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# How Meaning Might Be Normative \*

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### 1. The topic

My aim here is (i) to outline an account what it is to grasp the meaning of a predicative term, and (ii) to draw on that account in an attempt to shed light on what the normativity of meaning might amount to. Central to the account is that grasping the meaning of a predicative term is a practical matter—it is knowing how to use it correctly in a way that implicates having an ability to use it correctly. This calls for an examination of what it is to use a term correctly. Two quite different types of correctness are liable to be conflated. In sections 2 and 3 I show why they must be kept apart. In the sections 4 and 5 I consider how correctness of the second type might be conceived within a practice-theoretic framework and how that framework might make sense of the idea that meaning is essentially normative. In the concluding section I respond to an objection.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout I shall be building on, and I hope improving, ideas set out in Millar 2002, 2004 and 2011.

## 2. Meaning and correct application conditions

One type of correctness is correctness of application. To apply the term 'dog' to something is to predicate it of that thing. Thus I apply 'dog' to a thing if and only if, using that term, I say of it that it is a dog. That application will be correct if and only if what is thus said is true of the thing to which it is applied. If it is correct in this sense it is a true application. Correctness of the second type concerns use more generally: it is *use in keeping with the term's meaning*.<sup>2</sup> Simplifying somewhat, a use—perhaps an application—fails to be in keeping with a term's meaning if the speaker uses the term in a manner that fails adequately to respect its conditions of correct (= true) application. I say more about that in the next section. Here I consider the relation between meaning and conditions of correct (= true) application.

A meaning of a predicative term is fixed by a concept that the term can express. Conditions of correct (= true) application of a term display or exhibit a meaning that it has provided that, by employing the very concept that fixes that meaning, they spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for the term's correct application. For instance, in the sense in which it stands for a type of bird,

- (1) 'goldfinch' correctly applies to a thing if and only if it is a goldfinch.<sup>3</sup>

This specifies the sort of thing to which the term correctly applies when used in this sense. It does this by means of the very concept that fixes its meaning if so understood. Even if true, other bi-conditionals spelling out conditions of correct application will not serve this purpose unless they do likewise. For instance,

- (2) 'goldfinch' correctly applies to a thing if and only if it is a bird of the species described on p. 280 of the 1981 edition of *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain*

will not serve the purpose.

<sup>2</sup> See McDowell 1984 and McGinn 1984: 60 for similar expressions.

<sup>3</sup> Expressing a closely related idea, Michael Dummett says, 'In a case in which we are concerned to convey, or stipulate, the sense of an expression, we shall choose that means of stating what the referent is which displays the sense: we might borrow a famous pair of terms from the *Tractatus*, and say that, for Frege, we *say* what the referent of the word is, and thereby *show* what its sense is' (Dummett 1973: 227). John McDowell's (1977) treatment of proper names is, I take it, one way of developing that idea for the case of those names.

To those who share the language in which it formulated, and who know what goldfinches are, (1) is liable to seem trivial. To those who have no idea what goldfinches are it would be uninformative. This might tempt one to suppose that a better formulation of correct application conditions would provide more information as to what goldfinches are. But (1) is not meant to assist someone who did not know what goldfinches are to understand the sort of thing to which the term correctly applies. It simply exhibits the meaning of the term in that it spells out necessary and sufficient conditions for the term's correct application by means of the very concept that fixes its meaning.

People who have some grasp of the meaning of the term 'goldfinch' in the sense in which it stands for a kind of bird, thus some grasp of the concept the term expresses when so understood, might differ in their conceptions of what it is to be a goldfinch. Some might have little more than a perceptual-recognitional grasp in that they can visually recognize goldfinches as goldfinches. Others might have a rich conception of what it is to be a goldfinch. Yet others might know that goldfinches are birds but not know much else or even how to recognize goldfinches by sight. Possessing the concept the term expresses, is compatible with having any of a range of different conceptions of what goldfinches are.<sup>4</sup>

What about the conditions of correct application of synonyms like 'chews' and 'masticates'? Their conditions would be, respectively,

- (3) '\*\*\* masticates —' correctly applies to an ordered pair if and only if the first element of the pair masticates the second element of the pair.
- (4) '\*\*\* chews —' correctly applies to an ordered pair if and only if the first element of the pair chews the second element of the pair.

That 'chews' and 'masticates' are synonyms is reflected in the fact that (3) would be true if 'masticates' in its right-hand side were substituted by 'chews' and (4) would be true if 'chews' in its right-hand side were substituted by 'masticates'. For all that, one could grasp the sense of 'chew' while having no grasp of the meaning of 'masticate', and *vice versa*, which is why it can be informative to learn that to masticate is to chew. It is no surprise that a sentence like, 'No one doubts that to chew is to masticate' is false even though 'chew' is synonymous with 'masticate'. One might doubt that to chew is to masticate simply because one grasps the meaning of 'chew' while having no idea of what 'masticate' means.

<sup>4</sup> We could add '(the bird)' to the end of (1) without committing ourselves to supposing that *all* who grasp the sense of 'goldfinch' must know that goldfinches are birds.

### 3. Use in keeping with meaning

The second type of correctness is that of use in keeping with meaning. Correct use in this sense is a use of the term that respects the relevant conditions of correct (= true) application. In the simplest cases a term has a single received meaning and the relevant conditions of correct application are those that exhibit that meaning.

The key idea here is that a use of a term respects the relevant conditions of correct application only if its use on the occasion in question manifests an adequate grasp of those conditions. What I mean by 'grasp of the conditions' might more ordinarily be expressed by speaking of what a word is for. For instance, a somewhat partial grasp of the conditions of application of the term 'flu' might be expressed by saying that 'flu' is a word for a viral infection marked by fever and muscular aches.

Consider two contrasting cases of incorrect (= false) application. The first is a false application on the part of someone who knows perfectly well what the term 'dog' means, in the sense in which it picks out a species of domesticated animal, but in dim light applies it to a fox that he mistakes for a dog. Although this application is false it's in keeping with the relevant meaning of 'dog'. This person knows what the term 'dog' means, and accordingly his use manifests a grasp of the relevant conditions of correct application. The error lies simply in having mistaken a fox for a dog. The second case is an application on the part of someone who has not yet fully grasped what 'fox' means. A child might be disposed to apply the term to foxes and to dogs that look a little like foxes. Applying the term to a young Alsatian dog on some occasion the child speaks falsely but the error lies not just in the false application but in the fact that the false application derives from an inadequate grasp of the relevant conditions of correct (= true) application. The child uses the term as if it correctly applied not just to foxes but to foxes and some dogs and so fails to adequately to respect the relevant conditions of correct application. The mistake is accordingly semantic. The first subject's application of 'dog' to a fox is not.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss (2010a: 2.1.2) ask what motivates the introduction of the second notion of correctness. The answer to this is simply that to deny that there is this second type of correctness is to deny that examples of the sort considered point to a different dimension of evaluation from that marked by the first type of correctness. The worry might be whether the second type of correctness has anything to do with semantics. I find this hard to see since conditions of correct (= true) application surely belong to semantics and correct use in the second sense has to do with how speakers stand in relation to those conditions.

Isn't the first case one in which the term is used in a way in which it's not supposed to be used? Well, it is a misapplication—an application that is incorrect in the sense of false—but that is no reason to treat the application as incorrect in the second sense. A doctor does not fail to use the term 'flu' in keeping with its meaning if, misdiagnosing a patient, he says, 'This patient has flu' intending to say that the patient has flu. The doctor might or might not have been epistemically irresponsible in making his diagnosis but in any case his use manifests an adequate grasp of the relevant conditions of correct application and the term used is apt for saying what he intends to say. Similarly, if, lying, I say to someone, 'I have cleaned out the garage' I deliberately make a false application of the expression 'cleaned out the garage' but my use manifests an adequate understanding of the relevant conditions of correct application.

An application that is incorrect in the second sense might be correct in the first sense. If I were to apply the term 'arcane' to a ritual I might intend to convey, and mean to say, that it is ancient, not realizing that 'arcane' means *hidden or secret*. Yet the ritual might be arcane in which case my application, and what I say, would be true despite the fact that it does not manifest a grasp of the conditions of correct application for the term I use. In the envisaged circumstance I would say that the ritual is arcane and thus say something that is true, yet that the ritual is arcane in its received sense is not what I meant to convey though I uttered the words I did intentionally.

The child's use of 'fox' and my imagined use of 'arcane' fail to respect the relevant conditions of correct application because these uses do not manifest an adequate grasp of what those conditions are. These uses derive from ignorance or inadequate understandings of those conditions. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that all failures to respect the relevant conditions derive from ignorance or inadequate understanding. Slips of the tongue need not reflect ignorance or misunderstanding of the meaning of the term slipped in, yet the speaker's use fails to respect the conditions of correct application pertaining to the term used because it is not a manifestation of the speaker's grasp of those conditions. The speaker has a grasp of those conditions but his use does not stand in the right relation to that grasp.

One might be tempted to suppose that an application of a term is out of kilter with its meaning only if the subject says of the thing to which it is applied that it is one thing but intended to say that it is another.<sup>6</sup> Many cases of

<sup>6</sup>R. M. Hare (1963: 8) says that one misuses what he calls a descriptive term if one says that an object is of one kind, meaning or intending to convey that it is of another kind. He appears to

misuse, including slips of the tongue, are of this sort, yet it would be wrong to suppose that all are. When Tyler Burge's imagined patient (Burge 1979) utters the words, 'I have arthritis in my thigh' his use of 'arthritis' is incorrect in both senses. It is false because the pain has nothing to do with the patient's joints and arthritis is a condition of joints. He fails to respect the relevant conditions of correct application since his use does not manifest an adequate grasp of those conditions. Nonetheless, as the patient uses the term it stands for arthritis—the condition that doctors diagnose, that scientists research into, that in its various forms afflicts countless people. It seems right that he not only said that he had arthritis in his thigh but meant to say that he had arthritis in his thigh. Though his use of 'arthritis' was informed by a partial, albeit partially erroneous, conception of what it is for a person to have arthritis the term is apt for saying what he intended to say. By contrast, my use of 'arcane' was not informed by a conception of what it is to be arcane—I had no idea what it is to be arcane—which is why there was a complete mismatch between what I said and what I intended to say. A similar case would be a use of 'enervate' on the part of a subject who thought that 'enervate' means *energise or enliven*.

What about irony? Suppose that just after I have cleaned the kitchen floor a member of my family walks over it with muddy boots. I say, 'That was a great help' when what I mean to convey is that it was no help at all. Do I in this case respect the conditions of correct application of 'great help'? Again we need to focus on what it is to respect the conditions of correct application as that is to be understood here. In the case envisaged my ironical application of 'great help' is deliberately false, yet it manifests, and indeed is made possible by, an adequate grasp of the relevant conditions of correct application. So it satisfies our condition on respecting the relevant conditions.

The next task is to consider how the distinction between types of correctness feeds into an account of the way in which grasp of meaning is practical. After that I shall address the question of how meaning might be essentially normative.

#### **4. The practical dimension of knowledge of meaning and the normativity of meaning**

The practical dimension of grasping the meaning of a predicative term is knowing how to use it correctly, where the know-how is understood to im-

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intend this to be a definition of 'misuse of a descriptive term'.

plicate an ability to use the term correctly in the second of the two senses. We are working with the idea that the measure of correct use of a predicative term in a given sense is *respect for the conditions of correct (= true) application that exhibit the term's meaning when used in that sense*. This measure is not just a standard imposed on us from the outside. If we grasp the meaning of a predicative term then in our uses of it we are sensitive to what the meaning requires of us. Moreover, in early learning we gain a sense of there being right and wrong ways of using terms through, among other things, having correct uses encouraged and misuses corrected. The conceptions we have of what terms ascribe can be refined or corrected. All this makes it natural to think that our uses of words are subject to rules in the sense of prescriptions or requirements that govern use. These are not merely norms or standards to which it is open to us to be indifferent. If we use words we incur a commitment to using them in keeping with the rules that govern their uses—commitments to which it is not open to us to be indifferent. If we are in breach of the rules then there is a sense in which *we* go wrong—we fail to discharge a commitment that *we* have incurred just by using those words. This is not to deny that we may play with words, exploiting them in ways that are not in keeping with their meanings. But such play depends for its effectiveness on there being rules that can be flouted.

Assuming there are such rules, what form do they have? Evidently there is more to using a term than applying it or denying it application. We use a term when we exploit its meaning in understanding another's use of it or when we make inferences from propositions that are articulated by the use of the term. A developed account of what is involved in correct use should accommodate the variety of ways in which predicative terms can be used. This diversity might induce despair about achieving a secure grip on what rules governing their use could look like. I think that our working idea about the measure of correct use suggests a way through the complexities.

'Goldfinch' in its most common sense correctly applies to a thing if and only if it is a goldfinch. That is not a rule, or at least not a prescriptive rule of the sort for which we are looking, but this is: when using 'goldfinch' in its most common sense respect those conditions of correct application. The activity of using 'goldfinch' in the sense exhibited by those conditions is, as I shall say, *a practice*, that is, an essentially rule-governed activity or cluster of such activities. It is essentially rule-governed in that no activity could be that activity unless it were governed by the rule prescribing respect for the

relevant conditions of correct application.<sup>7</sup>

The operative conception of a practice applies to many activities. An example is playing tennis. This activity is essentially rule-governed in that nothing would count as playing tennis unless it were governed by some set of rules for playing tennis. (Any differences in rules would induce differences in the activity governed even though variants would have much in common.) Obviously, those who engage in such activity are subject to the rules of the game. To be subject to rules is simply to be such that one's behaviour is liable to be evaluated in terms of accordance or lack of accordance with the rules. But people can be subject to rules because others in power subject them to those rules. Merely being subject to rules carries no obligation or commitment to obeying them. The relation between a player of tennis and the rules governing the game is more intimate than mere subjection. Should we say, then, that players are governed by the rules of the game in that they intend to conform to those rules?<sup>8</sup> Even if tennis players have such an intention when they play it would be absurdly naïve to suppose that necessarily players of rugby intend to conform to all of the rules of the game. While continuing to be players they might flout rules to gain advantage if they think they can do so with impunity.

There are, it seems, two dimensions to governance by a rule. One is normative; the other is psychological. I am working here with the idea that the normative dimension is best captured by the notion of a *commitment* that I briefly employed at the beginning of this section. Plausibly, players, in a game of rugby, just in virtue of being players, incur a *commitment* to following all of the rules. There is a very natural way to conceive of what this commitment amounts to. It amounts to it being the case that a player, just in virtue of being a player, ought to avoid continuing to play while not conforming to the rules of the game.<sup>9</sup> Why not say that the commitment amounts to it being the case

<sup>7</sup> I am applying here a conception of a practice that is most fully set out in Millar 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Glüer and Wikforss (2010b) point out that under an influential conception of what it is to follow a rule the answer is affirmative.

<sup>9</sup> In previous discussions (Millar 2004, 2011) I qualified statements to this effect so that the commitment amounts to it being the case that one ought to avoid continuing to participate while not following the rules *in the absence of some countervailing reason*. I envisaged that there might be reasons to remain within a practice, for instance, in a corrupt institution and subvert it from within. I am no longer sure that the qualification is necessary. (A suggestion to this effect was made to me at a LOGOS seminar in Barcelona in 2009, though I resisted it at the time.) A whistleblower who remains within an organization but flouts its rules to expose wrongdoing, might continue to be a member of the organization while having, in effect, abandoned some part of its practices. Playful uses of words might depart from the practices of their use while depending for their intelligibility on being departures from those very practices.



that the player, simply in virtue of being a player, ought to follow the rules of the game? The central point, I think, is that commitments are about the normative-practical implications of occupying a certain standing, not about what course to take. Believing certain things commits one to believing other things. Merely incurring such a commitment does not tell us whether to believe something we are currently committed to believing. The best response might be to give up some belief among those that incur the commitment. Intending to do something commits one to taking the means necessary to doing that thing. Merely incurring such a commitment does not tell us whether to take the means. The best response might be to abandon the intention. The general point is that incurring a commitment leaves open whether we should do that to which we are committed rather than alter the condition that incurs the commitment. This applies to the commitments incurred by participating in a practice. While participating in a practice incurs a commitment to following the rules governing the practice, the mere fact that this commitment has been incurred does not dictate that the rules should be followed. It might be that we ought to stop participating in the practice as in the case of practices of using terms of racial abuse. It makes sense that this should be so. Practices do not exist in isolation. If we are participating in a practice and the question arises whether to continue participating and, by implication continue to follow the rules, the mere fact that we are participants will yield no answer. There can be pressing reasons having to do with the impact of the practice to withdraw from it. Yet these reasons do not impugn the idea that being a participant commits one to following its rules.

Using the term 'goldfinch' in its usual sense counts as a practice because it is an activity that is essentially rule-governed in that it would not be the activity that it is but for its being governed by the rule prescribing respect for the condition of correct application that display the relevant meaning. It is in keeping with the proposed account of how participants relate to the rules of a practice that those who use 'goldfinch' in this way incur a commitment to following this rule. This commitment amounts to it being the case that one ought to avoid continuing to participate in the practice while not following this rule. It can be discharged in one of two ways—by withdrawing from the practice or by following the rule. One could withdraw by giving up the use of the term or more radically by ceasing to use English.

The psychological dimension of governance by rules depends on whether the rules are formulated and explicitly treated as rules. The rules of soccer can be written down and cited to guide behaviour. It is correspondingly easy to say what would count as being governed by such rules. This would be a mat-

ter of knowing what the rules are and submitting oneself to them. (This would include preparedness to take the consequences if one flouts them.) Rules for word-use of the sort that I have posited are not generally written down. They are not rules that guide in the way that the rules of rugby guide because speakers do not routinely have them in mind. This might lead one to be sceptical that speakers are governed by rules like these. Yet there does seem to be a sense in which we can follow rules, and accordingly be governed by them, even if we never have them in mind in full generality. It might be that we routinely follow the rules in question in this sense.

For the sake of argument suppose that there is a rule in the style of Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) prescribing that we make our contributions to a conversation relevant given the accepted purpose or direction of the conversation. This rule could be *implicitly* followed even by those who never articulate it. An important part of what that would amount to is that their contributions are in general relevant to the purpose and direction of conversations in which one takes part, but that by itself would amount to their according to the rule but not to their following it. It would be crucial that they also have an ability to recognize concerning uncooperative contributions that they are *to be avoided* because they lack relevance. They need not have a general conception of what conversational cooperation amounts to. What matters is that their own contributions are modulated by their ability to recognize of irrelevant contributions that they are or would be inappropriate because irrelevant. They would have to be sensitive to irrelevance not only in that they actually avoid it (by-and-large), but also in that they have some understanding of irrelevance as to be avoided. In virtue of such understanding they would not merely accord with the rule; they would implicitly follow it. The question arises whether a similar story is plausible for the sorts of rules governing the use of predicative terms that I have envisaged.

We fail to respect the conditions of correct application of a term when our use of it does not manifest a grasp of those conditions. If the general idea in play in the discussion of the Cooperative Principle were to apply straightforwardly to the kind of rules governing the use of terms that we are considering, we would need to make sense of how those implicitly following a rule for a term can tell of uses that fail to respect the relevant conditions of correct application that they fail to respect those conditions and are of a sort to be avoided on that account. This might seem to ask for quite a lot if only because those with a grasp of the meaning of the term need not grasp in so many words what it is to respect the relevant conditions of correct application. But if they are competent users of the term they will be in command of something that is

tantamount to this. For instance, if the term is 'goldfinch' the use they make of it in their own utterances, and their reactions to uses made by others in their utterances, will be guided by a conception of the sort of thing to which it correctly applies. Should the issue arise they will think of the term as correctly applying to things of that sort. They will be able to recognize uses that clearly manifest a misconception as inappropriate because indicative of misunderstanding, and will regard such uses as inappropriate. That they implicitly follow the rule will be manifested in such ways. Of course, initiation into a practice for using words count as participants even at a stage in early learning at which they have no thoughts about words and their use, and even if they never get beyond that stage. The show keeps on the road in part because a sufficient number of participants are reflective to some degree about their use of language.

The proposal, then, is that the practical dimension of grasp of the meaning of a term amounts to knowing how to use it correctly in a sense that implicates an ability implicitly to follow the relevant rule.<sup>10</sup> This account accommodates the plausible thought that knowing how to use a word is not simply a matter of having various dispositions, conceived in the standard philosophical way, but implicates a sense of there being right and wrong ways to use it and an ability to tell which is which.

## 5. Resistance to normativity

Meaning is essentially normative if there is something about using an expression meaningfully that in and of itself makes it the case that those so using it ought to do something. On the account sketched in the previous section the normative dimension of the meaning of predicative terms is captured by the claim that just in virtue of using a term in a particular sense one incurs a com-

<sup>10</sup>Jennifer Hornsby, defending the view that semantic knowledge is practical, suggests that 'someone whose knowledge how to  $\phi$  is practical is able to simply  $\phi$  (at least so long as it is actually possible for her to  $\phi$ )' (Hornsby 2005: 115). To be able simply to  $\phi$  is to be able to  $\phi$  but not through doing something else. In response Jason Stanley remarks that '[i]n the case of individual words (and modes of syntactic combination), there is no . . . ability to do something, no ability simply to  $F$ ' (Stanley 2005: 138). The account I am proposing suggests that Stanley is unduly pessimistic with respect individual predicative terms. When we are able to use such terms correctly, in the sense of using them in keeping with the relevant conditions of correct application, and we exercise that ability in uses that are correct in that sense, we do not do so by doing something else. And once we bear in mind that use covers so much more than application we can make sense of how the ability to use a word correctly can implicate an ability to use that word in combination with others in ways that make sense both syntactically and semantically.

mitment to following a rule for its use prescribing respect for the conditions of correct application that display the relevant meaning. The commitment arises from being a participant in a practice of using of the term in the relevant sense. To have such a commitment is a matter of it being the case that one ought to avoid continuing in the practice while flouting this rule.

Some might suggest that the commitments incurred by using terms can be explained without assuming that meaning is essentially normative. The thought might be that we have a reason to use a term in a manner that respects its conditions of correct application because otherwise we run the risk of failing to communicate. Such normativity as there is in this area is taken to relate to instrumental rationality rather than anything essential to meaning. On this view there is no need to posit the kind of practice that I am linking to the correct use of terms and to the normativity of meaning. It is true that native speakers with command of the term 'goldfinch', and likely to want to talk about goldfinches or understand the talk of other English speakers about goldfinches, have a very good reason to continue being participants in the practice, since being a participant is the means to achieve those ends. The question though is whether uses that are incorrect in the second sense can be explained as failures of instrumental rationality. I think not since a misuse would be no less a misuse if the speaker were to have decisive practical reasons to use a term in a manner that fails to respect its conditions of correct application. It is crucial that we do not conflate considerations pertaining to why one should participate in a practice with what is incumbent upon one if one is a participant. From the present perspective there is something one has reason to do just in virtue of being a participant in a practice of using a term, irrespective of any reasons there might be to participate in the practice: one has reason either to respect the conditions of correct application of the term or withdraw from the practice.

Discussion of the normativity of meaning has been seriously distorted by *the problematic assumption* that if meaning were essentially normative then its normativity would be captured by such claims as that 'red' ought to be applied to a thing only if it is red.<sup>11</sup> There really is no good reason to accept this assumption. Those who, by way of telling a lie, say of something that is not red that it is red might have acted wrongly but there is no reason to think that they have made some linguistic error. I take it to be a strength of the pre-

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<sup>11</sup> This goes back to Kripke 1982. See also Gibbard 1994 and, recently, Ginsborg 2012. Some who object to the essential normativity of meaning are also guided by this assumption. See, for instance, Horwich 1998 and Hattiangadi 2007.

ceding discussion that it avoids this assumption and thus avoids objections to the view that meaning is essentially normative that rest on a conception of normativity that incorporates it. The key to felicity in this area is having due regard to the two types of correctness that I have distinguished. Where the focus is on correctness of the second type, we can happily accommodate the fact that there need be nothing linguistically incorrect about a false application of a predicative term. From such a perspective there is no incentive to link normativity to the kind of ought-statement that figures in the problematic assumption.

### 6. *A problem posed by occasion-sensitivity*

The position I have described is theoretically satisfying in that it connects two notions that are sometimes thought to have their natural homes in quite different theoretical frameworks. These are conditions of correct application and rules for use. But it faces what threatens to be a significant challenge. I shall describe the challenge and suggest a way to meet it that merits attention.

Jonathan Dancy objects to theories of meaning that invoke rules for use drawing upon the following conception of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

... the meaning of [a] term is what one knows when one is a competent user of that term. If the term is capable of making a range of contributions to differing contexts, this is part of what the competent user must know. To be a competent user, then, is to be in command of the *sorts of* difference that the presence of the term can make to the semantic value of the contexts in which it can appropriately be found. ... The meaning of [a] term, understood in general, is the range of differences it can make; its meaning in a given context is to be found somewhere in that range (though of course some contexts force an extension or other adaptation of that range). (Dancy 2004: 194)

In the light of this conception Dancy asserts,

There is nothing here that could be captured in a rule. Rules, in the sense in which we are here concerned, must be articulable in principle, even if our competent speaker is incapable of articulating them in practice. But if the meaning of the term consists in

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<sup>12</sup> I have found Whiting 2010 helpful in relation to what follows.

an open-ended *range* of available *sorts of* semantic contribution in this way, it is essentially inarticulable. Competence with it will therefore have to consist in a kind of skill rather than a grasp of a specifiable rule . . . . (Dancy 2004: 196)

I am happy with the idea that linguistic competence is a kind of skill. The question is whether the view Dancy outlines poses a problem for the account of grasp of meaning that I have given here.

First we need to consider why one might think that terms have the potential to make 'an open-ended *range* of available *sorts of* semantic contribution'. Examples of a sort used by Charles Travis (for instance, in Travis 1989, 1994, 1997, 2000) are suggestive in this respect. Here is one.

Pia's Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is the colour of leaves she paints them. Returning she reports, 'That's better. The leaves are green now.' She speaks the truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for a study of green-leaf chemistry. 'The leaves (on my tree) are green,' Pia says. 'You can have those.' But now Pia speaks falsehood. (Travis 1997: 89)

What is being suggested is not that 'green' is ambiguous in the way that 'bank' is or polysemous in the way that 'stand' is. It is that even when understood as having a particular meaning it does not make the same contribution to what is said on each occasion on which it is used.

. . . the words 'is green', while speaking of being green, may make any of many semantic contributions to wholes of which they are a part, different contributions yielding different results as to what would count as being as they are said to be. (Travis 1997: 92)

One might suppose that the phenomenon is akin to the occasion-sensitivity of an indexical like 'now' which is associated with a function from times of speaking to times referred to by its use. Pursuing this line the idea, as Travis puts it, would be that

what 'is green' means determines a set of parameters (variables in speakings), and a function from values of them onto a range of contributions 'is green' might make, such that for any argument of the function (fixed relevant values of the speaking), the value of the function is the contribution which 'is green' would make on a speaking so characterized. (1994: 174)

Travis rejects any such view and there is indeed reason to doubt that the phenomenon yields to a functional treatment because it is implausible that anyone who fully grasps the meaning of 'green' must be aware of, or even sensitive to, some fixed set of parameters of speakings that select what it contributes to what is said by its use on any occasion. A pressing question for the present discussion is whether the examples pose a problem for the claim that predicative terms are governed by rules prescribing respect for conditions of correct application. On the face of it they do if understood in Travis's way for they raise a question as to whether it can be right to suppose that there are meaning-exhibiting conditions of correct application as I have portrayed them. Travis himself rejects the view that 'green' correctly applies to a thing if and only if it is green. (Travis 2000: 213, using the case of 'blue').

Let's grant this much.

*Underdetermination (in relation to the example given of uses of 'green')*

- (a) What is said by 'The leaves are green' on the two occasions of use in the example given is different, and is, therefore, not wholly fixed by the words used, yet
- (b) this is not because the words used are ambiguous or otherwise polysemous, and
- (c) the difference cannot be explained on the model of standard treatments of indexicals.

What then can account for this underdetermination? We are liable to be pulled in two different directions here.

We might think there is a sense in which that of which Pia speaks in her first utterance is different from that of which she speaks in her second utterance. Though in both cases she speaks of the leaves her first utterance speaks of them truly with respect to the colour they have after painting and her second utterance speaks of them falsely with respect to their current natural (unadulterated) colour. So one direction in which we might be pulled is to accepting (a) that what is said of them with respect to their colour after painting is exactly what is said of them with respect to their current natural colour and so (b) it is wrong to assume that what 'green' contributes to what is said by either utterance is different. (One is tempted to say here, 'If the same colour is ascribed then surely what is said on both occasions is the same—that something has that colour.') But there is a pull from a different direction. Respects in which things can be green are just ways of being green. So Pia's first

application attributes one way of being green to her leaves and her second falsely attributes another way of being green to her leaves. From this perspective, what is attributed is different. Correspondingly, what 'green' contributes to what is said by Pia's first utterance is such that the utterance ascribes one way of being green while what it contributes to what is said by her second utterance is such that this utterance ascribes a different way of being green. The contributions are different as Travis supposes. Other examples serve to suggest that this is the right way to go. A surface might be green because made of green plastic. It would look green if seen in daylight. A different surface might be green because bathed in green light. If one said of the latter that it was green in a context in which the colour of the material of which it was made was at issue one would speak falsely. So the contribution 'green' makes to an application of it to a surface can be such that what it ascribes to the surface is being green in the first respect, and it can be such that what the application ascribes to the surface is being green in the second respect. On this way of thinking what becomes of the tempting thought that since the same colour is ascribed what 'green' contributes to what is said is the same in the two cases? That thought seems compelling because the same concept is in play and accordingly there is a sense in which the meaning of the word is constant across the applications. But as Travis remarks, 'a concept by itself does not determine which ways for things to be, so which things, satisfy the concept' (1994: 181)

If this view is right how does the context of utterance contribute to fixing what is said? We are to reject the idea that for the case of 'green' there is some fixed set of parameters associated with the relevant utterances and a function from those parameters to which colour-respect is at issue. Even so, observing Pia finish her leaf painting, what she says in speaking as she does would be clear. Davidsonian considerations about interpretation kick in at this point.<sup>13</sup> To the extent that a person's utterance about present circumstances is intelligible it must make sense as saying something that the speaker could (perhaps ineptly) treat as being pertinent to, and reasonable in, those circumstances. What Pia says first reflects what it would make sense for her to say with the words she uses given her strange preoccupations. That it is the colour she has painted on the leaves of which she speaks would be clear *to us* because, as the situation has been described, only that understanding would make sense of her speaking as she does. Likewise in speaking to her friend the context makes it clear that she can be speaking only of the natural colour the leaves

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<sup>13</sup> For an outline of what I take the central considerations to be see Millar 2004: ch. 1.



have. (Presumably she is being mischievous.)

Another example used by Travis (1989: 18-19) yields to a similar treatment. In one context, saying 'There is milk in the fridge' might pertain to the availability of milk for some mode of consumption—drinking, adding to tea, making a cake mixture, and the like. In another it might pertain to a puddle of spilt milk that is still there despite an attempt to clean the fridge. On Travis's view the contribution of 'milk' to what is said is different in the two cases. One might find this hard to credit because both utterances attribute the presence of milk to the contents of the fridge, but there are different ways in which milk can be present—as a stain on a garment or on a floor, in a carton for storing milk for consumption, or as a drip on a mother's breast. An utterance applying 'milk' might attribute its presence in any of various ways and so what 'milk' contributes to what is said will vary accordingly.

Travis (1997: 91) is, I think, right to dismiss the suggestion that the phenomenon in question should be considered to be a case of ellipsis if that is taken to mean that the words used are shorthand for a longer sentence that does not admit of diverse possible understandings and can therefore serve to fix what is said. The problem with this is that if underdetermination of the sort under consideration is pervasive then those further words could bear different understandings in different contexts. It's true, and instructive, that if anyone were wondering what Pia said by her words on either occasion, further words could make this clear. Pia's first utterance could be clarified by saying, 'With respect of the colour they have been painted the leaves are green'. Her second utterance could be clarified by saying, 'With respect to their natural colour the leaves are green'. This is so even if the clarifying words themselves admit of different understandings in that there are possible contexts, other than those in which the clarifying words are actually used, in which what they would say would be different.

The upshot is that a premise concerning the meaning of terms in Dancy's case against the invocation of rules for the use of terms looks to be correct. Supposing that it is, does Dancy have a good case against the account of rules that I gave—the account on which rules for use of predicative terms prescribe respect for the relevant conditions of correct (=true) application? I suggest that the account may stand if we refine our conception of meaning-exhibiting conditions of correct application to accommodate occasion-sensitivity. For a term like 'green' the form of such conditions must be something like this: in the sense in which it stands for a colour, 'green' correctly applies to a thing on an occasion of use if and only if there is a certain way for things to be coloured, the occasion is such that what is at issue is that way for things to be coloured,

and the thing is green in that way. The term 'milk' may be used to ascribe the presence of milk in a variety of forms and the words used on an occasion of use need not by themselves determine which form is at issue. Accordingly, 'milk' applies to a substance on an occasion if and only if there is a certain form in which milk can be present, the occasion is such that what is at issue is whether milk is present in that form, and the substance is milk present in that form. The form at issue might be evident because interlocutors are both attending to a stain on the floor or a puddle in a fridge or it might be evident because of conversation raising a question as to the availability of milk for consumption.

I emphasised in section 1 that those who have some grasp of the meaning of a predicative term might have diverse conceptions of what it is to fall under it. Clearly it can be part of one's conception of what it is to be green that there can be different respects in which something can be green and it can be part of one's conception of milk that milk can be present in a variety of forms. One's ability to employ the concept of milk can be refined though a developing conception of the varieties of forms in which milk can be present. Similarly one's ability to employ the concept of being green can be refined though a developing conception of the variety of respects in which something can be green. A corollary is that the degree to which one is able generally to respect the conditions of correct application of a term will vary with the level of refinement of one's conception of the range of things to which it can be applied.

The account I am offering is in keeping with something that concerns Dancy in the passages I quoted: there is much that goes into an ability to employ a term correctly, in the sense of being in keeping with its meaning, that is not brought out by formulations of rules. This is true on my account since the rules that I envisage to do not specify what it is to respect the relevant conditions of correct application. But this is a virtue of the account, not an objection to it. Since respecting the conditions of correct application is a practical ability we should not expect any rules fully to articulate what it is to have that ability. My suggestion, then, is that Dancy's remarks, for all the insight they undoubtedly contain, do not tell against the conception I have been outlining.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>I would like to record my appreciation of the massive contribution that Pascal Engel has made to the international dissemination of clear, constructive philosophy and to wish him well on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.

## 7. References

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