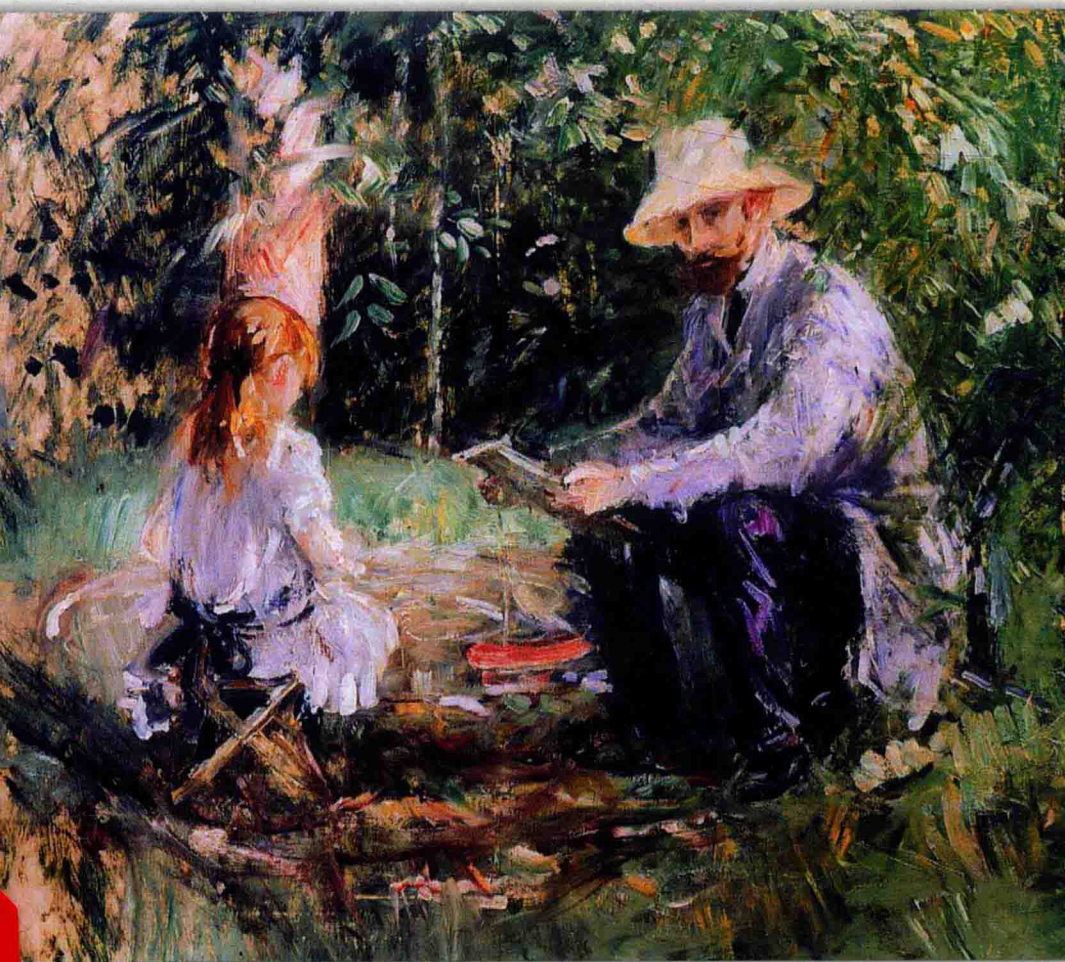


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MEANING *and* NORMATIVITY



ALLAN GIBBARD

Meaning and Normativity

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Meaning and Normativity

To Steve and George with love

Preface

This book is the upshot of my two decades' struggle to work out ideas I had in response to Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982). When I was finishing my 1990 book, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, I received a reader's report from the publisher that was later shown to be by John McDowell. The report, as I'll put it quite roughly, observed that I treated meaning entirely in natural terms, whereas I needed to realize that meaning is normative. I turned to Kripke's book, which I should have read sooner, and was both enchanted and worried. The lines that Kripke pursues on behalf of Wittgenstein, I thought, were right in important ways, but could benefit from devices familiar to metaethics. G. E. Moore distinguished what "good" means from what he called "*the good*"—or as I would put it, from what being good consists in. We need, I thought, to apply such a distinction to meaning, and separate what "means" means from what meaning such-and-such consists in. Once we do this, I became convinced, the "skeptical solution" that Kripke finds in Wittgenstein transforms into something far more straight. (What happens as a result to Kripke's and Wittgenstein's treatments of "private language" isn't a question I pursued very far, since commentators haven't agreed on what the "private language argument" is supposed to be, and I haven't been able to find a rendition that convinces me.) As for whether Kripke's treatment gets right what Wittgenstein is intimating, I haven't pursued that question. It is notoriously difficult to discern how Wittgenstein is arguing, if arguing is what he is doing. Interpreters disagree, and I haven't found an interpretation apart from Kripke's that could engage my own thinking. As I grappled with Wittgenstein in graduate school, I thought that his work on mathematics was far more intriguing than philosophers' lore credited at the time—and I argue in the third chapter of this book, in effect, that Wittgenstein's example of counting by twos is more illuminating than Kripke's example of addition. Still, it is as Kripke presented a paradox—one that may perhaps be Wittgenstein's—that I thought I came to see what to say in response.

The fruits of this cogitation included a marvelous discussion group with my colleagues Paul Boghossian, Peter Railton, and David Velleman, a set of

three Hempel Lectures at Princeton in 1992, and a revision of the first lecture published in 1994 as “Meaning and Normativity”, passages of which reappear in this book. I thought that in that paper, I had resolved some of the problems that give rise to the Kripke/Wittgenstein paradox—and I still think so. My second and third Princeton Hempel Lectures, though, aimed at something more ambitious: defining meaning in purely normative plus empirical terms. Some of my friends said it couldn’t be done, and for much of two decades I worked to prove them wrong. My next sabbatical in 1998–1999 I spent in London, intending two projects. One, dealing with the shape of the theory of normative concepts in my 1990 book, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, eventuated in my 2003 book, *Thinking How to Live*. The meaning project, though, still eluded me. For my following sabbatical in New York in 2005–2006, I worked to get my thinking started by reviewing Paul Horwich’s two books on meaning, and then prepared five Hågerström Lectures on the subject for the University of Uppsala. I don’t remember just when I later persuaded myself that I had the basic devices I needed to solve the puzzles that had stymied me, but in the summer of 2008 was I was publicly trying out the approach I had devised. Since then, I have been working on how it might all fit together.

In my books and other work developing a form of expressivism for normative concepts, I have tried to explain how, though we are parts of nature, still as parts of nature that live and think, we can be expected to have thoughts that aren’t naturalistic. Not all of our thoughts about ourselves will amount to naturalistic descriptions. In my books up to now, I followed expressivists like Ayer and Hare in taking this view of ethical and other normative thinking. In this book, I endeavor to develop such a view of our very thinking about thinking.

I have not been able, in this book, to heed anywhere nearly all of the vast philosophical literature related to the issues I take up in the book. I suspect that the ambitions of the book and the lines I propose for dealing with meaning and normativity are sufficiently distinctive that others’ approaches don’t much engage them—but of course I may always be mistaken in such expectations, and if so, I apologize for ignoring those works I should have treated. Some highly relevant work has been published recently enough that trying to remain current would have delayed completing this book indefinitely.—Derek Parfit’s trenchant criticisms in *On What Matters* (2011) I’ll engage elsewhere (in a volume of critical essays to be edited by Peter

Singer). Kit Fine's *Semantic Relationism* (2007) has been out longer and demands serious engagement, but I need to think his proposals through more fully than I have managed to do so far, and consider how they might bear on the project of this book. On his proposals, I add only a tentative parenthetical note. I can hope that aspects of what I do could be reframed in ways informed by Fine, but I can't at all guarantee how such a project would go. Brandom's 1994 book *Making It Explicit* has deeply influenced my thinking, but I don't much engage it here, apart from how aspects of its general structure. I voice worries about other aspects of his treatment in my 1996 commentary "Thought, Norms, and Discursive Practice".

Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne, in their 1997 book *The Grammar of Meaning*, start out with a thought that is central to my approach in this book: that

the very speech act of making a meaning claim is itself normative, that saying what something means is *prescribing*. As such, meaning claims have more in common with the claims of morality than they do with the claims of science and so ought to raise for us philosophical questions consonant with those arising in moral philosophy, rather than in the philosophy of science.¹

Meaning claims, they say, concern "what ought to be inferred from what."² They develop these leading ideas, though, in a way quite different from mine, and I have not attempted an assessment of their approach or tried to compare it with my own ways of doing things. Byqvist and Hattiangadi, in their paper "Does Thought Imply Ought?" (2007), criticize an approach with important affinities to mine, but I must leave consideration of their critique for other occasions.

As I indicate at times in the book, I am not claiming that treating the concept of meaning as normative is the most important and promising way to investigate meaning systematically. The project that I would have been proudest to advance would be to explain phenomena of meaning scientifically, in a purely causal, non-normative way. A comprehensive treatment in this vein would explain language and its interaction with individual thinking as something to be expected in an intricately social species. The potentialities of a human newborn to develop into a refined social and linguistic being would be explained as biological adaptations, shaped by natural selection for behaviors that lead, indirectly, to high reproduction in an ecology of like, highly social language users. We know a great deal about

¹ p. 2.

² p. 9. Their article "From a Normative Point of View" (1990) too has this key idea, which was central to my "Meaning and Normativity" (1994) and is central to this book.

how such a story should go. The conventionality of language is to be explained along the lines broached by David Lewis in *Convention*, taken biological in the ways broached by Maynard Smith in his treatment of evolutionarily stable strategies. The “conventions” in this story are of two kinds: first, from the point of view of the genes, as it were, coordinating with the genotypes of fellows in coding recipes for developing, in normal environments, mechanisms for interacting with others. Second, we have conventions among the resulting individuals, including features of the particular language a community shares. In such a picture, Ruth Millikan’s ideas of words as reproductive families and normal conditions as those one’s propensities are shaped to cope with are powerful and central. So are Gary Marcus’s picture of genes coding for recipes for developing phenotypes and John Tooby’s and Leda Cosmides’s ideas of contingency plans for developing in response to the social conditions around one. Ruth Millikan’s difficult book *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* is a powerful development of this kind. My sense, though, is that so far, we haven’t known how to refine this broad approach and get it to engage with more specific linguistic phenomena. I would love to contribute to doing so, but so far, I don’t know how.

Products of natural selection are unlike anything else in the universe, and acculturated human brains are unlike any other products of natural selection that we know of. The science of these will look quite different from physics, chemistry, or meteorology. A good account of human thinking, social interactions, and social patterns that places the familiar within a general biological account would be a crowing achievement of our species.

Suppose, though, we had such a powerful naturalistic treatment of thinking and language, picturing thinking and language as features of an ecology populated by highly social products of natural selection adapted to thriving reproductively in such an ecology. That would leave questions of what all this has to do with meaning and mental content as we—participants in the ecology—think of it. How do coordinated goings-on in such a picture constitute thinking thoughts? How do they constitute voicing thoughts in language filled with meanings? If we succeed in interpreting complex physical goings-on as thinking and as voicing thoughts, we interpret ourselves as thinking about the very goings-on we thus interpret. Ordinary thinking about thinking need not emerge, viewed in such a

way, as entirely like thinking about phenomena that don't involve thinking. The Kripke/Wittgenstein puzzle I see as a manifestation of what can happen when scientifically informed inquiry scrutinizes itself. This book is my attempt to sketch, along simplified lines, how thinking about thinking might work.

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Passages in the book are drawn, with kind permission of their publishers and often with modifications, from articles of mine that have previously appeared. They are:

“Horwich on Meaning” (2008). *Mind* **117**:465 (January), 141–166.

“Truth and Correct Belief” (2005). *Philosophical Issues*, a Supplement to *Noûs*, **15**, Normativity, E. Sosa and E. Villanueva, eds., 338–351.

“Meaning and Normativity” (1994). *Philosophical Issues* **5**, Enrique Villanueva, ed., *Truth and Rationality* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1994), 95–115.

“Thoughts and Norms” (2003). *Philosophical Issues: A Supplement to Noûs* **13**:1, 83–98.

“Reply to Critics” (2006). *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **72**:3 (May), 729–744.

I have received help over these two decades from many people, far more help than I have been able to keep track of. I conducted six seminars on the issues of this book at the University of Michigan, in 1993, 1997, 2000, 2005, 2008, and 2011, discussing drafts of book chapters and papers that led to the book and contributed to it, as I tried to clarify my ideas. The discussion in these seminars was immensely valuable, and I have not managed to keep track of the many significant contributions that seminar participants made to

my thinking and writing. Active participants (as far as I can reconstruct) included in 1993 Laura Schroeter, Krista Lawlor, Robert Mabrito, Edward Hinchman, Nadeem Hussain, Steven Schultz, David Hills, François Schroeter, and Gregory Velazco y Trianowsky; in 1997 Stephen Petersen, Peri Weingrad, Karen Bennett, Nishi Shah, and Dan Sperber; in 2000 Stephen Daskal, Shane Davis, Peter Gibbard, Bruce Lacey, Carole Lee, Pat Lewtas, Greg Sax, and Kevin Toh; in 2005 Aaron Bronfman, Vanessa Carbonell, Ivan Mayerhofer, Howard Nye; Jim Staihar, Ira Lindsey, Scott Sturgeon, Peter Railton, and Peter Ludlow; in 2008 Stephen Campbell, Ian Flora, Warren Herold, Dustin Locke, Ivan Mayenhofer, Giacomo Mollo, Howard Nye, Sven Nyholm, Linda Brakel, Carl Hoefer, Patricia Marino, Eric Swanson, and Peter Railton; and in 2011 Annette Bryson, Bryan Parkhurst, Adam Rigoni, Stephen Shaus, Patrick Shirreff, Damien Wassel, Nate Charlow, Patrick Clipsham, Billy Dunaway, and Richmond Thomason. (I have listed only once people who participated during more than one term.) I apologize to anyone whom I should acknowledge but lost track of in this list. The contributions of a number of these people were extraordinary, but I have found no fair way to single them out. I am immensely grateful for the extremely high quality of the discussion in these seminars, which affected my thinking in many ways.

Over two decades, I presented material that contributed to this book to departmental colloquia at Princeton University, Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, Cornell University, the University of Notre Dame, Ohio State University, the University of Syracuse, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of York, University College London, Johns Hopkins University, Oxford University, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Rochester, the University of Canterbury and the University of Otago in New Zealand, the City University of New York Graduate Center, l'Università di Roma La Sapienza, Uppsala University, Indiana University, Stanford University, and the University of British Columbia. I also made presentations to la Sociedad Filosófica Ibero-Americana (in one case with a commentary by Paul Horwich); to the Franco-Indian workshop on "Rationality in Cognitive Science and Social Science" at NISTADS, New Delhi; to the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association (with a reply by Paul Boghossian); to a Workshop on Normativity in Paris; to European Summer Schools in Analytical Philosophy in Italy; to the New York Institute of

Philosophy; to the New York University Seminar on Mind and Language (with commentary by David Velleman); to a Workshop on "Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism" in Sidney; to a Johns Hopkins University departmental retreat; to the Korean Philosophical Association in a Special Session of the World Congress of Philosophy; to Arché in St. Andrews; and to the Western Canadian Philosophical Association. All these occasions gave rise to valuable discussion. As with the seminars at my own university, I have been far from able to take full advantage of the observations, arguments, and ideas of audience members. Among other people I have specially benefited from in conversations specifically on aspects of this project are Jason Stanley and Craige Roberts.

I have benefited immensely, of course, from family, friends, students, and colleagues. During the whole period that led to this book, my life has been brightened by my dear wife Beth Genné, without whose love and support I find it hard to imagine pursuing life with zest.

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Introduction

The Normativity Thesis

Man would live better, Mephisto scolds the Lord, “if you hadn’t given him the gleam of heavenly light.” Or perhaps this mistranslates Goethe’s *Faust*: the German word “Schein” can indeed mean gleam or luster, but it can also mean appearance or illusion. We’d live a little better, perhaps, if the Lord hadn’t given us the illusion of heavenly light. Light itself, we now find, is something physical that in no way specially resembles anything in us as we experience it. Light is wave- or particle-like; it is electromagnetic radiation quantized into photons. Is the gleam as we experience it then an illusion? Are we mistaken in seeing the physical world as, in places, gleaming and radiant? More crucially, are we mistaken about the nature of human experience itself? Is experience too something physical, and not at all as we conceive it? And if so, are we therefore deluded about its nature?

Philosophers from near the dawn of the subject have been at odds over questions like these. Some of us are physicalists, maintaining that the mind, in so far as there is any such thing, is entirely physical. Some are dualists and interactionists, holding, with Descartes, that the human mind is a thing beyond physics, a non-physical thing that intervenes in the physical world to cause some of our movements. This book will mostly ignore such dualists, and posit a claim that they reject. The physical world, I’ll take it, is causally closed. Cartesians hold, on the contrary, that a non-physical spirit causes our fist-fights and book writings, thus causing physical motions, changes, and transformations. Whether this happens must be, at least in part, an empirical question—and I bet against the hypothesis that it does. The laws that govern particles, waves, strings, or whatever makes up the physical world apart from life govern them in living things as well. They govern whatever goes on in our brains and nerves. In this respect I side with the physicalists.

Physicalists must explain, though, why dualists seem so right. Are human experiences, thoughts, and meanings all physical phenomena? Or alternatively, do they turn out not even to exist? Either way, a physicalist has explaining to do. Physicalistic philosophers take up this burden eagerly, and I'll be shouldering some of it myself. We can't, of course, get far without further discoveries and devices of science, but in the meantime we'll press along as best we can, looking for hopeful ways to proceed.

Much of this book, though, explores a different kind of philosophical vision. Perhaps the clash of dualist and physicalist is in some ways misconceived. The physical world indeed is causally closed, I take it, and if it is, then a straight interactionist dualism can't be right. Perhaps, though, the straightest of physicalisms isn't right either. We do think, I'll take it, and we do experience our surroundings. But these claims aren't claims of physics. Thinking and experiencing aren't straight physical goings-on—or at least it's misleading to say that they are. Something more nuanced and refined must be said about thinking and experience.

With this most philosophical physicalists would agree. Science explains the world at more than one "level". A chemical explanation, for instance, doesn't appeal to quantum electrodynamics, even if in some sense, all that's going on is a matter of events at the quantum level. Now I don't doubt that there is much truth in such talk of levels. I won't try to sort out just what this truth is; I'll steer clear of vexed matters of the senses in which a higher level science such as chemistry or ecology does or does not "reduce" to lower levels. Instead, I'll chiefly be looking to a different kind of philosophical stratagem for saying why perfectly true descriptions of the same goings-on might not be intertranslatable.

Begin with a stock case for which talk of "levels" might indeed work. This case holds a lesson that carries over to the alternative strategies I'll be pursuing. Water, as we have known for over two centuries, is H_2O . The property of being water, arguably, just *is* the property of being H_2O , consisting of molecules with two hydrogen atoms joined to one oxygen atom. The properties are one and the same.¹ Still the term "water" doesn't *mean* H_2O . Or at least it didn't before the time of Lavoisier, back when no one knew that water is H_2O . As Frege would have noted, it is trivial that

¹ This bald statement of course needs elucidation and qualification. What we normally count as "water" is impure H_2O , and the property of being H_2O is only the property of being water purely.

water is water, whereas that water is H_2O was a great discovery. The sentences 'Water is water' and 'Water is H_2O ' had different meanings. In play in this history, then, were a single property but two distinct meanings. All this we can put also in terms of concepts: The meaning of a term, we can try saying, is the *concept* that it *voices*.² In play are a single property, then, but two distinct concepts of it.

This book addresses meaning and concepts, the content of talk and of thinking. I won't, for the most part, take up other ways in which we humans appear to go beyond the possibilities of mere physical stuff. Specifically, I won't take up puzzles of experience and consciousness, of what it's like to see green or to feel blue: I set those puzzles aside as beyond the scope of this book, much as I would love to solve them. What I want to explore, as Ogden and Richards long ago put it, is the meaning of meaning.³ I have suggested that the terms 'water' and ' H_2O ' mean different things and voice different concepts. What might this claim itself mean? I want to understand, then, the meaning of meaning—or in a vein that is closely related, the concept of a concept.

Puzzles of Meaning

Begin with an example of Quine's.⁴ In an exotic locale, as visiting anthropologists from far away, we observe a man Ndapu who points to another man and says 'kula'. We ask ourselves what the term means. The man he pointed to, we discover, is his half-brother, and it appears, as we investigate, that he applies the term 'kula' to his half-brothers and to no one else. Later, though, he points to a pelican and again says 'kula'. Does he hold pelicans to be his half-brothers? I jump to a conclusion: the term 'kula', I hypothesize, means half-brother, and when he applies the term to a pelican, he means that the bird is his half-brother. Ruth, however, my fellow investigator, proposes another hypothesis. The term 'kula' means not half-brother, but half-brother or totem associate. Ndapu applies the term to pelicans not

² We might have said instead that a word "expresses" a concept. Later, though, I want to reserve the term 'express' for expressing a state of mind, such as the belief that rabbits are quick.

³ Ogden & Richards, *Meaning of Meaning* (1923).

⁴ Quine, *Word and Object* (1960a), 77.