

Wittgenstein (and his followers) on meaning and normativity

PAUL HORWICH

ABSTRACT

This paper questions the idea that Wittgenstein's account of meaning as use requires an intrinsically normative understanding of this notion, and suggests instead that Wittgenstein is better understood as promoting a naturalistic view of meaning that undertakes an explanation based on non-semantic and non-normative facts of word-usage. It discusses the relevant positions of Kripke, Brandom and McDowell, all of whom are found to be united by the attempt to attribute to Wittgenstein a normative understanding of language that is not convincing. While language does exhibit normative properties that cannot be naturalized, the understanding speakers have of their own words is "a *prima facie* plausible candidate for naturalistic analysis."

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§1. Introduction

THE PAIR OF ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED here is: whether the *Philosophical Investigations* advocates a *normative* conception of meaning and whether some such conception is correct. Many eminent scholars of Wittgenstein have insisted that the answer to both questions is yes. These commentators —I’ll be focusing on Saul Kripke, Robert Brandom, and John McDowell— don’t merely have in mind the obvious and uncontroversial point that what’s meant by a word has distinctive implications for how it *should* be deployed and/or how it would be *correct* to deploy it (e.g. that if a word means DOG then we ought to try to avoid predicating it of things that aren’t dogs). After all, most phenomena —perhaps *all* phenomena— figure in normative principles of one sort or another (e.g. that umbrellas are *good* to have in the rain). Rather, the more interesting thesis that these philosophers are pinning on Wittgenstein (and endorsing themselves) is that meaning is *constitutively*, or *intrinsically*, or *analytically* normative. Some of them would say, more specifically, that a given word’s meaning what it does is nothing over and above the fact that it *ought* to be used in accord with certain distinctive regularities.

One of my aims here is to show, on the contrary, that this view of meaning *isn’t* advocated in the *Investigations*: neither explicitly nor implicitly. My argument will invoke, not just narrow textual evidence, but also considerations of philosophical plausibility that show the view itself to be incorrect.¹

I’ll begin by laying out that argument —that is, by describing what I take Wittgenstein’s *actual* account of meaning to be— and by defending both the account itself and its attribution to him. I’ll then consider, one by one, what

¹ This paper is an extended and improved presentation of (i) ideas about the nature of meaning that I developed in *Meaning* (1998) and in *Reflections on Meaning* (2005), and also of (ii) the reading of Wittgenstein’s view of that issue offered in my *Wittgenstein’s Metaphilosophy* (2012).

Kripke, Brandom, and McDowell have said about these matters. At both levels — namely, their own philosophical views and their readings of Wittgenstein— we’ll see that there are substantial differences between the three of them. But they agree that meaning must be explained in normative terms. And they each take themselves to be inspired by Wittgenstein on this central point. I will be attempting to bolster my own contrasting view of meaning (which is also inspired by what I take Wittgenstein’s to be) by raising objections to their various philosophical and interpretive positions and to the considerations they offer in support of them.²

§ 2. Wittgenstein

There can be no doubt that, in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, the meaning of a word–type is held to be a matter of the word’s *use* (in some sense of “use”). He rejects his earlier identification (in the *Tractatus*) of the meanings of basic terms with what they stand for, in favour of a position (known these days as “deflationism”) whereby the thing or things to which a given word applies —i.e. the thing or things of which it is true—is trivially fixed by its meaning (via principles such as “w means DOG → w is true of the dogs”); and its meaning is in turn fixed by the word’s *use*.³

But what conception of “word–use” is he relying on here? In particular, what is the *normative* (i.e. evaluative or prescriptive) status of the features of “use” that he associates with word–meanings? Is he saying that a word’s meaning is constituted by how it *should* be used, i.e. some fact of the form, <We ought to use w in such–and–such a way>? Is he supposing, rather, that it is our respect for such norms —*not* the normative facts themselves, but rather our appreciation of them— that provides our words with their meanings? And, in either case, what would be the appropriate sense of “ought”? Would it be the one we employ in maintaining “One ought not to believe what is false”; or the one involved in canons of justification, such as “One ought to believe simple theories that fit the

² Some of the other distinguished philosophers who have advocated normative conceptions of meaning are Paul Boghossian, Allan Gibbard, Hannah Ginsborg, Hans–Johann Glock, Peter Hacker, John Hawthorne, Mark Lance, Huw Price, Severin Schoeder, Meredith Williams, and Crispin Wright. As for fellow–critics of that doctrine, they include Åsa Wikforss, Anandi Hattiangadi, and Kathrin Gluer. See Wikforss (2001); Hattiangadi (2006); and Gluer & Wikforss (2008).

³ I’ll be using capitalised expressions as names of the meanings of the corresponding lower–case expressions. Thus “DOG” will refer to the meaning of “dog”, “DOGS BARK” will refer to the meaning of “dogs bark”, etc.

evidence”; or is some further sense of “ought” —pragmatic, perhaps— the relevant one? Or perhaps what’s needed is some quite different normative term, such as “correct”? Alternatively, maybe his idea is that meaning a given thing by a word is a matter of following imperatival rules for its use (i.e. “Accept such-and-such sentences containing w!”), in which normative concepts are not explicitly expressed? Or —in stark contrast with all of the above— could it be that the principles of use that Wittgenstein has in mind are mere *naturalistic regularities*, or dispositions, or *ceteris paribus* laws —wholly non-normative, non-regulative facts of linguistic activity? Well, let’s consider what he actually says.

At the outset of *Philosophical Investigations*, he seems to be proposing the last of these positions. —He seems to be regarding the “use” of a word as a distinctive pattern that’s recognisable in its deployment. In his very first paragraph, Wittgenstein asks us to consider “the following use of language”, and he reminds us of what is typically done with the word “five” —how people actually tend to behave with it (e.g. when counting out apples in a shop). And then he says, “It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words”.

Similarly, for all the primitive language games that he goes on to present, e.g. the one (described in paragraphs 2 and 8) in which a builder calls out “slab” (or “block”, or “beam”) then someone brings him a slab (or a block, or a beam). These examples of the meaning-constituting uses of words aren’t couched in normative terms.

A non-normative conception of “use” continues to be deployed in PI §§138 – 140, where Wittgenstein criticises the idea that the meaning of “cube” is the word’s association with a *mental image* of a cube. His decisive objection to this idea is that someone might associate such an image with a certain word, yet have no tendency to apply that word to cubes. He’s regarding it as obvious that the actual criterion for a word’s meaning CUBE is a certain regularity in its use —specifically, a tendency (or disposition, or propensity) to apply it to cubes and only to cubes.⁴

And the same view of meanings as engendered by use-regularities is displayed

⁴ It’s worth stressing a certain respect in which this example is atypical. In Wittgenstein’s picture, relatively few of our predicates (only our *observation* terms) satisfy meaning-constituting use-principles of roughly the form, “*Word w tends to be applied to fs and only to fs*”. A central feature of Wittgenstein’s use-conception of meaning is that the functions (utilities) of different words —and therefore the forms taken by the propensities of word-use that enable those functions to be fulfilled— vary considerably from one area of language to another (e.g. between observations terms, logical terms, scientific terms, normative terms, etc.). For example, he would regard the meaning-constituting use of the word, “true”, to be a tendency to accept instances of “<p> is true iff p” —*not* a tendency to apply the word to propositions that are true.

in PI §187, where the issue is: What would definitively show that a pupil has understood the instruction to “add 2” to any specified number? Wittgenstein’s answer is that it’s simply the pupil’s *propensity*, when asked to add 2 to 1000, to respond with “1002”, and, more generally, to respond with whichever number is the sum of 2 and the number she’s just been given.

Thus, many of Wittgenstein’s remarks suggest that he’s proposing to explain meaning in terms of a purely *naturalistic* conception of use.⁵ However, we mustn’t neglect the passages in which one or another of the above-mentioned more *normative*-flavoured characterisations of meaning-engendering word-use appear to be endorsed.

The most prominent of these alternatives is the third of the options that I listed initially: the idea of meaning as *rule-following*. On this view, meaning a given thing by word *w* is a matter of following a rule of the form: “Use *w* in accord with regularity *R(w)*!”. Wittgenstein’s sympathy for this perspective is conveyed, first of all, by his frequent invocation of the analogy between languages and games (n. b. his famous notion of “language-game”), including the idea that words, like chess-pieces, are governed by rules. And further evidence for that sympathy is provided by the considerable attention he devotes to the general question of *what it is* to follow a rule. That preoccupation can be explained if he’s supposing that meaning and understanding are matters of rule-following. For this supposition implies that we can’t fully demystify those linguistic phenomena unless we are clear about the general nature of rule-following.⁶

Moreover, there are also occasional passages in which the “usage” that’s characteristic of meaning a given thing by a term is specified in explicitly normative terms: —as its *proper* use; or as the fact that it *should* be used in this way but not that way.

So one might well wonder exactly which, from amongst the various accounts of meaning that can be read into the *Investigations*, is Wittgenstein’s preferred view. However, I think it would be a mistake to interpret him as accepting just one from amongst the array of alternatives initially surveyed: meanings as (i)

⁵ I think these examples also suggest that Wittgenstein’s meaning-engendering uses are supposed to be non-semantic and non-intentional —that is, *not* uses of the form, “*w* is used to refer to dogs”, or of the form, “*w* is used to express beliefs about dogs”. See section 5 below for discussion of McDowell’s contrary opinion.

⁶ Note also the implicit endorsement of meaning as rule-following that’s conveyed in PI § 68, where Wittgenstein says that the use of a word “is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high to throw the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too”.

norms of use, (ii) *commitments* to such normative facts, (iii) *followed rules* of use, or (iv) naturalistic *regularities* of use —for they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it seems likely that Wittgenstein sympathises with all of them.

In order to see how they might be coherently combined with one another, let's begin by looking more carefully at option (iii), meaning as rule-following.

This idea, despite its intuitive appeal, has often been considered peculiarly problematic. For it has seemed impossible to pin down exactly what it would be for us to follow specific meaning-engendering rules for the use of words. The difficulty issues from the recognition that one could not, in general, suppose that we proceed by first *reading* what the rules are (or by being *told* them, or by simply happening to have articulations of them *explicitly in mind*), and then deciding to do what they instruct. For any such rule-*formulations* would themselves need to be understood; so there would need to be rules for understanding *their* words; and so on. Thus, in every case we'd be confronted with an unsatisfiable regress.

It must be, therefore, that the rules that provide at least *some* of our words with meaning are followed in some non-standard way that doesn't involve the rule-follower's engagement with *formulations* of her rules. In other words, there must be such a thing as following rules *implicitly*. —But what might that be?

This is a notoriously controversial matter. However, I think a good case can be made for the view, suggested by Wittgenstein in PI § 54, that a rule is implicitly followed in virtue of a combination of (i) a disposition, i.e. rough conformity with a law-like regularity, and (ii) a meta-disposition, to occasionally correct one's initial behaviour:

One learns a game by watching how others play. But we say that it is played according to such-and-such rules because an observer can read these rules off from the practice of the game—like a natural law governing the play. —But how does the observer distinguish in this case between players' mistakes and correct play? —There are characteristic signs of it in the players' behaviour. Think of the behaviour characteristic of correcting a slip of the tongue. It would be possible to recognise that someone was doing so even without knowing his language.⁷ (Wittgenstein, 1953 § 54)

⁷ The prospect of correction is brought in to distinguish rule-followings from mere law-like regularities (as in the elliptical motion of the planets). We cannot, however, simply identify the cases in which someone inadvertently deviates from the rule he's implicitly following with cases in which he corrects himself, because he may well fail to notice certain cases of non-compliance, and he may sometimes wrongly correct himself. Thus a person's rule cannot be straightforwardly *read off* his practice of self-correction.

Nonetheless, that practice is an important part of the empirical evidence that can help us to reach plausible conclusions as to which combination of *ceteris paribus* laws (i.e. dispositions) and occasional

And in PI § 82 he allows, similarly, that “the rule by which [a speaker] proceeds” might be “The hypothesis that satisfactorily describes the use of his words, which we observe”. Thus, someone’s meaning a certain thing by a word might consist in his implicitly following a certain rule for its use, which might in turn be constituted (in large part) by his being disposed to operate with the word in a certain law-like way.

As for the normative import of this proposal, several distinct implications for “what ought to be done” are fairly clear.

First —as we’ve just seen— a person’s following a rule incorporates a certain meta-disposition: a propensity to sometimes correct herself. And when this happens, it’s presumably provoked by certain immediate reactions of dissatisfaction she has to her initial behaviour. Thus we might well say that she manifests an “implicit desire” to obey the rule. In which case it is natural for us to recognise a self-interested pragmatic reason for her to conform. Thus she ought (other things being equal) to conform.⁸

Second, it is plausible that, for the sake of smooth communication and its many benefits, all the members of a community have reason to follow the same basic rules of word use. So, if a word’s communal meaning is constituted by the majority (or the “experts”) following a certain rule, then everyone else has reason to follow that rule too.⁹

And third, it is a virtue to pursue truth and avoid false belief. Therefore, the following of certain rules of use for a word will, in light of the meaning thereby constituted, imply the desirability of applying it to certain things and not others. For example, if following $\langle \text{Conform with regularity } R_{73}(w) \rangle$ constitutes w ’s meaning DOG, then anyone who follows that rule should desire to apply w only to

distorting factors are influencing the person’s activity.

⁸ Like Wittgenstein (as I’m reading him), Hannah Ginsborg takes implicit rule-following to derive in large part from a disposition to conform to the corresponding regularity. But instead of supplementing this factor with ‘occasional self-correction, based perhaps on immediate feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction’, her proposed further requirement is (roughly) that a rule follower “take each of his actions to be correct/appropriate”. (See her “Primitive Normativity and Skepticism about Rules”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 108 (5) (2011), 227–254). Possible misgivings about this suggestion of hers are that it’s introspectively unmotivated, over-intellectualized, and potentially regressive. However, Ginsborg might avoid these complaints by allowing (i) that her ‘takings to be correct/appropriate’ are merely occasional and merely implicit, (ii) that sometimes they are immediately and explicitly corrected by the rule-follower, and (iii) that these reactions are based on feelings of dissatisfaction. In such a case her account would resemble the proposal I’m attributing to Wittgenstein.

⁹ For further discussion, see my “Languages and Idiolects” in A. Bianchi (ed.) *Language and Reality From a Naturalistic Perspective: Themes From Michael Devitt*, Springer, 2019.

dogs.¹⁰

Thus the answer to our present question —“Are Wittgenstein’s meaning–constituting features of use supposed to be normative facts, or normative commitments, or cases of imperatival (game–like) rule–following, or mere regularities?” —is, “More or less all of them”.¹¹ We might reconstruct his picture as follows. At the bottom there are propensities to operate with words in one way or another; these help engender our implicitly following the rules of our language–game; and this activity of rule following constitutes our words’ meanings. In light of the values of desire satisfaction, smooth communication, and believing the truth, we can see that our meaning what we do has at least three kinds of normative import.

But according to this picture, meaning is not intrinsically, or constitutively, or analytically normative. A word’s meaning what it does is not itself an evaluative or prescriptive fact. Nonetheless, it has a variety of important and distinctive evaluative and prescriptive implications.

§ 3. Kripke

The above reading of the *Investigations*’ remarks on meaning is vehemently rejected by Saul Kripke (1982). According to his conflicting interpretation, Wittgenstein’s main points are that:

1. The relationship between *meaning* a given thing by word, *w*, and a characteristic way of *using* *w* isn’t *descriptive* but *normative* (see Kripke, 1982, p. 37). —For example, S’s meaning PLUS by “+” isn’t tied to S being *disposed* to give certain answers to questions of the form “ $x + y = ?$ ”, but is tied rather to it being *right* for S to give those answers, i.e. tied to that being how S *ought* to use the word.
2. More generally, there’s *no naturalistic* fact that *underlies* and *constitutes* a word’s meaning what it does. Nor are there any primitive (i.e. irreducible) naturalistic facts as to what words mean¹².

¹⁰ See section 3, below, for discussion of how to determine which particular rule for the use of a word, *w*, is the one whose being followed by a person, S constitutes her meaning a given thing by *w*.

¹¹ Only ‘more or less’, because —as will become clear in our discussions of Brandom and McDowell (in sections 4 and 5)— the proper direction of explanation is *not* from the fact that one *ought* to do certain things with a word to its having a certain meaning, but the other way around.

¹² Kripke himself explicitly says (on behalf of Wittgenstein) that there are *no facts at all* as to what words

3. Nonetheless, attributions of meaning (such as, “Pierre’s word ‘chien’ means DOG”) are themselves perfectly meaningful. This is so —despite points 1 and 2 —because, in order for such a sentence to have a meaning, no naturalistic analysis (indeed, no *analysis of any kind*) is needed of the proposition it expresses. What’s required —not only in this sort of case, but also for other sentences to be meaningful— is that we follow rules supplying their “assertability conditions”, i.e. that specify the circumstances in which they should, and should not, be accepted.

Kripke gives two reasons for denying (and for taking Wittgenstein to deny) that a word’s meaning is constituted by a brute disposition to use the word in some characteristic way.

The first of these reasons is that the dispositional account couldn’t do justice to the fact that our applications of words are not simply knee-jerk responses. Rather, what we mean by our words both *guides* and *rationalises* our applications of them; we deploy words *in light of* how we are understanding them.

And granted, Wittgenstein does suggest that how we use a word is in some sense *guided* by what we mean by it. But he’s quite clear that, on pain of the regress noted above, such “guidance” cannot be a matter of *explicit* rule following. Rather, the guidance and rule following involved must be *implicit* —implicit in our use-dispositions (as discussed in section 2 above). Moreover, we have already seen that even *implicit* rule-following can naturally be regarded as *justifying* —even *obliging*— behaviour in accord with the rule.

Kripke’s second argument begins with the premise that in order for some property, #, of our predicate, “f”, to constitute that word’s meaning what it does, it would have to be the case that one can *read off* from “f”’s possession of # that the word is true of the fs and only the fs. He then proceeds to show that no *naturalistic* property of “f” (in particular, no *dispositional* property) could possibly satisfy that condition.

Now, since there isn’t any *textual* evidence that Wittgenstein endorsed this line of argument, the grounds for thinking that he was nonetheless moved by it could

mean. But it’s pretty clear that he means merely “*no naturalistic facts*”. For, in the first place, he acknowledges that, whenever it’s legitimate (as he thinks it often is) to assert, for example, that a certain person means PLUS, then we could equally well say that it’s *true* that she means PLUS, or that it’s a *fact* that she means PLUS. So Kripke *does* countenance *certain* sorts of facts about meaning. And, in the second place: like dispositions, all the other kinds of candidate meaning-constituting fact that he specifically argues against are similarly *naturalistic*.

only be its overwhelming philosophical plausibility. But, on reflection, it's not at all plausible!

In particular, there's no good reason to go along with the following instantiations of Kripke's "reading off" requirement, in which the candidate, $\#(w)$, for what constitutes the meaning of S's word, w , is that *S's disposition, $D(w)$, is the explanatory basis for S's overall use of w* :

*S's meaning F by word w could be constituted by the fact that S's disposition, $D(w)$, explains S's overall use of w **only if** one could read off (i.e. *directly explain*), from the fact that S's basic use of w is his disposition, $D(w)$, why it is that S's w is true of f s and only f s.*

Perhaps this could reasonably be demanded of an adequate *a priori conceptual analysis* of "S's w means F " in terms of the dispositional fact, but it shouldn't be required of a good *empirical reduction* of it to that fact (on a par with the reduction of water to H_2O). After all, in the familiar cases from physics and chemistry all that's required of a plausible property–constitution thesis is that the candidate underlying property explain *the characteristic causal symptoms* of the superficial property (e.g. stuff's being made of H_2O must explain its being colourless and tasteless, and it's boiling at $100^\circ C$, etc.) And the main symptoms of S's meaning what she does by w are found in her observable overall use of that word—her acceptance of certain w –sentences in certain circumstances, and her rejection of others. So if it can be shown that the best explanations of each of these particular naturalistic use–facts invoke *S's basic use–disposition, $D(w)$* , then we can be reasonably confident that S's meaning F by w is constituted by that dispositional fact.¹³

A Kripkean might protest that, since the meaning of a predicate determines its extension (e.g. the fact that S's w means DOG determines that S's w is true of dogs and only dogs), any adequate meaning–constituting dispositional fact would surely have to *explain* how that could happen.

¹³ The meaning of S's w cannot derive merely from S's disposition, $D(w)$. For S could be disposed to use a different word, v , in just that way—i.e. S may exhibit $D(v)$ as well as $D(w)$ —despite not meaning the same things by the two words. For it may be that although $D(w)$ is the core explainer of D's overall use of w , $D(v)$ is **not** the core explainer of D's overall use of v . So the meaning–constituting use–property of S's w has to be, not merely S's *having* that disposition, but the fact that $D(w)$ it is the *basic* use of w that explains S's *overall* use of it. For further discussion, see Horwich (2005, pp. 50–1).

But, we can reply that, although there would indeed have to be *some* explanatory route from a word's meaning–constituting use–disposition to its extension, such a thing is easily provided by first establishing, via the above familiar methodology, that a certain dispositional fact empirically constitutes *w*'s meaning DOG; second, noting that *w*'s meaning DOG entails *w*'s being true of the dogs; and third, invoking the transitivity of implication.

What cannot be provided, and shouldn't have been demanded, is a *direct* explanation (which doesn't pass through the word's meaning) of the extension by the dispositional constitutor, something that *would* yield an *explanation* of why it is that the constituted meaning has that extension. This is an unreasonable demand, since principles like,

w means DOG → *w* is true of dogs and only dogs

are what implicitly *define* “is true of”, and so are simply not susceptible to explanation.

Ironically, this deflationary perspective is strongly supported by Kripke's compelling arguments (pp. 25–32) to the effect that “S's *w* is true of *x*” cannot be reduced to “S is disposed to apply *w* to *x*” (or even to “S is disposed *in ideal circumstances* to apply *w* to *x*”). And deflationism about truth and reference is a central strand in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Let's turn finally to part (3) of Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein, the view that the meaningfulness of our ascriptions of meaning doesn't depend on there being any naturalistic facts of meaning, but requires merely that we follow certain established and useful rules in making such ascriptions.

More specifically, Kripke says that the rule we follow is: *to accept “S's word, w, means F” only after we've observed that S has used w in roughly the same way that we have used our word, “f”*. And it's indeed plausible that we do indeed follow that rule. However, there's an obvious explanation of *why* we do, one that's inconsistent with Kripke's main contention.

For if —contrary to Kripke— our meaning F by *w* is simply a matter of our having the tendency to use that word in some distinctive way, then —when we observe that two words (e.g. S's *w* and our “f”) have tended to be used in the same way— it will, given induction, be eminently reasonable for us to infer that they have the same meaning, i.e. that our word *w* means F. Thus, via “inference to the best explanation”, we can conclude, on the basis of the correctness of the Kripkean rule for ascribing meanings, that the meaning of a word is constituted

by the basic tendency governing its use.

Moreover, independently of this inference —simply considering the rule for attributing meanings that Kripke identifies— there would be no basis for thinking that MEANING is an intrinsically normative concept (i.e. that “means” is a normative term, on a par with “ought”). For the uses of *all* terms are governed by rules; and surely that doesn’t imply that *all* terms are intrinsically normative. Moreover, there’s nothing in the particular (Kripkean) rule for our use of “means” that would give that word a prescriptive or evaluative character.¹⁴

Thus, dispositionalism about meaning isn’t as straightforwardly refutable as Kripke thinks. Far from it! So his confidence that Wittgenstein must have recognised its disqualifying defects is quite unwarranted —especially in light of the *Investigations*’ frequent expressions of sympathy for the view.

§ 4. Brandom

Robert Brandom’s Wittgenstein–inspired account of meaning coincides in some central respects with the position I attributed to Wittgenstein (and endorsed myself) in section 2.¹⁵ Both accounts take it that the meanings of our words (i.e. the concepts expressed by them) are grounded in what we implicitly suppose to be the proper ways of using those words. That is to say, by our implicitly following certain rules for their deployment. Both stress that the *functions* of terms in different areas of language, and the forms taken by the use–rules that enable those functions to be fulfilled, vary enormously from one such area to another. In both stories, these ideas go hand–in–hand with *deflationary* perspectives on the truth–theoretic notions. So both reject the mainstream dogma that TRUE and REFERS are the key concepts of meta–semantics.

But there are a couple of glaring differences between us, reflecting

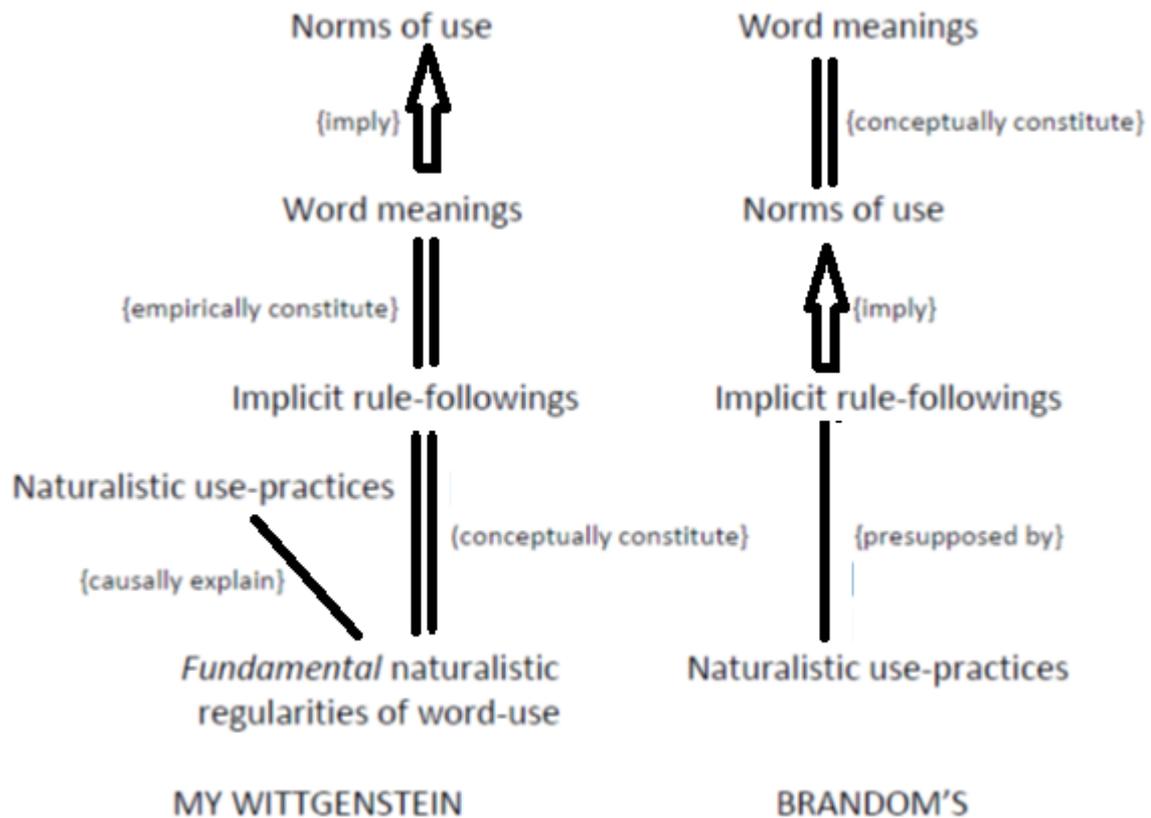
¹⁴ So what is the basis for attributing to Kripke (or to Kripkenstein) the view that meaning is non–trivially normative? First, it’s that his above–mentioned cryptic statement (on p. 37) that the relationship between the meaning of a word and its use isn’t *descriptive* but normative. And second, it’s that (on p. 73) he endorses Dummett’s characterisation of the later Wittgenstein as having abandoned his earlier (*Tractatus*) way of explaining meanings —in terms of *truth* conditions —in favour of the idea that meanings derive from *assertability* conditions (i.e. conditions of *justified* acceptance). For this is naturally read as implying that *an expression’s meaning what it does* consists in the non–natural fact that it *ought* to be used in a certain distinctive way. In which case, meaning–facts would be conceptually, constitutively normative.

Since Brandom’s and McDowell’s embrace of this conclusion is more explicit than Kripke’s, the arguments that I take to tell against it are postponed until sections 4 and 5, where their views are addressed.

¹⁵ See Brandom (1994)

Brandom’s sympathy with various aspects of Kripke’s position. One is that, according to Brandom, meaning is *intrinsically normative*, whereas on my account it isn’t. He contends that a word’s meaning what it does is nothing over and above the collection of normative facts as to which inferences should be accepted *from* sentences containing the word, and which inferences *to* such sentences should be accepted. In his picture, such normative facts are “instituted by” our implicit commitments (or, in other words, by the rules of inference we implicitly follow). We implicitly take ourselves and others to be obliged to say this, permitted to infer that, etc.; and these attitudes (or rule-followings) in some sense “bring it about” that we, *in fact*, have those obligations and permissions.

And the second glaring difference is that, in Brandom’s view, the phenomena of meaning *cannot* be *reduced* to wholly naturalistic regularities. He allows that certain propensities of use are *presupposed* by the implicit normative attitudes that imply the normative facts that, in turn, constitute the meanings of words. But he denies that these propensities suffice to determine those attitudes.



Whether Brandom’s story can be regarded as an accurate characterisation of Wittgenstein’s intentions depends not merely on how well it corresponds to his explicit remarks, but, to some extent (given the virtue of charitable

interpretation), on whether it offers a *plausible* account of meaning. So let us examine the relative *philosophical* merits of his “normativist” approach and my alternative (“regularist”) form of use–theory.

And let’s begin with the simple point that a word’s meaning would seem to be *causally potent*, helping to explain (in combination with various further factors, such as our perceptions, and the meanings of *other* words) all of the details of our particular deployments of it, including our acceptance of certain sentences containing it in certain circumstances, and the behaviour that results from the beliefs and desires that are articulated in terms of it. But how could this explanatory role be squared with meaning being a purely *normative* attribute of words, a matter of how they *ought* to be used? For surely such attributes are *causally inert*; an “ought” can’t cause an “is”.

One might therefore wonder why Brandom didn’t opt for a slightly different model, one in which meaning–facts are constituted *directly* by our implicit normative attitudes (i.e. by our implicit rule–followings), without any mediation by normative facts. If he had taken that position, he would have found himself with something more like my Wittgenstein. (Although there would still be the clash over whether the implicit rule–following could be reduced to naturalistic regularities.)

The answer, perhaps, is that Brandom doesn’t agree that his meaning–constituting normative facts are causally inert. For he describes them as “instituted” by our normative attitudes. And if that form of “bringing into being” is assimilated to *constitution* or *reduction* or *identity*, then the normative facts themselves *will* (via Leibniz’ Law) inherit the causal powers of the attitudes that “institute” them.

But any such assimilation would be ad hoc and implausible. On the face of it, the fundamental normative conditionals that specify the OUGHT– implications of non–normatively characterised states of affairs are *not* expressions of *constitution*. They are *not* akin to “the temperature of a gas is constituted by the energy of its molecules” or “water is H₂O”.

This isn’t merely a matter of intuition. Rather, it’s shown by the very different ways in which the two kinds of explanatory claim are established. We conclude that a given molecular energy *constitutes* a given temperature, not only because of the constant correlation between these things, but crucially because we are able to explain the symptoms of a gas having that temperature in terms of the associated molecular energy. Similarly, a given brain state might be shown to *constitute* pain, but only if it could be shown that this brain state would give rise to the familiar behavioural consequences of being in pain. But no such supporting

arguments are expected from someone claiming that pleasure is the sole and fundamental source of goodness, or that an act that maximises expected utility ought to be performed, or that if a word *tends* to be used in a certain way, then it *ought* to be used in that way. And the same goes for Brandom's conditionals that specify how a word, *w*, *in fact* ought to be used, given how *we implicitly take it that* *w* ought to be used. So he isn't entitled to suppose that whatever linguistic behaviours are caused by our implicit normative attitudes are equally caused by the normative facts that those attitudes imply. Thus the explanatory role of a word's meanings (its role in accounting for the circumstances in which the thousands of sentences containing the word are accepted) can't be squared with his view of their normative nature.

Let's now turn to the second distinctive contention of Brandom's Wittgenstein: namely that, even though meaning-facts may be fully grounded in our implicit normative attitudes (= implicit rule-followings), these grounds cannot in turn be reduced to naturalistic regularities; so we won't eventually obtain an analysis of meaning-facts in non-normative terms.

The crucial premise here is that implicit rule-followings don't consist in naturalistic regularities. But I think that Brandom's ways of supporting that premise—which are close to Kripke's arguments for it—should be resisted.

In the first place, we can grant that that *S*'s past use of a word will satisfy *many* regularities (most of them highly complex and contrived). But we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that none of these could qualify as the best candidate for being the one to which *S* is implicitly trying to conform. For—in light of PI § 54 (quoted in Section 2)—the relevant regularity must be a disposition, or tendency, or *ceteris paribus* law. And there's no reason to think that the established scientific methodology for identifying such propensities could not succeed in the present context.

In the second place, we can grant that a mere propensity would not, *on its own*, be enough to provide a case of *rule-following*. Obviously, the planets aren't *following rules* as they orbit the sun! After all, there's no possibility of them making mistakes, or them *not* obeying the laws that govern them. But we can deal with this concern—as Wittgenstein suggests in PI § 54—by supposing that a propensity qualifies as rule-following only when there is, in addition, the disposition to sometimes immediately correct initial behaviour, in response either to the agent's dissatisfaction with what has just been done or else to criticism by others.

And, in the third place, we needn't be deterred by Brandom's worry that the speaker's disposition to make corrections to her initial responses couldn't enable

us to fix what her rule is, since certain corrections might themselves be incorrect. For this worry involves a failure to appreciate that the real point of bringing “*criticism*” into the picture was *not* to settle which of the multitude of exhibited regularities is the one to which the agent is attempting to conform (see footnote 7 above). Instead, it was needed to show how an agent’s attitudes and reactions towards her initial dispositions make it natural to speak of “*attempting* to conform”, “mistakes”, and “correctness” —and thereby to distinguish implicit rule-following from mere law-like activity.

§ 5. McDowell

Alongside Kripke and Brandom, John McDowell has been a leading advocate of the three-pronged view that “meaning is normative”, that this precludes the possibility of any purely naturalistic account of what it is for a word to mean what it does, and that these are amongst the most important lessons to be learned from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.¹⁶

By “meaning is normative” he (like the others) presumably *doesn’t* just have in mind that, for any linguistic expression, there’s a true conditional specifying the distinctive normative import of its meaning —for example, a conditional of the form, “If sentence *u* means *that p*, then it would be *correct* to accept *u* if and only if *p*”, or of the form, “If *S*’s word *w* means *F*, then *S* ought to use it in accord with regularity *R(w)*”. For, in just about every domain, there are countless examples of conditionals that specify the normative imports of phenomena that are themselves designated in purely naturalistic terms (e.g. “Killing is *prima facie* wrong” and “Umbrellas are good to have in the rain”).

Nor can he have in mind merely, for example, that it’s *impossible* for a sentence to mean *that there’s life on Mars*, yet be correctly asserted even though there’s no life on Mars. For it’s entirely normal for certain normative properties of naturalistic phenomena to be *essential* to those phenomena. For example: if it’s true that whenever an action is morally right, that’s in virtue of its maximising happiness, then this proposition is (in some sense) *necessarily true*.

In order for McDowell’s view to have the anti-naturalistic consequences he supposes it to have, we must take the claim to be that, in the case of certain specifications of meaning-dependent correctness-conditions and assertability-conditions (e.g. the just-mentioned one about life on Mars), it’s *inconceivable* for them not to be true. He must be holding that those conditional norms are

¹⁶ See especially McDowell (1984, 2009, 1992)

analytic. For only then —since (following Hume) a non–normative proposition can’t analytically entail anything normative— could we conclude that the antecedent meaning–attribution must itself be a (covertly) normative proposition.

But this “analyticity” contention is problematic in several respects:

- First, it’s an unsupported *theoretical* claim. Instances of “If *u* means *that p*, then *u* is correctly accepted iff *p*” are indeed obviously *true*, but are not obviously *analytic*. Yet no reason for us to believe the stronger claim has been provided.
- Second, a piece of evidence *against* the view is that, if these conditionals *were* analytic, they couldn’t have the *substantial normative force* as a tool of criticism that they appear to have. They don’t seem to be on a par with “You ought to do what you ought to do”, or with “Murder is wrong” (given a definition of “murder” as “wrongful killing”). Therefore their consequents can’t be regarded as merely articulating facts that were already stated in their antecedents.
- Third (as already emphasised in our discussion of Brandom) their being *analytic* —which would imply that their antecedent meaning–attributions must be covertly normative propositions— couldn’t easily be reconciled with the fact that what we mean by our words helps to *causally explain* why and when we accept the sentences we do.
- And fourth, McDowell’s position is undermined by the observation that MEANS–to–CORRECTNESS conditionals invoke meaning merely in order to extend the reach of substantive *home*–language norms to the effect that *our acceptance of our sentence, “p”, is correct iff p*, norms which make no mention of meaning. The *extended* norms add the substantial extra information that foreign sentences are correctly accepted whenever their translations into our language are correctly accepted.¹⁷

In light of these considerations, one might wonder what *really* persuaded McDowell to dismiss the prospect of any adequate *naturalistic* treatment of meaning and to reject the possibility that Wittgenstein could have been offering such a treatment. The answer, pretty clearly, is that he reads Wittgenstein as

¹⁷ By analogy, consider an extension of the moral norm, “People should be treated with respect” to “Creatures with mental states like those of people should be treated with respect”. This implies that X HAS MENTAL STATES LIKE THOSE OF Y has *normative import* —but doesn’t imply (or provide the slightest reason to think) that it’s *itself* a normative concept.

rightly objecting to any form of *philosophical theorizing*—as rightly contending (i) that nothing conjectural or controversial is to be advanced within the subject, and (ii) that the only legitimate task for philosophers is to dispel confusions, in particular, to undermine pseudo-questions by means of reminders of how words (such as “true”, “means”, “intends”, “believes”, “free”, “ought”, ...) are ordinarily deployed.

As applied to the topics of meaning and rule-following, this “quietist” meta-philosophical perspective leads McDowell (and his Wittgenstein) to insist that there could be no good reductive analyses of *what it is to mean a given thing by a word*, or of *what it is to follow a given rule*. Thus he agrees with Brandom’s negative point that these phenomena cannot be constituted by *naturalistic regularities*. But he’s no less critical of Brandom’s *positive* project: to show how facts of meaning are engendered by *implicit normative commitments*.

According to McDowell, the *ur*-mistake, made by both my Wittgenstein and Brandom’s, is that of regarding meanings (including the meanings of explicit rule-formulations) as *puzzling* phenomena, as demanding an answer to the question, “In virtue of what does an intrinsically “dead” sound or mark come to have its distinctive meaning?” For he thinks that this question leads inevitably to a vicious regress. That’s because he thinks the only plausible answer to it would be that the “dead thing” acquires its meaning by our giving it an *interpretation*; but an interpretation is nothing but another intrinsically dead item (a bit of language, or signpost, or something similarly *physical*) whose possession of meaning will have to be explained in the same way, and so on.

But surely the defect here is not in the initial question, but is in what McDowell takes to be the only reasonable answer to it. Surely, a much better answer—the one Wittgenstein gives—is that a dead sound’s meaning can derive from its *use* rather than from an *interpretation*.¹⁸

This is not to deny that Wittgenstein is indeed deeply opposed to something he called “theory construction in philosophy”. But his conception of that proscribed activity is by no means perfectly clear. So it’s sometimes hard to say whether or not a given philosophical pronouncement is or is not disallowed.

Still, I think we can be confident that he isn’t simply equating “theories” with “controversial claims”. For, under that construal, his meta-philosophical thesis—with which very few philosophers would agree—is patently self-undermining.

More plausibly, Wittgenstein has in mind a rough distinction (akin to the

¹⁸ “What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule that is not an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases” PI § 201.

observation/theory distinction in science) between, on the one hand, things that are obvious to normal people in normal circumstances (in which they are sober, clear-headed, looking in the right direction, and not in the grip of confusion) and, on the other hand, things that *cannot* be made simply obvious, but rely for their plausibility on abductive support from things that *are* obvious.

Given an interpretation along these lines of his anti-theoretical meta-philosophy, it remains to be seen whether naturalistic analyses of meaning and implicit rule-following would inevitably go beyond what Wittgenstein allows. Certainly, this can't be settled merely by observing that they wouldn't command universal assent.

Substantial evidence that such analyses are *not* in fact condemned by Wittgenstein is provided by the fact that he himself appears to offer them. Paragraph 43 tells us that

For a large class of cases —though not for all— in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be *defined* thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Wittgenstein 1953 § 43; my emphasis)

And —as mentioned in Section 2 above— his paragraph 54 suggests an analysis, in terms of what the agent has a tendency to *do*, of a distinctive and important form of rule-following. That form is distinctive in that the rule-follower isn't aware of, or engaged with, any explicit formulation of her rule. And this is important because, if our meaning what we do by our words is a matter of following rules for their use, then —on pain of regress— the rule-following would have to be of that distinctively *implicit* kind.

Now McDowell is perfectly happy to endorse both Wittgenstein's equation of the meaning of a word with its use and his conception of a special form of rule-following that's implicit in observable dispositions. But he maintains that these remarks must be construed, in light of Wittgenstein's “quietist” meta-philosophy, in such a way as to make them completely uncontroversial.

This is to be achieved, in the case of PI § 43, by construing “the *use* of w” extremely broadly: not restricting it to verbal *behaviour*, but allowing it to also include *semantically* characterized properties (such as, “w is used to pick out the set of dogs”), *intentional* properties (such as, “w is used to express beliefs about dogs”), and purely normative properties (such as, “w is *correctly* applied to dogs” and “w ought to be used in conformity with regularity, R(w)”). For who could deny that any word with those properties would have to mean DOG?

And in the case of PI § 54 —Wittgenstein's account of *implicit* rule-

following— the trivialization is achieved by regarding the analysis as mere stipulation, marking a rare, esoteric use of “following a rule” that plays no important role in the *Investigations*’ discussion of meaning.

But such moves would deprive Wittgenstein’s treatment of meaning and rule-following of any interest whatsoever. For what philosophers have hoped for — and what he was surely aiming to provide— is a full demystification of the concept of meaning, yielding demystifications of what he takes to be the derivative and equally puzzling concepts of reference, intention, and belief. As he says in the *Blue Book* (pp. 4–6), he wants to explain how “life” is given to signs that are otherwise “dead”. And the “life” of a sign surely includes its capacity both to reach into reality and to help express the contents of thoughts.

To see why Wittgenstein’s direction of explanation (or definition) would have to be from a word’s meaning to its reference, rather than the other way around, bear in mind that he advocates a view of truth, reference, and predicate-satisfaction that’s these days known as “deflationism”. He holds, for example, that once we understand the term, “5”, by mastering its use in counting and calculating, we’re in a position, simply by disquoting, to specify its referent as 5. So he obviously couldn’t be thinking that the term’s meaning what it does could be defined in part by its referring to 5.

Turning to the question of whether intentional psychological use-facts are supposed to be included amongst the meaning-defining ones: our puzzlement about how a state of belief or intention could have the content, say, *that I will scratch my nose*, is no less than our puzzlement about how the sentence, “I will scratch my nose”, could have that content. So it would not be at all demystifying to explain the latter in terms of the former. More helpfully, one might well go in the opposite explanatory direction and view contentful mental states as relations to linguistic expressions whose meanings are independently explained in terms of their compositional structure and the uses of their component words.

Regarding normative use-facts —e.g. that it’s correct to predicate the French word, “chien”, of a thing if and only if it’s a dog— there’s no doubt that their obtaining can be implied and explained by facts of meaning (e.g. that “chien” means DOG). Moreover —as we’ve seen— this wouldn’t provide the slightest reason to doubt that the antecedent meaning-facts could be fully naturalistic. On the contrary, the typical norm begins by picking out some phenomenon in *non-normative* terms (e.g. “killing” or “umbrella”) and proceeding to evaluate it using normative vocabulary (e.g. “wrong”, or “good to have in the rain”). As for the opposite direction of explanation, with which McDowell appears to sympathize—that, for example, a word means DOG in virtue of the fact that it’s correctly

applied to dogs and only to dogs— this has the various marks against it that were listed above: it's intuitively the wrong way round, thus a counterintuitive philosophical theory; it can't be squared with the fact that what we mean by our words helps causally explain why and when we accept the sentences we do; and it would imply that the particular normative import of a given meaning is *analytic*, and hence that meaning-dependent correctness-conditions couldn't have the substantial normative force that they evidently do have.

So, given Wittgenstein's commitments and aspirations, it would be absurd for him to include within the meaning-engendering "use" of a word such characteristics as "used to *refer* to so-and-so", or "used to express such-and-such *beliefs*", or "used *correctly* when, and only when, predicated of *fs*". Rather, he should be construed as holding that the meaning-giving uses of words must be restricted to non-semantic, *non-intentional*, and non-normative forms of use, including physical, behavioural, and certain psychological forms —e.g. the internal acceptance of sentences. And this conclusion is vindicated by Wittgenstein's many strikingly behaviouristic illustrations of word-use (see Section 2 above). His examples of the meaning-defining uses of words aren't typically couched in semantic, intentional, or normative terms.

Moreover, I would suggest that his definition of the meaning of a word as its "use", understood naturalistically, does not fall afoul of his meta-philosophical scruples, since it's *not* presented as a 'theory' as he is understanding the term. It's supposed to do no more than record the evident fact that demonstrations of understanding reside in linguistic activity. We settle what someone means by a word by observing the way he uses it. We are convinced that a child has grasped what a word means when we see that her basic deployment of it is just like ours. We explain what a word means by describing how it is used —i.e. that such-and-such sentences containing it are accepted in such-and-such circumstances. These are obvious features of our practice (or of one of our practices) with the word "meaning", and Wittgenstein's definition is intended to do no more than register them.

To repeat, this is not to deny that his equation of meaning with use may be found puzzling and questionable. But, for Wittgenstein, the controversial character of his account does not betray it as the sort of philosophical theory that he opposes. Rather, the forms of resistance to it are taken to be the results of confusions that lead us astray —lead us away from the definition of "meaning" that is plainly implicit in normal discourse, and towards various mistaken accounts of it. One such misbegotten account is the Augustinian-Tractarian view that he criticises at the outset of his *Investigations*. Other examples, addressed later

in the book, derive from the tempting idea that what one means by a word is an introspected, guiding, mental state.

Thus, although it may not actually be obvious to someone that “meaning is use” (*naturalistically* construed), it’s potentially obvious; it isn’t hidden beneath the surface and credible only via a self-conscious inference to the best explanation; so its recognition does not qualify as a theory (explanation, conjecture, hypothesis) of the kind that philosophers are supposed to be shunning. No doubt a fair amount of work must be done in order to defuse the various confusions that can prevent us from recognising the accuracy of Wittgenstein’s definition. But that’s not the same as providing evidence for a theory.

§ 6. Conclusion

Much of what we do, including our linguistic behaviour, is subjected to normative assessment (as permitted, or obligatory, or incorrect, etc.) —both by other people and by ourselves. In that sense, language is a *normative* practice. But it doesn’t follow —or so I’ve been arguing on Wittgenstein’s behalf and on my own behalf— that the prescribed, or proscribed, or evaluated activities (whether linguistic or not) can’t themselves be fully specified in *non*–normative terms. In particular, although *a word’s possessing the meaning it does* certainly has various kinds of normative import, that provides no reason at all to suspect that facts of word–meaning are *analytically, intrinsically* normative and so aren’t reducible to naturalistic use–regularities.

On the contrary, I’ve urged that Wittgenstein’s definition of “the meaning of a word” is best understood as offering exactly that sort of account. His picture, as I see it, is that certain *ceteris paribus* laws underlie our basic rules of word–use; that such rule–following constitutes the meanings of our words (and hence sentences); that these meanings then trivially engender the truth conditions of sentences, via the schema “*u means that $p \rightarrow (u \text{ is true} \leftrightarrow p)$* ”; and that true belief is valuable, both instrumentally and for its own sake —or, in other words, that we ought to aim to accept sentences only when their truth conditions are satisfied.

This picture isn’t an expression of any general doctrine of “metaphysical naturalism”. For it’s fully appreciated that the normative properties themselves (of being *permitted, obligatory, incorrect*, etc.) *cannot* be naturalised. But a person’s understanding of her words appears to have naturalistic causes and effects, and is therefore a *prima facie* plausible candidate for naturalistic analysis. So it shouldn’t be so hard to accept that such an account can in fact be vindicated, and was sketched and endorsed in Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*.

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I would like to thank Allan Gibbard for the invaluable stimulus provided by his book, *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford University Press, 2012) —which makes a forceful case in favour of the view, opposed here, that meaning *is* analytically normative. I haven't, in the present discussion, addressed his searching and subtle treatment of the issue. That's for a couple of reasons. First, he is by no means a follower of Wittgenstein. And second, my grounds for resisting his arguments are spelt out at length in my "Obligations of Meaning" (to appear in B. Dunaway & D. Plunkett (eds.), *Meaning, Decision, and Norms: Themes from the Work of Allan Gibbard*, Maize Books, Ann Arbor, 2019).

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