the aspect problem. The questions, recall, were as follows: first, on what grounds can we plausibly say that the content-constituting cause is distal, rather than proximal? Second, assuming that we settle the first question, on what grounds can we plausibly select, for a particular individual, the content-constituting aspect of the cause from among its many aspects? Now, let us grant Burge that the solution to the first problem is provided by one's perceptual system. More specifically, let us grant that, as he puts it,

Perceptual constancies [which are present in any perceptual system] are capacities for objectification. Objectification separates registration of surface stimulation that is local to individual and occasion from elements in that registration that are (according to formation patterns) representationally specific to attributes in the physical environment. Thus objectification separates local, idiosyncratic registrations from *representations of individual-independent, occasion independent, mind-independent, perspective-independent reality, beyond the individual.* (2010, 399, italics added)

It is clear—he makes it especially obvious when he discusses Davidson's triangulation argument (2011, 272-6)—that Burge also seems to think that the capacity for objectification automatically solves the aspect problem. But one might grant that the perceptual system represents, in Burge's terminology, a reality beyond the individual without also granting that it represents it as fully independent of her. One might think, for instance, that the presence of physical bodies in the environment is responsible for representations of bodies in an individual's cognitive system, without also thinking that the individual represents bodies as bodies, where being a body is an individual-independent, occasion-independent, mind-independent, and perspective-independent feature. The claim that the individual herself views bodies as bodies requires additional support.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ At times, Burge seems to think that this burden can be discharged by appealing to considerations about ecological relevance for the basic functions of the individual (eating, navigating, mating, and so on). But nothing in these

In his review of Burge's monograph, John Campbell argues that the demand for a justification for this claim is legitimate, and, moreover, that Burge's view lacks the resources to answer it (Campbell 2011). He appeals to the notion of affordance, which was introduced by James J. Gibson, who defined it as follows: "the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill" (Gibson 1986, 127). The affordances of an object for an individual differ from the physical properties of the object; also, they are "unique for that [individual]" (Gibson 1986, 127). The identity of an affordance, or that which makes it the affordance that it is, essentially involves the individual for which it is an affordance; affordances are, we might say, individual-dependent properties.¹⁴⁶ So, granting that an individual's perceptual system generates representations of the environment, what grounds are there for thinking that those representations represent the aspects of the environment as anything other than mere affordances?

To begin answering this question, it is worth noting that, in light of Burge's taxonomy (2010, 46-54), affordance-involving representations still count as objective in several ways. To see why, let us quickly review his overview of the ways in which the notion of objectivity might be understood. Burge distinguishes between conceptions of objectivity that are focused on the subject matter and those that are focused on the mode of representation involved. With respect to subject matter, the features that are objective are those that are real. Affordances, individual-dependent properties, are real. (The fact that, for instance, the bookcase in my living room is

considerations requires that the representations be objective in the sense relevant here. We can explain those functions without appealing to the capacity to represent objectively.

¹⁴⁶ An individual-dependent property is a property the specification of which requires an appeal to the creature or to facts about the species to which she belongs. Importantly, an individual-dependent property does not depend nor require being represented by the creature as such. The class of individual-dependent properties is thus different from the class of properties which are constitutively perspectival, where to be constitutively perspectival is constitutively "to have, employ, or be representational content" (Burge 2010, 47).

climb-on-able¹⁴⁷ relative to my cat is, we might think, a real feature of it, just as real as its having a length of three meters.) They are also objective in the sense of being mind-independent. (The fact that the bookcase in my living room is “climb-on-able” does not depend on its being taken to be so.) With respect to objectivity as a feature of modes of representation, which is what Burge is primarily interested in, veridical representations of individual-dependent properties would count as objective inasmuch as such properties are real and mind-independent. (Recall that a representation is objective if it is “a veridical representation of properties, kinds, relations that are mind-independent” (2010, 49).¹⁴⁸) Moreover, such representations have veridicality conditions that are met independently of whether they are taken to be met. (Again, a representation of something as climb-on-able does not become veridical as a result of someone merely thinking that it is so.) It would thus seem that representations of features as individual-dependent could meet all the criteria for objective representation that operate in Burge’s conception. This suggests that his mapping of the notions of objectivity is, at the very least, incomplete, and his conception of objectivity unsatisfactory. For a satisfactory conception of objectivity must respect the distinction between an individual’s representing features of the environment as elements of a world that is entirely independent of herself and that individual’s representing features of the environment as subordinated to her own ends, such as the need for climbing or entertainment.

As far as I can tell, Burge does not seriously consider the possibility that the properties represented be individual-dependent, or, to put it differently, that the contents of the

¹⁴⁷ I am borrowing this example from Gibson (Gibson 1986, 128).

¹⁴⁸ Burge sometimes adds that mind-independent matters must not be represented as mind-dependent. For instance, if something is represented as someone’s favourite property, the representation is not objective, because “it represents mind-independent matters by representing mind-dependent matters” (2010, 49). But climb-on-ability is not a mind-dependent matter.

representations do not reveal a world that is independent of the individual. As we have seen, when Burge defines objectivity as a mode of representation, he defines it as “a veridical representation of properties, kinds, relations that are mind-independent” (2010, 49). But such properties, kinds, and relations might very well include features that constitutively depend on the individual herself, albeit not on her mind. After all, to repeat, being individual-dependent is, on the face of it, compatible with being mind-independent. Later in the same paragraph, Burge describes objective representation as representation that “attributes only unproblematically mind-independent kinds and properties” (2010, 49). But, again, why would “climb-on-ability” fail to count as a mind-independent kind or property in this context? And yet, the fact, which I take to be highly plausible, that my cat may be harbouring representations of things as climb-on-able is not enough to support the claim that she is capable of having a conception of the world as independent of herself, or that her own ends and projects, such as the one of climbing things, do not provide the only lens through which she sees the world. It is this understanding of objectivity that is at play in Davidson’s project to elucidate the possibility of objective meaning and thought.

2.6. The second objection: pristine objectivity

We have seen that the first condition that operates in the meaning sceptic’s challenge is the idea that a satisfactory account of the determination of meaning must account for a distinction between correct and incorrect meaningful uses of expressions, and that it must do so in a way that rules out the possibility that what counts as correct is determined by what one might take to be correct. Now, if the triangulation argument succeeds, the aspects picked out by the individual in triangular transactions are precisely the aspects that endow her expressions with meaning. We

must think of the basic cases of triangular transactions as those in which the applications of the triangulating individuals are correct; indeed, a use's being taken to be correct in such a context seems to be constitutive of its being correct. It would seem, then, that the correctness of the application, which is, we might say, a purely semantic matter, cannot be disentangled, for instance, from the taking of the application to be correct, which is a psychological matter. More generally, it would seem that "the notion of investigation-independent patterns of application" of an expression, namely patterns that extend "independently of the actual outcome of any investigation, to the relevant case" (McDowell 1984, 222) cannot be disentangled from the investigative pursuits of triangulating creatures. What are we to make of this entanglement?

A worry closely related to this one is articulated by Glüer. According to Glüer, the Davidsonian account of meaning determination does not succeed in answering Wittgenstein's rule-following challenge. (As we shall see, Glüer's account of the challenge is different from Kripke's account of it.) The reason for which it does not succeed in answering it is that meaning, as determined in the way suggested by such an account, is not "fully and pristinely objective" (Glüer 2017, 88). An account of meaning determination is not fully and pristinely objective when the relation of metaphysical determination—which, according to Glüer, is the so-called principle of charity—"contains a 'subjective' element" (Glüer 2018, 233). What exactly does she mean by this, and why does she think that Davidson's construal contains such an element? Before addressing these questions, I shall summarize Glüer's take on Davidsonian meaning determination, which in turn requires explaining Glüer's conception of what giving an account of meaning determination requires.

Glüer distinguishes between the determination base, the determination target, and the principle of determination, which are, on her view, the three elements of an account of meaning

determination. The base consists in facts that determine meaning. The target consists in the facts thereby determined, namely the meaning facts themselves. The principle of determination supplies a systematic mapping of meaning facts to meaning-determining facts.¹⁴⁹ The latter is a requirement for any account of meaning determination, because “we need to know by what principle the items in the determination target are determined by those in the determination base” (Glüer 2017, 75). In the absence of such a principle, there are indefinitely many ways of mapping meaning facts to meaning determining facts. According to Glüer, the question of the principle of determination is “surprisingly often overlooked in discussions of meaning determination” (Glüer 2018, 252n2). Nevertheless, we cannot answer the question of the facts that determine meaning without articulating such a principle. The need for a principle is, according to her, “one of the main lessons to be drawn from Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations” (Glüer 2018, 252n2).¹⁵⁰ The question, then, is how Davidson might be taken to conceive of the base, target, and determination relation.

To answer it, Glüer focuses exclusively on the radical interpretation papers, which, as I said at the beginning of the chapter, contain Davidson’s reflections on the procedure by which a radical interpreter constructs a theory of meaning for a speaker whose language and attitudes are not known by her.¹⁵¹ On her picture, the Davidsonian determination base consists in facts about sentences held true by the speaker, or, in her own words, facts about “attitudes of holding true towards uninterpreted sentences” (Glüer 2011, 137).¹⁵² Once the interpreter has collected, by observing the speaker, very many such facts, she may construct a theory of meaning. The theory

¹⁴⁹ See also section 1.3 of Chapter 3.

¹⁵⁰ See also Pagin 2002, on which Glüer’s discussion of this tripartite distinction is based.

¹⁵¹ See Glüer 2017, 76.

¹⁵² “Attitudes of holding true thus form the base on which the principle of charity metaphysically determines meanings—and belief contents” (2011, 137).

of meaning is, to repeat, a theory of truth: a theory which specifies the truth conditions of the sentences of the speaker's language. The only way to construct such a theory, for Davidson, is by deploying the principle of charity, which, in Glüer's words, "counsels the radical interpreter to interpret the alien speaker such that his beliefs are true and coherent where plausibly possible" (2011, 9). On Glüer's interpretation, the principle of charity should be seen as the principle of meaning determination.¹⁵³

Before discussing Glüer's complaint about Davidson's account of meaning determination, there is one question that is worth asking, the answer to which is, I believe, an indication that the account of meaning determination that she articulates just cannot be the whole story made available by Davidson's view. Glüer claims, as I have said, that the determination base consists in "facts about which sentences speakers hold true under which observable circumstances" (2011, 135). On her view, the metaphysical base for meaning coincides with the evidential base, which is the consequence of Davidson's commitment to the publicness of meaning. Thus, for her, the facts that determine meaning are the facts that constitute the evidence for the theory of meaning:

The data for the t-theory that the radical interpreter is after therefore have an epistemic-metaphysical double nature. They epistemically support the theory, but at the same time, Davidson tells us, they "entirely determine" the very thing the theory is a theory of. The data available to the radical interpreter thus form the determination base for meaning. Meaning is an evidence-constituted property. (Glüer 2017, 82)

But to conceive in this way of the determination base is to offer an account of the determination of meaning that presupposes that some facts about meaning already obtain. For facts about speakers' holding sentences true, which are the facts that determine meaning, obtain only if

¹⁵³ See also Jackman 2003b, 2005 for accounts of the determination of meaning that are based on the radical interpretation papers.

speakers already have an understanding of those sentences. And yet, Glüer seems to think that the determination base is non-semantic. She writes,

The relation the principle of charity establishes is one of supervenience: On the Davidsonian picture, *linguistic meanings (and belief contents) are determined by non-semantic facts*. But the relation is one of supervenience only; according to Davidson, there is no chance of any reduction of the semantic to the non-semantic, or the intentional to the non-intentional. His is a non-reductive naturalism. (2011, 137, italics added)

So, her claim, in a nutshell, is that, given that the metaphysical base for meaning is identical with its epistemological base, and given that its epistemological base consists in facts about which sentences speakers hold true in which circumstances, the metaphysical base must also consist in facts about which sentences speakers hold true in which circumstances.¹⁵⁴ As I have said, according to Davidson, the relation of holding a sentence true can be detected by the interpreter without any knowledge of the meaning of that sentence. As he puts it in one of the early papers, “it is an attitude an interpreter may plausibly be taken to be able to identify before he can interpret, since he may know that a person intends to express a truth in uttering a sentence without having any idea *what* truth” (1974a, 135). Later on, he writes that “the interpreter can detect one or more nonindividuating attitudes. Examples of the kind of special attitude I have in mind are: holding a sentence true at a time, wanting a sentence to be true, or preferring that one sentence rather than another be true” (1991b, 211). However, a speaker is obviously not capable of holding sentences true without already having the capacity to understand sentences.¹⁵⁵ Thus, facts about speakers’ holding sentences true cannot obtain without facts about speakers’ understanding sentences obtaining. If an account of the determination of meaning takes facts about speakers’ holding sentences true for granted, and assigns them the role of determination

¹⁵⁴ See Glüer 2017, 82. As it will become clear, the problem is not, or not necessarily, with the claim that “the data available to the radical interpreter thus form the determination base for meaning,” but with Glüer’s conception of the data.

¹⁵⁵ Perhaps we can imagine a scenario in which someone holds true a sentence that she does not understand. But she has to be able to understand sentences in order to hold anything true.

base elements, the idea that the determination base is non-semantic is obviously ruled out. What is more, the question of what accounts for the aforementioned facts in the first place has yet to be answered.

And yet, it is not totally clear that Glüer would agree that there is a need for such an answer. For instance, she characterizes the attitude of holding a sentence true as “an attitude directed at uninterpreted sentences” (Glüer 2011, 72). But, from the point of view of the speaker, the sentence is obviously not uninterpreted, and so the attitude is obviously not directed as something uninterpreted. In order to hold something true, one must take it to be apt for truth and falsity in the first place. (Trivially, tables and chairs cannot be held true.) One may take something to be so only if one grasps its truth conditions, or, at the very least, if one takes it to be the sort of thing that has truth conditions. But if a sentence has truth conditions (for someone), then it is not uninterpreted (by that person). If it appears as uninterpreted, it will appear so only from the perspective of the interpreter.¹⁵⁶ All of this suggests that, as I already said, facts about speaker’s holding sentences true presuppose meaning and understanding. People must already mean something by their expressions in order for these facts to obtain. It is hard to see then how they might be said to determine meaning and understanding in the sense that Glüer is after.

¹⁵⁶ Here Glüer might appeal to Davidson’s own remarks, such as the following: “The objective was not to avoid intentional states; it was to avoid *individuating* intentional states, *intensional* states, states with (as one says) a propositional object. A preference for the truth of one sentence over another is an extensional relation that relates an agent and two sentences (and a time). Because it can be detected without knowing what the sentences mean, a theory of interpretation based on it can hope to make the crucial step from the nonpropositional to the propositional” (Davidson 1990a, 329). I have my doubts about whether the relation is genuinely extensional. Take the following example: Sam holds true “It is meal time” at 5 pm every day. In order for it to be extensional, we must be able to replace the expression that designates the abstract object held true, i.e., the sentence, with a co-referring expression without risking to change the truth value of our report. Is it necessarily true that Sam holds true Octavia’s favourite shape at 5 pm every day (assuming that “It is meal time” is Octavia’s favourite shape)? To my mind, this is, at least, not obvious. (Here, I am taking it for granted that “sentences are abstract objects, shapes...” (Davidson 1990a, 309).)

Let us now examine Glüer's complaint about this account of meaning determination—such as it is. Glüer considers the case, first discussed by Pagin, in which a radical interpreter named Casey cannot detect any pattern with respect to the uses of a particular expression 'Φ' made by an alien speaker whom she refers to as Alien. In Pagin's imagined scenario, Casey deals with this conundrum by defining the set of correct uses for that expression as the set of uses that have actually been made by Alien. More specifically, Casey defines the predicate 'Φ' by cases: "true of objects that Alien applies Φ to, false of objects that Alien withholds Φ from, and for all objects b unconsidered by Alien, F is true of b just in case b is a rocket" (Pagin 2013, 236). Casey builds much of the theory of meaning—if we may call it that—by deploying this strategy. This theory will be one that, Pagin and Glüer think, meets the constraints of the principle of charity, for it maximizes the truths that Alien possesses.¹⁵⁷ However, according to Glüer, the theory fails to secure objectivity, for "an object (that Alien has considered) satisfies Φ precisely in case Alien has applied Φ to it" (2017, 87). Thus, Glüer argues that the principle of charity fails to rule out scenarios in which the radical interpreter assigns meaning to an expression in a way that renders its uses correct if they have been made by the speaker. It thus fails to rule out scenarios in which whatever the speaker takes to be correct is correct. But, Glüer writes, "objectivity couldn't be much further away" (Glüer 2017, 87) from such a principle of meaning determination.

¹⁵⁷ Inasmuch as the principle of charity is a principle that demands that we make interpretative decisions "partly on normative grounds by deciding what, from his point of view, maximizes intelligibility" (Davidson 1991b, 215), there is reason to doubt that Casey meets its constraints in this case. For it is not obvious that we improve intelligibility if we depict someone in a way that makes it impossible for them to have been wrong in any of their past judgments about certain matters. An agent is the sort of creature who lives with the recognition that she must have been wrong at least on some occasions. Glüer seems to agree that this theory does not allow us to understand Alien (2017, 86), but she does not seem to have doubts about whether the theory is the product of a proper application of the principle of charity. Doubts are in order here.

In order to rule out such scenarios, Glüer thinks that we must ensure that an interpreter is in principle able to overcome any difficulty of the sort that Casey encounters. Consequently, an interpreter must be able to detect patterns in the applications of the speaker's expressions. This is tantamount to saying that she must be sensitive to, or that she must have the natural capacity to discern, the features of the world to which the speaker is reacting. But this entails that the only properties "eligible to be meant", as Glüer puts it, are properties that the radical interpreter could, in principle, detect—in other words, that the external features that are relevant to meaning must be features that are within the cognitive reach of the radical interpreter. Facts about the natural sensitivity of the interpreter thus become crucial to meaning determination. As she sees it, however, this is a problem, for it suggests that the radical interpreter is not "merely a dramatic device", but rather "an essential element of the meaning determining relation" (2018, 227), which in turn suggests that the account of meaning determination that is available to us in light of Davidson's reflections on radical interpretation cannot provide an answer to Wittgenstein's paradox about rule-following.¹⁵⁸ This is because it does not meet what Glüer takes to be Wittgenstein's objectivity requirement, according to which,

Meaningful expressions have conditions of correct application. And, in many cases at least, the correctness of an application has to be an objective matter if there is to be any correctness at all. The correctness of the use of our expressions must have a certain sort of independence from us—it must, for instance, be independent of our actual applications, judgments, and other relevant kinds of reactions. (Glüer 2017, 85)

That Glüer thinks that only answers that accommodate this conception of objectivity are "congenial to Wittgenstein" (2017, 83) is surprising. As many commentators have argued, the lesson of his *Philosophical Investigations* is precisely that the aspiration for an account that preserves this sort of independence from us is as misguided as it is alluring.¹⁵⁹ I tried to show in

¹⁵⁸ Glüer has changed her mind about whether the radical interpreter is merely a dramatic device. She initially thought that it is (2011, 136-8), and later came to deny it (Glüer 2018).

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., Pears 1988 and Heal 1989.

the third chapter why this way of conceiving of standards of correctness is hopeless. At any rate, whether it is congenial or not to Wittgenstein, it is certainly uncongenial to Davidson. To repeat an earlier point, Davidson does not make a secret, so to speak, of the fact that shared capacities for discrimination are necessary for meaning to arise. In the absence of discriminatory capacities that are largely similar, which allow individuals to react in similar way to similar things, triangulation, which is central to meaning constitution, cannot so much as get off the ground. Indeed, it is only if one fails closely to consider the triangulation papers, and to grant them a role in the project of making the best sense of Davidson's views, that one might think that there is a genuine question as to whether detectable similarity by the interpreter is necessary for the Davidsonian account of meaning.

Still, Glüer is preoccupied with an important question, which has to do with the sense in which the standards of correctness yielded by triangular transactions are objective. As we have seen at the beginning of this section, one consequence of the triangulation argument is that the investigation-independence of the patterns of correctness of our expressions, to borrow McDowell's term, turns out to be essentially dependent on our investigative pursuits in triangular scenarios. This thought might seem baffling, even incoherent. But it is not: whether or not an application is correct remains an investigation-independent matter. The key here is to recognize that the investigation-independence of correct applications does not require that the pattern of correctness extends "of itself" (McDowell 1984, 256) to new cases. Indeed, as McDowell suggests, the idea that the pattern extends of itself, without any contribution from us, is to be rejected. But accepting that we contribute to the constitution of the pattern, and thus to the way in which it extends, need not commit us to the idea that correctness is to be equated with the

outcome of our investigations. It is the fact of our being investigating creatures that matters for the constitution of correctness; not the actual outcomes of our investigations.

To conclude, thoughts and meanings—the standards of correctness that govern our thinking and our speaking—are constituted in triangular transactions, in which minds meet. Thus, the elucidation of content requires the elucidation of mutual understanding: one cannot be a thinker and a speaker unless one has been understood and one has understood another being.

In Davidson's own words,

We would not have a language, or the thoughts that depend on language (which comprise all beliefs, desires, hopes, expectations, intentions, and other attitudes that have propositional content), if there were not others who understood us and whom we understood; as such mutual understanding requires a world shared both causally and conceptually. (1993c, 176)

The Davidsonian conception of meaning is thus austere non-reductionist, by which I mean that the notion of meaning is not elucidated from outside meaning; it is not explained in terms that do not presuppose meaning. However, Davidsonian non-reductionism does not commit us to the view that meaning is a supernatural phenomenon. Neither does it commit us to the view that meaning facts are facts about which we must stay silent, for it is not a form of quietism about meaning. In the next section, I shall briefly explain why there is a clear sense in which what we mean (and what we think) are, as Glüer insists, metaphysically dependent on non-intentional, observable goings-on. Then, in the final chapter, I shall try to give shape to the non-reductionist conception of states of meaning and understanding that emerges, and of the way in which this conception can be used to answer the challenge of the sceptic.

3. STATES OF MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING

In the previous section, we have seen that facts about sentences held true by speakers presuppose that speakers understand those sentences. But this is not the only reason for which, if we think

that the metaphysical base coincides with the epistemological base, such facts cannot be the determinants of meaning. Another reason is the following. Even though Davidson seems at times to suggest otherwise, the idea that an interpreter is in a position to detect such facts without understanding the speaker at all is, at the very least, questionable. As Child puts it,

...it is wholly implausible that we could ever have access to a whole class of data about someone's holding sentences true in advance of any more detailed knowledge about his meanings and attitudes; and it is implausible that we could ever, even in theory, ascribe a whole set of more detailed intentional states on the basis of "more primitive data" of that sort. Rather, what seems plausible is that "[l]ight dawns gradually over the whole"—that, even in the case of radical interpretation, an interpreter works her way gradually to the ascription of a whole pattern of beliefs, desires, and meanings, a pattern in which no one part is any more basic than another. (Child 1994, 11-12)

Child's point becomes even more compelling if we consider triangulation, which is something that the radical interpreter must engage in with the speaker if she is to be able to understand her. One cannot understand another unless, among other things, one identifies the features of the environment that she is talking about. Given the necessity of triangulation, it is clear that the evidence will include, for starters, not only the speaker's utterances—the sentences held true in particular circumstances—but also anything that she may observe in the speaker's behaviour, as well as, crucially, anything that she may observe in their common world.¹⁶⁰

It might be objected, on behalf of Glüer, that the attitudes of holding true are always paired by the interpreter with the circumstances in which they are true; it is, after all, the circumstances which supply the truth conditions for the sentences uttered. But this widening of scope in the determination base is still far from sufficient, for, among other things, many

¹⁶⁰ This shows how misguided some of the criticisms offered against Davidson's view in contemporary discussions really are. Michael Rescorla, for instance, writes that "radical interpretation takes as data only the distal circumstances under which the speaker prefers one sentence true over another. No cognitive scientist would accept any such draconian evidentiary restriction. Depending on the explanatory context, cognitive scientists cite numerous additional evidentiary sources: intentional descriptions of speech acts; syntactic or semantic features of other human languages; discoveries about the mental activity of nonhuman species; neural facts; and so on. What interest attaches to a philosophical model that deliberately ignores so many potentially valuable sources of evidence?" (Rescorla 2013, 481). If anything, the practice of cognitive scientists, as outlined by Rescorla, confirms the intricate nature of interpretation that Davidson seeks to reveal.

circumstances that are not paired with the aforementioned attitudes are going to matter for the radical interpreter when she constructs her theory. This is because, as we have seen, “we must find others largely consistent and right in what they believe as a condition of making them intelligible, that is, as having thoughts at all” (1992b, 245). And this might require us, for instance, to attribute beliefs to them even when we do not detect any attitudes of holding true that correspond to them. Indeed, the interpreter must work out her ascriptions of meanings, beliefs, and desires gradually, and she must do it by taking the speaker to have a perspective that by and large aligns with her own. If we do grant the assumption that, as Glüer puts it, the evidential base is identical with the metaphysical base, it is obvious that the picture of meaning determination that emerges is not as straightforward as she suggests. We might still be able to maintain, with Davidson, that the semantic supervenes on the “observable and non-intentional” (Davidson 1993a, 84), but we might not be able to offer a detailed and complete specification of the non-semantic and non-intentional facts that might be relevant for the determination of what a speaker means by her expressions. That is, we might not be able to say more than that the observable and non-intentional include facts about her behaviour and her history of triangular interactions with others and the world.

One might worry that, in the absence of such a specification, we have no reason to think that such a relation of supervenience obtains. But what is the alternative? Presumably, it would be to take meaning facts, facts about what we mean by our expressions, to be “sovereign” (see, e.g., Kearns and Magidor 2012), that is, not to depend on anything else for their existence.¹⁶¹ But it seems to me that we can reject this view even in the absence of a detailed specification of

¹⁶¹ In response to Fodor’s notorious remark that “when the physicists will complete the catalogue they’ve been compiling of the ultimate and irreducible properties of things (...) the likes of *spin*, *charm*, and *charge* will perhaps appear on their list. But *aboutness* surely won’t; intentionality simply does not go that deep” (Fodor 1987, 97), Stephen Kearns and Ofra Magidor argue that “semantic properties really do go that deep” (2012, 323).

the supervenience base. For such a view leads us back to a conception of the mind as utterly divorced from the world. Indeed, the claim that the semantic domain is sovereign is no less problematic—in fact, it is arguably even more problematic, for it is more deeply alienating—than subjectivism, which is, to repeat, the idea that what is present to the mind does not depend on external factors. Leaving aside the suggestion that this conception is fraught with epistemological and metaphysical difficulties, it is clear that the triangulation argument is incompatible with the semantic domain being sovereign. Indeed, such sovereignty would pose a problem for any conception according to which thoughts and meaningful utterances are essentially interpretable. If the semantic domain is utterly disconnected from facts about ourselves, indeed from any facts in the universe, we can no longer say that it is essentially discoverable, just as we can no longer say that our causal relations to outside items are constitutive of what we mean. The claim that the semantic is sovereign in this way makes it unintelligible how there can be such a thing as meaning.

Thus, an individual's states of meaning and understanding must supervene on facts that can be observed by another. But how are we to conceive of such states? Right before discussing the objections raised by Burge and Glüer, I said that the Davidsonian variety of non-reductionism is different from the version that Kripke briefly considered in his investigation of plausible candidates. I shall now try to explain why. To begin with, as we saw in the first chapter, according to Kripke, a meaning state is characterized as “a finite object, contained in our finite minds” (1982, 51). Thus, for a speaker to mean something by an expression at a particular time is, roughly, for there to be a particular in her mind. This commits Kripke to a view according to which meaning states are items internal to speakers, located in space and time.¹⁶²

¹⁶² It might be objected that I am attributing to Kripke a deeply implausible view, given that it is incompatible with externalist conceptions, according to which, roughly, what someone means must be explained by attending to her

And, as with any such items, because they are finite, they could always be interpreted in more than one way, precisely because of their finite nature. This construal of meaning is indispensable to Kripke's seeming success in showing that no fact can be invoked to answer his sceptic, and, more specifically, that no primitive meaning facts could be accepted by such a sceptic.

Davidson, on the other hand, has an altogether different conception of mental states and attitudes. As he sees it, "in thinking and talking about the beliefs of people we needn't suppose there are such entities as beliefs" (Davidson 1989, 60). Later, he says that "having a belief is not like having a favourite cat, it is being in a state; and being in a state does not require that there be an entity called a state that one is in" (Davidson 1997a, 74). Also, "the only *object* required for the existence of a belief is a believer" (Davidson 1997a, 74).¹⁶³ And, more generally, "having an attitude is just being in a certain state; it is a modification of a person" (Davidson 1994b, 232).

What might he mean by these claims?

Davidson seems to be denying that which Kripke seems to be explicitly endorsing. For Davidson, "having a belief is just exemplifying a property" (Davidson 1997a, 75). When the property of having a particular belief is exemplified by someone, the exemplification is not a particular object or event; it is not a spatio-temporally located going-on. Indeed, this might be why Davidson chooses to express the point in terms of exemplification rather than of

relations to the outside world. But externalists need not deny that mental attitudes are particulars in the mind or head; what they maintain is that the individuation of their semantic properties must appeal to external items. See Burge 2011, 64 for an elaboration of this point.

¹⁶³ Famously, Davidson draws an analogy between ascribing propositional attitudes to persons and ascribing measures to objects (see, e.g., Davidson 1991b, 214), but I believe that the analogy is detrimental to his view, so I shall ignore it. One reason for which I find the analogy misleading is that it obliterates an essential aspect of propositional attitudes, which is their first-personal dimension. As Gurpreet Rattan notes, "Davidson's commitment to The Measure Theory [i.e. the theory according to which "the understanding of some propositional attitude reports should be modeled on the understanding of measurement reports" (Rattan 2017, 435)] is in tension with his views about the normativity of the mental" (Rattan 2017, 438n9). I could not agree more. But I also think that the analogy is not essential to Davidson's view, or at least that the charitable interpretation of Davidson's views should dispense with the measure theory.

instantiation: the latter seems to require an instance, thus a particular object or event, while the former does not. Thus, we may be better off thinking of attitude properties as akin to qualities, rather than to sortals.¹⁶⁴ Sortals are properties that are instantiated by objects, while qualities are exemplified by them. The property of being a marble is a sortal, while the property of being round is a quality.¹⁶⁵ Attitude properties are exemplified by persons, but this does not entail that they are instantiated in their minds or elsewhere. We should view the triangulation argument as an inquiry into the conditions that make exemplifying such properties possible.

What might we say, in light of the Davidsonian conception of meaning, in response to the sceptic's query, which is articulated in the first chapter? To go back to the initial example, the sceptic maintains that by 'round' I always meant *round unless red*, and thus that I should not apply the expression to the red marble in front of me; moreover, there is nothing about my mind or behaviour that reveals that I did not mean *round unless red* by it. In order to answer her challenge, a conception of meaning must meet the two conditions that the sceptic puts forward: the external condition to the effect that uses of expressions be governed by standards of correctness, and the internal condition to the effect that uses of expressions be able to receive reason explanations. In the first section of the next chapter, I shall sketch the way in which the conditions can be fulfilled with the Davidsonian resources that I have articulated in the present chapter. Then, finally, I shall try to address the claim, recently made by Boghossian and Wright, to the effect that a non-reductionist view is bound to conceive of rule-following as "blind".

¹⁶⁴ Hunter defends this suggestion (Hunter 2018), though he does not mention that Davidson seems to have a similar view. As far as I know, Davidson does not explicitly liken attitude properties to qualities, rather than to sortals, though some of his remarks seem to lead in this direction.

¹⁶⁵ One straightforward test for determining whether the property of being X is a sortal or quality is that of asking the question of how many instances of it there are and assessing its intelligibility.

VI. A DAVIDSONIAN ANSWER TO THE SCEPTIC

1. SEMANTIC NON-REDUCTIONISM

It should be obvious by now that our response to the sceptic will consist in a non-reductionist view of meaning, according to which states of meaning and understanding are, in a sense, primitive, though not in the sense in which the sceptic herself took them to be primitive when she considered the non-reductionist answer, by assimilating them to particulars inside the mind that somehow, mysteriously, indeed quasi-magically, are supposed to embody all the possible correct uses of the expressions that the speaker understands.¹⁶⁶ Rather, they are primitive inasmuch as what it is to understand an expression (and to mean something by it)—more broadly, what it is to exemplify semantic properties—cannot be specified in terms that do not presuppose meaning. This, in turn, precludes an illuminating answer to the question of the transition from the stage in which they are not present in an agent to a stage in which they are. However, this limit does not prevent us from discovering constitutive links between states of meaning and understanding and other intentional goings-on, between the concepts of meaning and understanding and other concepts. What it is to understand an expression can be illuminated by appealing to the triangular transactions that are necessary for such states to so much as *be*.¹⁶⁷

It is in such triangular transactions that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, speakers form beliefs and other attitudes about the world, in part by communicating about that world. This involves settling on the causes of their responses, and thereby contributing to the fixing of standards of correctness that govern those responses. Thus, to go back to the sceptic's query, the

¹⁶⁶ See the sixth section of the first chapter, as well as the last section of the fifth chapter, for more discussion of Kripke's notion of a primitive state.

¹⁶⁷ It is worth stressing that the notion of triangular transaction, as I have been conceiving of it, is a thoroughly semantic notion.

fact that I mean *round* by ‘round’ is grounded in my understanding of ‘round’ to mean round, which consists, in part, in my taking ‘round’ to apply correctly to round things. I mean what I do by ‘round’ in virtue of the triangular transactions in which I have used it.¹⁶⁸

But how does this ensure that the second condition of adequacy put forward by the sceptic is met? According to it, our conception of meaning must have the resources for making it possible to offer reason explanations of uses of expressions. Such uses must be able to be depicted as worth doing from the perspective of the agent. In response, I shall very briefly articulate the conception of linguistic agency that the Davidsonian view affords. For Davidson, “a man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional” (1971, 46). Thus, an individual is the agent of an utterance if the utterance can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional. According to Davidson, “a method of

¹⁶⁸ Thus, as I said before, it is not the case that, for every single expression in one’s repertoire, a triangular scenario must have endowed it with meaning. Many expressions need not come to be endowed with meaning in this manner, especially since expressions are used to talk about much more than one’s immediate surroundings. But elucidating meaning requires that we focus, at least initially, on such talk. This is why Davidson thought that Kripke’s puzzle has a “flaw”, namely that his examples are mathematical, “and so lack the shared stimulus to provide the possibility of a shared content” (2011d, 144).

What about the many expressions for which a shared stimulus is unavailable? There are plenty of expressions for which triangulation is possible, but a history of triangulation by the individual is usually absent. Here, we may appeal to Davidson’s thought, mentioned in the previous chapter, to the effect that meanings and contents are constituted holistically. The meaning of the aforementioned expressions will depend on the meanings and contents of the expressions whose meanings are fixed through triangulation. However, what might Davidson say about the sceptic’s mathematical example?

To begin with, let us note that it might be thought that triangulation is still required in order for one to be competent with expressions that pertain to certain domains, even though one need not triangulate on the meaning of every single expression in that domain. As Myers shows (Myers and Verheggen 2016, Chapters 5-8), properly explaining the nature of normative content, and thus of normative discourse, requires appealing to the triangulation argument: agents must triangulate on normative features of the world. So, it might be thought that a similar account could be proposed as an elucidation of the nature of mathematical content, and thus of mathematical discourse. But normative facts, which are real features of causally-efficacious situations, do not seem to have an analogue in the mathematical case. One cannot triangulate on numbers, for instance, for the possibility of causal transactions is essential to triangulation, and numbers are not the sort of things that causally impinge upon us.

Davidson himself never addressed the question of the meaningfulness of statements of arithmetic. But he characterized himself as follows: “I have no general objection to abstracta, as long as they are shown to be useful; as I always say, they take up no space” (1999c, 83). This suggests that he would be willing to countenance the existence of numbers *qua* abstracta. However, this does not answer the question of the sort of foundational account of meaning that he thinks is the right one with respect to such expressions. I leave this question for future investigation.

interpretation can lead to redescribing the utterance of certain sounds as an act of saying that snow is white” (1975, 161). However—and this is where the limits of his reflections on radical interpretation, and the need for the triangulation argument, are again revealed—while such a description reveals the action as intentional, the aspect under which it is intentional does not involve the expressions themselves. Davidson seems to be aware of this. This is why he acknowledges, in the passage I quoted in the previous chapter, that a theory of truth for a speaker cannot straightforwardly explain a speaker’s utterances. Here is the passage in full:

...it is not at all clear how a theory of interpretation can explain a speaker’s uttering the words ‘Snow is white’. But this is, after all, to be expected, for uttering words is an action, and so must draw for its teleological explanation on beliefs and desires. Interpretation is not irrelevant to the teleological explanation of speech, since to explain why someone said something we need to know, among other things, his own interpretation of what he said, that is, what he believes his words mean in the circumstances under which he speaks. Naturally this will involve some of his beliefs about how others will interpret his words. (1975, 161)

Here, Davidson acknowledges that uttering words—and not just saying things—is an action, and, moreover, that explaining actions of this sort is not a simple task, for it cannot be done simply by appealing to the theory of meaning for the speaker’s language. This theory allows us to understand what the speaker is saying, but not, or at least not immediately, to explain why she used the words she did in saying it. In order to explain the use of expressions in particular circumstances, we need to consider those circumstances—in particular, the speaker’s attitudes toward her words, as well as her aim in using those words.

The aim of an agent who utters words is, typically, that of communicating something to someone else—to an audience. Let us again use our example. Imagine that I want to say that the marble is round. My utterance of ‘The marble is round’ can be explained by this desire together with my belief that uttering ‘The marble is round’ counts as saying that the marble is round.¹⁶⁹ The explanation is a rationalization—it provides a reason for my action, that is, a belief and a

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Glüer and Pagin 1999, 218.

desire that reveal the action as worth doing from my perspective.¹⁷⁰ The question is, what grounds or justifies my belief that uttering ‘The marble is round’ counts as saying that the marble is round? Again, the radical interpretation papers do not, as far as I can tell, provide us with a straightforward answer to this question.¹⁷¹

First, for Davidson, beliefs of this sort will always be sensitive to “how others will interpret his words” (1975, 161). They are, to some extent, specific to communicative contexts. For instance, if I am speaking to someone who calls round things ‘pound’, I might use the sentence ‘The marble is pound’ to say that the marble is round, even though I normally mean pound by ‘pound’. This is because my recognition that her words are governed by standards of correctness different than mine might make a difference to my choice of words. But being able to recognize this discrepancy requires, at the very least, that I take my words to be governed by standards of correctness. It requires that I have an understanding of these words which consists, in part, in my recognizing these standards. The triangulation argument sheds light on what makes it possible to have such states of understanding. They are, as I mentioned before, the product of my settling on the relevant causes of my responses, which is tantamount to fixing standards of correctness governing those responses. I thus cannot, in the basic cases at least, be estranged from these standards.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ See again Davidson 1963.

¹⁷¹ Davidson says, “the theory describes the conditions under which an utterance of a speaker is true, and so *says* nothing directly about what the speaker knows. The theory does, however, *imply* something about the propositional content of certain intentions of the speaker, namely the intentions that his utterances be interpreted in a certain way” (1990c, 312). This is because, for Davidson, what the speaker means by her words is in part determined by how she intends to be understood by her audience.

¹⁷² Glüer and Pagin discuss the kind of practical inference involved in speaking, and claim that the belief involved in such an inference (such as the belief that uttering ‘The marble is round’ counts as saying that the marble is round) “functions just as an ordinary belief” (1999, 218). More generally, in order for speakers to be capable of a practical inference of the required sort, “all that is required is that there are *facts* about meaning, like the fact that *s* means that *p*, which the speaker can know or believe to obtain. Since the speaker does believe that *s* means that *p*, he believes that he can say that *p* by means of uttering *s*” (1999, 219). How meaning facts are established is completely irrelevant, they add. But if triangular transactions are essential to meaningful use of expressions, meaning facts cannot be established without beliefs about meaning being established.

Thus, the conception of linguistic agency that emerges allows us to view uses of expressions as actions typically aimed at “getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to” (Davidson 1994a, 120). For it allows us to conceive of speakers as having an awareness of the standards of correctness that govern their expressions, and as applying their expressions for reasons that can ultimately be traced to those very standards. However, at this stage, the sceptic might change her approach to the challenge. She might be willing to grant me the non-reductionist position that I have been trying to give substance to—indeed, she might have to grant it, given that she represented herself as willing to entertain non-reductionism as a possible solution to her challenge. But, then, she would follow in the footsteps of Boghossian and Wright, who, in opposition with their earlier selves, recently argued that non-reductionist conceptions of intentional content are incapable of making sense of the possibility of rule-following. Thus, in Boghossian’s words, even if we “help ourselves to an anti-reductionist view of mental content” (Boghossian 2012, 39), we are still facing a problem that “might be called, following Kant, an antinomy of pure reason: we both must—and cannot—make sense of someone’s following a rule” (Boghossian 2012, 28).¹⁷³ To this I turn next.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ The relevant papers are Boghossian 2008, 2012 and Wright 2007, 2012.

¹⁷⁴ Recently, it has been suggested that Kripke’s sceptic “can run his sceptical problem even if the aspect problem is somehow solved. Suppose that the speaker is caused by a certain aspect of an object, say, the whole table in view, to utter ‘table’. Such a fact cannot prevent K[ripke’s]W[itzenstein]’s sceptic from claiming that the speaker by being so caused to utter ‘table’ actually means tabair (...). We still need to say what fact about the speaker can rule out such rival sceptical hypotheses” (Hosseini 2018, 115-6). But this objection begs the question against Davidson’s line of reasoning. The triangulation argument is supposed to show precisely that we cannot claim that an aspect of an object has caused a response unless the creature has taken the object to be some way rather than another, that is, unless the creature has adopted a semantic attitude with a determinate content (the presence of which will, of course, rule out rival sceptical hypotheses). Claiming that Kripke’s sceptic can mount his problem even after the relevant aspect is fixed ignores what Davidson takes fixing the relevant aspect to require.

2. “BLIND” RULE-FOLLOWING

In this section I shall try to address the suggestion that the semantic sceptic might recast her challenge in the form of the antinomy that Boghossian gestures towards. She might thus insist that, even from within the non-reductionist view that we have adopted, we will be unable to render the idea of rule-following intelligible. There are two different lines of argument, articulated by Boghossian and Wright respectively, to which she might appeal. I shall outline the two arguments, and then I shall examine Miller’s response to them, which is based on his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s reflections on the idea of being trained into a practice. I shall try to offer some considerations in favour of the idea that a superior response might be available to the proponent of Davidsonian non-reductionism. The gist of the Davidsonian response is that “blind” rule-following is unintelligible.

2.1. Boghossian’s argument

Boghossian begins by articulating a conception of what it is to follow a rule, which consists in the following four conditions:

(Acceptance) If S is following rule R (‘If C, do A’), then S has somehow accepted R.

(Correctness) If S is following rule R, then S acts correctly relative to his acceptance if it is the case that C and he does A.

(Explanation) If S is following rule R by doing A, then S’s acceptance of R explains S’s doing A.

(Rationalization) If S is following rule R by doing A, then S’s acceptance of R rationalizes S’s doing A.

(Boghossian 2012, 32)

He then argues that rule-following, thus understood, is unintelligible within a non-reductionist framework. His discussion is focused on the case in which a subject is following the rule “Answer any email (that calls for an answer) immediately upon receipt” (2012, 40). He argues that, given the resources of a non-reductionist conception, it is impossible for the subject to

follow this rule.¹⁷⁵ I shall explain Boghossian’s argument in detail—indeed, in more detail than he himself provides. By way of warning, the explanation will involve some awkward technicalities.¹⁷⁶

To begin with, Boghossian construes the subject’s acceptance of the rule as consisting in her forming an intention to conform to the instruction. Let us consider the case in which I am trying to follow the email rule. First, I shall adopt an intention with the content For all x, if x is an email and I have just received x, I shall answer it immediately (2012, 40). In order to act on this intention, I will have to think, “even if very fleetingly and not very consciously” (2012, 40), that the antecedent obtains. For instance, I will have to form a belief to the effect that the item in front of me is an email that I just received—thus, a belief with the content e is an email that I just received. I will then be in a position to conclude—to *infer*—that I should answer it immediately. For Boghossian, however, “inference (...) is an example of rule-following *par excellence*” (Boghossian 2012, 40). Thus, consistently with the conception of rule-following that Boghossian outlines, which is quoted above, it seems that I must, additionally, be following a version of the *modus ponens* rule, such as a rule of the form “From ‘If C, do A’ and C, conclude ‘do A’!” (2012, 41). And, in order to follow *this* rule, I must have an intention with a content like From ‘If C, do A’ and C, conclude ‘do A’!. In order to act on this intention in the context in which I am attempting to follow the email rule, I must have the belief that if the email in front of me is a recently received email, I shall answer it and the email in front of me is a recently received email.¹⁷⁷ Given my intention to follow the rule “From ‘If C, do A’ and C, conclude ‘do

¹⁷⁵ Boghossian thinks that the same can be said with respect to reductionism. Hence, he takes the problem to have the status of an antinomy. I shall ignore this strand in my discussion of his view.

¹⁷⁶ See Miller 2015, 399-403, for a more detailed (and more technically precise) account of Boghossian’s argument.

¹⁷⁷ Miller notes that, strictly speaking, here we should have two states instead of one. I am following Miller in avoiding this complication (2015, 402).

A'!', I am seemingly entitled to infer that I should answer the email that I just received. But, given that inference is a matter of rule-following, I am not entitled to infer this unless I follow yet another inference rule—unless I have an intention with the content From (From 'If C, do A' and C, conclude 'do A'!) and ('If C, do A' and C), conclude 'do A'!. And, to act on this intention in the context in which I am trying to follow the email rule, I will need to form the relevant belief to the effect that the antecedent obtains. I am obviously caught in a regress here, a regress that seems to show that following the email rule is impossible. But this conclusion generalizes, Boghossian thinks:

...[T]he email case is hardly special. Since any rule has general content, if our acceptance of a rule is pictured as involving its representation by a mental state of ours, an inference will always be required to determine what action the rule calls for in any particular circumstance. On the Intention View,¹⁷⁸ then, applying a rule will always involve inference. (Boghossian 2012, 40)

Thus, Boghossian concludes:

In its most fundamental incarnation, rule-following is something that must be done blindly, without the benefit of some intentional encoding of the rule's requirements. (...) As a result, it is hard to explain how rule-following is so much as possible, and this difficulty arises even without our having to assume (...) that intentional states need to be given a naturalistic reduction. (Boghossian 2012, 47)

2.2. Wright's argument

Wright's argument is slightly different from Boghossian's. He addresses specifically the application of linguistic expressions in basic cases (2007, 490). His starting point is Wittgenstein's reflections on the alleged "blindness" of rule-following (Wittgenstein 1953, §219), reflections which conclude with his famous remark that "When I follow the rule, I do not choose. I follow the rule *blindly*." Wright notes, correctly to my mind, that Wittgenstein's point cannot be a point about phenomenology. (If the point were about phenomenology, it would be

¹⁷⁸ Boghossian's Intention View is the nonreductionist view, defended by Wright, according to which "we can follow rules by forming intentions to uphold certain patterns in our thought or behavior and by acting on those intentions" (2012, 27). Boghossian seems to think that this conclusion applies to any nonreductionist view, however.

utterly uninteresting.) He suggests that the remark can properly be understood only if we appreciate that rule-following always involves what Wright calls “the *modus ponens* model,” according to which the rule is stated as a general conditional, and it is followed by a minor premise to the effect that the antecedent of the conditional obtains in a particular case. Thus, for a case to be an instance of rule-following, it must involve two components: on the one hand, the rule itself, and on the other hand, the recognition (or seeming recognition) that the conditions specified in the antecedent, which trigger the rule, obtain. For Wright, “the *modus ponens* model supplies the only means whereby facts about the requirements of rules can enter into a subject’s reasons for an act” (1997, 499). Rule-following is unintelligible if the *modus ponens* model fails to apply. So far, Wright is in full agreement with Boghossian.

Wright notes that, in typical cases, the (seeming) recognition that the conditions that trigger the rule obtain can only be attained by deploying that very rule. He writes,

...at least in basic cases, the contribution of the grasp of the rule to the responses it informs is *inextricable* from the contribution of one’s grasp of the prevailing circumstances. The clean separation effected by the *modus ponens* model between what belongs to the rule and what belongs to the situation to which it is to be applied is possible only in the (relatively complex) cases where the conditions which trigger the application of the rule—those described in the antecedent of the relevant conditional—can be recognised and characterised in innocence of a mastery of the rule. That cannot be the situation in general. (2007, 494)

It certainly cannot be the situation, Wright thinks, when it comes to the application of rules for basic expressions, given that the rules for basic expressions cannot but be homophonic. This is to say that their specification—more specifically, the conditions that must obtain in order for the rule to be triggered—will necessarily make use of those very expressions. As an example, consider again the case of ‘round’: the standard of correctness governing the use of this expression states that the expression applies correctly to round items.¹⁷⁹ So, in order to settle on whether one should apply ‘round’ to an item, one must be able to assess whether that item is

¹⁷⁹ To express the standard in conditional form, we would say that if an object is round, ‘round’ applies correctly to it.

round. This suggests, Wright thinks, that, in order to be able to apply the rule, one must already possess the concept of round. This in turn is taken to show that the *modus ponens* model “calls for a conceptual repertoire *anterior* to an understanding of any particular rule—the conceptual repertoire needed to grasp the input conditions” (2007, 496).¹⁸⁰ This commits us to “a general picture of thought as an activity of the mind that language merely clothes” (Wright 2007, 496), a picture that is irredeemable, on Wright’s view. Our goal is the articulation of a “conception of language not merely as a *medium for the expression* of thought but as (...) *enabling* thought: as providing its very raw materials” (2007, 496).¹⁸¹

So, on the one hand, it seems as though we should conceive of the basic applications of expressions as cases of rule-following, in order to avoid a picture on which our basic applications of expressions are made for no reason—on which they are groundless. For if we are not able to make sense of rule-following in the basic cases, we will have to say that “in the basic case we do not really *follow*—are not really guided by—anything” (2007, 497). But, on the other hand, if we do conceive of basic applications of expressions as cases of rule-following, Wright thinks that we are committing ourselves to the view that one’s grasp of concepts must be anterior to one’s grasp of linguistic expressions. This view is problematic, in part because whatever problems we find with the idea of applying an expression will, as both the semantic sceptic’s challenge and the aspect problem show, re-emerge in relation to the idea of deploying a concept. We are forced to conclude that the *modus ponens* model “*must* lapse for basic cases” (2007, 496). For basic cases are “cases where rule-following is *uninformed by anterior reason-giving*

¹⁸⁰ Or, as Wright later puts it, “grasp of the concepts they [i.e., the rules or standards in question] express must be viewed as cognitively *anterior* to mastery of the relevant expressions” (Wright 2012, 382).

¹⁸¹ Wright is convinced by the Wittgensteinian critique of the Augustinian conception of language, which he takes to be a central theme of the *Philosophical Investigations*. He describes the *Investigations* as a “journey of recoil” (Wright 2012, 382) from the Augustinian conception.

judgment” (2007, 496). In such cases, one follows rules without reasons—one follows them “blindly”.

2.3. Miller’s response

In a recent paper, Miller discusses, and offers a response to, each of the two arguments outlined in the previous two sections. As we shall see, I agree with Miller that there is some confusion in these arguments, though my arguably tentative diagnosis is different from his. I shall start by outlining his response, at the core of which is the claim that neither Boghossian nor Wright properly appreciate “Wittgenstein’s famous declaration that dispelling the air of paradox surrounding rule-following requires rejecting the idea that following a rule has to consist in interpretation” (Miller 2015, 405). The lesson of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, according to Miller, is that rules must be able to be followed immediately, that is, without the mediation of some further rule.¹⁸² The transition between the acceptance of a rule or standard, on the one hand, and the application of it in particular cases, on the other, must be conceived of as not involving an additional or intermediary step or element of any kind. The right way to conceive of it as such, on Miller’s proposal, is to see it as a distinctive kind of causal relation:

Following a rule is a matter of an intentional state with general normative or imperatival content causing (in the right kind of way) an action (or action-guiding state inclining the rule-follower toward an action) that complies with the rule. (Miller 2015, 410)

Moreover, according to Miller, “this causal relation is set up and sustained by facts about custom, practice and training” (Miller 2015, 407). Rules are thus not able to be followed by subjects who have not received training with respect to them, or who have not been initiated into the relevant custom or practice. For, in Wittgenstein’s words, which Miller cites, “following a

¹⁸² See also sections 3.1 and 3.2 of Chapter 1 for more discussion of the idea that rule-following does not require interpretation.

rule is analogous to obeying an order. One is trained to do so, and one reacts to an order in a particular way” (1953, §206). Untrained subjects have no familiarity with the way in which a rule is to be applied. Consequently, they would need to interpret the rule in order to determine what it calls for in a particular case. This leads to the problems that Boghossian and Wright articulate. But how exactly does Miller think that we avoid these problems if we deploy the Wittgensteinian resources that he invokes?

First, let us examine Miller’s response to Boghossian. As we have seen, Boghossian thinks that to follow a rule involves making an inference about what its application requires in each particular case, which in turn involves following another rule—an inference rule. This leads us into a regress that seems to render rule-following impossible. Miller claims that Boghossian’s conception of what it is to follow a rule relies on a problematic assumption—namely, that following a rule requires interpreting it. To relinquish this assumption is to recognize that, as I said before, the transition between the intention to follow a rule and the application of the rule in a particular case is immediate:

When we say that there is a way of following the EMAIL rule that is not an interpretation we are saying that between acceptance and application of the EMAIL rule there is no additional application of a further rule [such as an inference rule]. (Miller 2015, 406)

More generally, Miller thinks that Boghossian’s claim to the effect that “acting under particular circumstances on an intentional state with general (prescriptive or normative) content involves some sort of inference to what the content calls for under the circumstances” (Boghossian 2012, 42) must be, in the light of Wittgenstein’s remarks on rule-following, firmly rejected. What we should say instead is that “acting under particular circumstances on an intentional state with general (prescriptive or normative) content involves some sort of *rule-mediated transition* to what the content calls for under the circumstances” (Miller 2015, 408). The rule-mediated transition may very well be a case—indeed, it is such a case when it comes to the e-mail rule—of

conforming to a rule of inference such as *modus ponens*, but it need not be a case of following that rule, or any other rule for that matter. Following a particular rule does not require following any additional rule, for following a particular rule does not require that one interprets that rule. It is only the need to interpret the rule that makes the appeal to another rule, and thus the regress, unavoidable.

Miller thus seems to agree that rule-following must be conceived of as “blind”, but the “blindness” of rule-following does not suggest, as Boghossian seems to think, that it is non-intentional. For, according to Miller,

Wittgenstein is not arguing that acceptance of a rule is not an intentional state. Rather, ‘blind’ contrasts with ‘based on an interpretation’. To say that following a rule is ultimately blind is to say that at the fundamental level following a rule is not based on an interpretation. (2015, 411)

Training performs the role that interpretation might initially, but misleadingly, be taken to perform. For, as we have seen earlier, we are to construe the relation between the state of accepting the rule, on the one hand, and applications of the rule in particular cases, on the other, as “set up and sustained by facts about custom, practice and training” (Miller 2015, 407). What is it to be trained or initiated into a custom? Miller does not say very much about this. He writes:

Bear in mind that—consonant with our non-reductionism—the notions of training and custom in play here are not required to be characterizable in terms that don’t presuppose the notions of meaning and understanding. An intention to uphold a rule combining with a suitable belief to cause an action ‘in the right kind of way’¹⁸³ is a matter of the relevant agent’s having been suitably trained or initiated into an appropriate custom or practice. (Miller 2015, 414)

Let us now consider Miller’s response to Wright’s argument. Wright’s worry, re-expressed by Miller, is that “a homophonic statement of a rule, such as *If in pain, then assent to ‘I am in pain’!* can be viewed as guiding the practice of a speaker only by accepting ascription to the speaker of a prior competence with the concept *pain*” (Miller 2015, 406). (By the same

¹⁸³ This is supposed to account for deviant causal chain problems. We need not concern ourselves with this here.

token, as we have seen, a standard such as ‘*Round*’ applies correctly to round objects can be viewed as guiding the practice of a speaker only if we also ascribe to the speaker a prior competence with the concept *round*.) Miller outlines a requirement to which Wright subscribes, which Miller calls “NOVICE”. According to NOVICE, “a rule R must be capable in principle of guiding the practice of an agent who has not been trained into the practice or custom of following R” (Miller 2015, 406). Miller thinks that this requirement is not only unmotivated, but also—more importantly—that it is at odds with the idea that rule-following cannot always be a matter of interpretation. His point seems to be, as before, that if we have not been trained with respect to the application of a rule, we will have to interpret it in order to be able to apply it, and thus we shall find ourselves under the purview of the *modus ponens* model, in which we shall have to confront the problem outlined by Wright. Bringing in the notion of training helps us avoid this, Miller suggests. According to Miller, then, the transition between adopting the standard according to which ‘round’ applies correctly to round items and its application to round objects in particular cases is sustained, for subjects who have received the required training, by that very training, rather than by the subjects’ inferring what the rule calls for in each of those cases.

We should note that, crucially, on Miller’s view, the initiation into a custom or practice does not play an explanatory role with respect to the intention to uphold a rule, or with respect to the idea of adopting a standard of correctness. Such initiation does not account for a subject’s having contentful states in the first place. Its role is that of explaining how it is possible to act on a rule that a subject is already upholding, or to follow a standard that a subject has already adopted. But, again, what makes it possible for the subject to adopt the standard? Here, the Wittgensteinian resources that Miller exploits seem to be of little help. All we can do is gesture

toward a non-reductionist conception. But such a gesture risks being an exercise in philosophical quietism. For it implies that nothing at all can be said about the fact that there are such things as states with intentional contents in the world. Indeed, Miller does not seem to say much about this.¹⁸⁴ He does say this, however:

Note that we are not attempting to recover the intentional content of any of these three states in terms of their causal relations to other mental states or behaviour: the aim here is to show that once the notion of intentional content has been secured in the face of KW's challenge via a form of non-reductionism, there are no *further* problems threatening the possibility of rule-following. (2015, 407)¹⁸⁵

The question is, can we, from within a Davidsonian conception of intentional content, say more than this?

2.4. The unintelligibility of “blind” rule-following

As we have seen, the triangulation argument shows that necessary for the adoption of standards of correctness for expressions are triangular transactions—active, repeated engagement with another and, simultaneously, with the world. It is such triangular transactions that constitute the bedrock—the level beyond which, in our attempt to elucidate meaning, we cannot dig. We ought not underestimate the richness of these transactions, which it is easy to do. Recall that they involve mutual engagement on the part of both individuals, who seek to view each other as being “as intelligible as possible” (Davidson 1983, 152), to find “a great deal of reason and truth” (Davidson 1974a, 153) in one another. The contents of one’s mind and the meanings of one’s

¹⁸⁴ It should be emphasized, however, that the paper discussed here is primarily devoted to rejecting Boghossian’s and Wright’s arguments. Miller notes that he is currently working on further developing the view (Miller 2017).

¹⁸⁵ Also, in his paper in which he discusses Ginsborg’s view, Miller writes:

[M]y understanding of a signpost is to be viewed as an intentional state capable of combining with my beliefs about my current location and my desire to reach the relevant destination to cause me to move in the appropriate direction. Crucially, although this is a causal process that involves no interpretation on my part, the fact that it takes place in virtue of my training in a practice or custom ensures that it can be viewed as a genuine example of guidance by a rule rather than a ‘mere’ causal process. (Miller 2017)

utterances are thus constituted holistically, rather than one by one, and the principles of rationality contribute to their constitution. Meanings and contents are individuated, in part, by their inferential relations with one another. And to have a language and thought requires that one recognize a large portion of these inferential relations. The conception of rationality that operates here, as Davidson's repeated emphasis on the significance of rendering the other intelligible indicates, is extremely rich.¹⁸⁶

Davidson thinks—indeed, he has always thought—that the domain of the mental “cannot be divorced from such questions as what constitutes a good argument, a valid inference, a rational plan, or a good reason for acting” (1974b, 241). Our conception of the constitution of meaning and content also cannot be divorced from these matters. A subject's capacity to have thoughts and to make utterances is constitutively linked to her being a rational agent—someone who makes inferences, plans rationally, and acts for good reasons. This is not to say that a subject's capacity to have thoughts and to make utterances requires that her inferences always be valid, her plans always rational, and her acts always done for good reasons. The point is, rather, that someone cannot be said to make mistakes unless many of her inferences are valid, many of her plans rational, and many of her acts done for good reasons. Agents are, essentially, fallible creatures, creatures who can—and often do—make mistakes, but whose mistakes are also, to some extent, intelligible:

Having made a start by assuming consistency, finding it where we can, we prepare the ground for making the fallings off from rationality in others intelligible. We expect failures in reasoning when memory plays an important role, when sentences become complex, when distractions and temptations are part of the picture. (1995b, 50).

Moreover, what it is to mean round by ‘round’ is, in part, to apply ‘round’ to things that are taken to be round—thus, to infer that, if something is round, ‘round’ is correctly applicable to

¹⁸⁶ See Child 1994, 56-61, for an account of Davidson's conception of rationality.

it. Principles of inference, such as *modus ponens*, are constitutive of meaning and content. Thus, once we have secured a Davidsonian conception of meaning and content, there is no additional task of explaining the transition from adopting a rule—having an intention with a conditional content—and acting on it in particular circumstances, or from adopting a standard of correctness for an expression and applying that expression in light of that standard to particular objects. One cannot be a rational agent without being a follower of rules; one cannot be a speaker without being a follower of standards of correctness in one's uses of expressions.

Thus, the conclusion to draw is not that the *modus ponens* model is inadequate. It is also not that, given the adequacy of the model, one must have a conceptual repertoire that is antecedent to one's capacity to apply expressions. For the states involved in the model are explanatorily on a par; there is no priority among them. We cannot explain what it is to form a belief that an object is round without appealing to the capacity to use 'round' as meaning round, and thus as governed by conditions of correctness, and we cannot explain the latter capacity without appealing to the former. There is no explanatory ranking between language and thought, between words and concepts, between the truth conditions of our judgments, on the one hand, and the truth conditions of our sentences (and the correctness conditions of our expressions), on the other.

Of course, this does not mean that, in basic cases, we will not justify our uses of expressions by simply repeating them. If I am asked why I applied the expression 'round' to the marble, I cannot but resort to my taking the marble to be round, and to my taking 'round' to apply correctly to things that are round. I could justify my taking 'round' to apply correctly to things that are round by appealing to my linguistic competence, which I manifested successfully in a variety of situations in which I have been understood.

However, it might be asked, “how can I justify the use of an expression by repeating it?” (McDowell 1984, 241). McDowell’s appeal to Wittgenstein in his treatment of this question is helpful:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e., it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language game. (Wittgenstein 1969, §204).

While this dissertation is not the place to articulate connections between Wittgenstein’s and Davidson’s views—especially not at this late stage—it is worth remarking how illuminating this passage is for the purpose of our inquiry. The lesson of the triangulation argument is precisely that “at the bottom of our language game” lies acting—or, better, interacting with another and the world. It is only in the context of such interactions, which I have been calling triangular transactions, and which are the most fundamental manifestations of linguistic agency, that meaning and content emerge. Thus, contra Wright, the fact that we can only justify the use of a word by repeating that word does not entail that there is any sense in which concepts are prior to meanings, or thought is prior to language—indeed, no sense in which language provides a mere clothing for thought.

Furthermore, to return to Miller’s treatment of the alleged antinomy, it must be noted that the very possibility of a scenario in which an individual has an “intention to uphold a rule” (such as, to use Miller’s example, *if e is a recently received email, answer it immediately on receipt!*) as well as a “suitable belief” (such as a belief to the effect that an email has appeared in one’s Inbox) but does not have the capacity to combine them and thus act on them because she has not received the required training, while seemingly allowed by Miller’s picture, is unintelligible on the Davidsonian picture. This is because, to repeat, the constitution of the contents pertaining to those states will partly involve inferential connections with other contents, as well as the

subject's capacity to recognize many of these connections, and indeed her having made many of the required inferences.

Here is another way of articulating what I take to be, ultimately, the same point: contra Boghossian, to make an inference is not to follow a rule, at least not in the sense in which to uphold the email rule is to follow a rule. In order for something to be a case of rule-following, the subject must have the freedom not to uphold the rule—not to form the relevant intention, for instance.¹⁸⁷ It is obvious that this holds with respect to the email rule. It is perhaps less obvious that it holds with respect to the standards of correctness governing our uses of expressions, though the triangulation argument makes it perspicuous that speakers themselves are responsible for the standards that govern those uses, and that, with respect to any expression, it is open to a speaker to adopt another standard of correctness.¹⁸⁸ However, what should be relatively clear by now is that, on the Davidsonian picture, the claim that rules of inference, such as *modus ponens*, are rules that we may *not* follow—or that we may *not* by and large follow—is false. But, then, in what sense are we following these rules? One cannot be a rational agent without making inferences that accord with the *modus ponens* rule. But it is not clear that, as a rational agent, one follows this rule. However, contra Miller, this is not because one has been initiated into a practice that enables the possibility for certain rule-mediated causal transitions, which conform to the *modus ponens* rule. It is rather because it is constitutive of (cognitive) agency that agents aim to discover how things stand in the world. Agents aim at truth.¹⁸⁹ Sound inferential

¹⁸⁷ In their discussion of the topic of the normativity of content, Glüer and Wikforss also rely on the claim that “oughts ... imply the possibility of violation” (2009, 49). In a footnote, they note in passing that they “do not share the intuition” (2009, 57n58) that to infer is to follow a rule, but they do not develop the point.

¹⁸⁸ This is a manifestation of Davidson's fierce anti-conventionalism, famously defended in Davidson 1986.

¹⁸⁹ To use Myers' way of expressing the point, “our systemic aim is to get descriptive and normative matters right” (Myers and Verheggen 2016, 161).

principles, such as *modus ponens*, are constitutive of what it is to have this aim. One cannot so much as be an agent if one does not conform with the *modus ponens* rule.

Leaving the Davidsonian picture aside, I suspect that the reason for which the scenario allowed by Miller's picture appears intelligible has to do precisely with the quietist stance with which the non-reductionist position is typically assimilated or even equated. Because of this assimilation, it is not unnatural for one to portray oneself as having accepted non-reductionism about content without giving any hint whatsoever about what sort of conception of content one has thereby endorsed. However, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the kind of non-reductionism that one adopts, and the kind of conception of content that one has, makes a difference to how one approaches further questions about content, including the question of how to make sense of the possibility of applying expressions, or of following rules. If the conception of content is Davidsonian, the appeal to training might not be needed.¹⁹⁰

But couldn't the sceptic (with Boghossian and Wright perhaps) insist that, even though the possibility of rule-following can perhaps be made sense of, the possibility of *adopting* the rule cannot? In order for one to adopt the standard of correctness for 'round', which says that applications of 'round' are correct if they are made to round objects, one must already understand the standard, and so one must already have the concept of round. This seeming tension might lead one to think again that we must somehow conceive of our grasp of concepts

¹⁹⁰ At the end of his article, Miller asks:

Does availing ourselves of a notion of training (or custom or practice) (...) in our account of rule-following incur philosophical obligations in addition to those that we already have in virtue of subscribing to a non-reductionist view of what constitutes the fact that we are following one rule rather than another? Given that the obligations of non-reductionist views of rule-following, meaning and content are far from trivial (...), it is difficult to see how an answer to this question can be anything other than negative. (2015, 414)

I have tried to make a tentative case for the claim that the answer is, at the very least, not obviously negative.

as antecedent to our grasp of meaningful expressions. But we cannot conceive of our grasp of concepts in this way, for the triangulation argument shows, as we have seen in the second section of the previous chapter, that grasping a concept also requires settling on some aspect of the world, and thus it requires linguistic exchange, which in turn presupposes that standards of correctness already govern our uses of expressions.

We may accept this puzzle; we may even express it even more forcefully—and perhaps even more puzzlingly—by saying that, in order to adopt the standard of correctness for ‘round’, one must already have adopted (and one’s very adoption must already be governed) by the standard of correctness for ‘round’. To go back to the triangulation argument: in order for one to settle on an aspect of the causes of one’s responses, one must already conceive of that aspect in some way or another. More generally, in order for one’s responses to the world to be endowed with content, one’s responses must already have been endowed with content. This puzzle, which is at the heart of the triangulation argument, is also at the very heart of semantic non-reductionism. It is, to my mind, the clearest and plainest manifestation of the idea that meaning cannot be explained from outside meaning. It is thus a puzzle that we have to live with.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Davidson’s reflections furnish us with a conception of the relation between mind and world according to which the idea that the world somehow imposes itself on minds is unintelligible. The world cannot be seen as dictating or supplying, by itself, meanings for our utterances or contents for our thoughts. This, importantly, does not entail that the features of the world are not independent of how we come to think or talk of them; the possibility of a gap between the world and what we think or say about it remains. Rather, on this conception, there cannot be any

automatic or immediate latching, by our minds or our utterances, onto those features. The latching onto the world requires an effort of a special sort, namely the effort of two subjects who endeavour to address the tension between their responses through conversation.

Davidson's later reflections on meaning, as well as his overall triangulation argument, seem to be, to a large extent, neglected by contemporary philosophers. The same can be said about Davidson's semantic non-reductionism, which was always at the heart of his thinking. What is more, semantic non-reductionism itself, as a conception of meaning, seems to be disregarded. It is perhaps a consequence of this latter neglect that non-reductionism is often taken to require a quietist attitude toward the constitution of meaning and content. But, as Verheggen remarked nearly two decades ago, the rejection of reductionism does not "force us to end all constructive philosophy about meaning." Instead, it forces us "seriously to revise our sense of what such philosophy can achieve" (2000, 196). This dissertation is, in part, an attempt to carry out such a revision. I have tried to show that, as an answer to the sceptic's question, Davidsonian non-reductionism is not an altogether mysterious proposal. It has the materials to show why there need not be a logical difficulty in the attempt to make sense of states of meaning and understanding. It provides us with a plausible conception of linguistic agency. It is able to address even an amended form of the sceptic's challenge. Lastly, I also hope to have shown that Kripke and Davidson have more in common than either of them recognized, and that reflecting on their common ground is by no means unilluminating.

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