

Chapter 3

Semantic primitivism and normativity

(Originally published in *Ratio* 14: 1–17, 2001)

Preview

Kripke-Wittgenstein meaning scepticism appears as a serious threat to the idea that there could be meaning-constituting facts. Some people argue that the only viable response is to adopt semantic primitivism (SP). SP is the doctrine that meaning-facts are *sui generis* and irreducibly semantic. The idea is that by allowing such primitive semantic facts into our ontology Kripke's sceptical paradox cannot arise. I argue that SP is untenable in spite of its apparent resourcefulness. No version of SP can account for the normative and practical aspects of meaning while remaining non-reductive. A sparse, basic SP does not adequately deal with the sceptical paradox. A richer SP, with an added intuitive epistemology, can only explain the practical aspect of meaning by aligning itself with reductive use-based accounts of meaning. SP with essential relations between meanings and meaning-bearers could possibly avoid these problems, but we have no reason to think such a version of SP is really non-reductive. I conclude that Kripke-Wittgenstein meaning scepticism should not lead us to adopt SP, instead we should re-examine use-based, dispositionalist accounts of meaning.

Chapter 3

Semantic primitivism and normativity

1. Introduction

In this paper I argue that one should not adopt a non-reductive semantic primitivism in response to Kripke-Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox. The sceptical paradox is that 'there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by 'plus' . . . and my meaning nothing at all'.¹ That is, there are no facts – no meaning-facts – in virtue of which it can be true or false that someone means something by any utterance. Semantic primitivism (SP) is the doctrine that the sceptical paradox does not arise if by mean-ing-facts we mean *sui generis*, irreducible, judgement-independent meaning-facts.² The main motivation for SP is that the sceptical paradox only arises if one is committed to a reductive analysis of meaning, and that, therefore, we have reason to believe that a non-reductive account of meaning can sustain the idea that there are facts in virtue of which it can be true or false that I mean, e.g., *plus* by 'plus'. (Throughout my discussion I shall think of the facts in question as relational. We can conceive of the semantic relata, meaning-bearers and meanings, as abstract objects, and focus on the facts that determine which bearers are related to which meanings).

Intuitively, SP has some appeal. If we can help ourselves to primitive meaning-facts, then surely the sceptical paradox cannot arise. So, if we think the spectre of the sceptical paradox outweighs the price of enriching our ontology with primitive, irreducible meaning-facts, then it seems we should adopt SP. I want to argue that SP does not work. There is no conception of SP such that we do in fact

get an adequate non-reductive account of the concept of meaning.³ My main argument is that SP faces a dilemma: either it fails to make sense of our core beliefs about meaning, or it is reductive.

I first discuss the core of the Kripke-Wittgenstein arguments, and set out three core beliefs, or platitudes, which we may say are constitutive of the concept of meaning. Then I present a basic version of SP and argue that it is inadequate as it stands. I discuss two strengthened versions of SP, and argue that they both fail.

2. The Kripke-Wittgenstein arguments, dispositionalism and SP

The main difficulty in giving an account of meaning, leading to the sceptical paradox, is the following. No matter which finite meaning-fact is under consideration, it will be consistent with an infinite number of interpretations. For example, a finite series of uses, e.g., '2', '4', '6', '8', does not determine only one rule, such that there is only one correct way to continue the series. Likewise, a mental image or inner voice can legitimately be interpreted in an indefinite number of ways.⁴ The problem is that if none of the candidate meaning-constituting facts determine what is the right thing to do on the next occasion of application of an expression, then none of these facts can make it true or false that when someone then does apply the expression, he or she is correct or incorrect to do so. And without an aspect of correctness there will be no meaning.

One prominent reductionist suggestion for what the meaningfacts could be, which Kripke spends a lot of time on, is dispositionalism.⁵ This is the doctrine, roughly, that if meaning-facts are dispositional, then the correct thing to do at, say, the *n*th place in the series, is what the subject in question is disposed to do at the *n*th place in the series. But this suggestion apparently also falls prey to the sceptical paradox. How can incorrect use be possible, if the subject's dispositions for use of an expression determine what its correct use is? If everything the subject would do is correct, then we lose

the distinction between correct and incorrect altogether. So the situation is similar to the above scenario inasmuch as dispositionalism does not after all determine what is the correct thing to do on any application of any expression.

The semantic primitivist's response to such difficulties is simple. The only reason the candidate meaning-facts cannot determine what is correct to do is that they are non-semantic. If instead we let the meaning-facts be *sui generis* and irreducibly semantic, then it will be determined what is the correct thing to do on any occasion of application of an expression. This is what it is for a fact to be *semantic*. Hence, to prevent the Kripke-Wittgenstein paradox from arising, one must show that one's preferred meaning-facts do in fact determine what is the correct thing to do on any occasion of application of the expression in question. Notice, however, that in order to avoid the sceptical paradox, SP must take care to avoid reductionism also in its dispositionalist attire.

3. Three core platitudes about meaning

It is clear from the way the sceptical paradox arises that one of the core platitudes constitutive of the concept of meaning is that occasional error must be possible. That is, in order for a fact to determine a meaning for an expression, it must be clear what would count as an incorrect application with respect to the expression. The main reason is that it just does not make sense to say that someone 'follows' a rule unless it is possible for her not to follow it.

We should acknowledge, however, that the phenomenology associated with the error platitude tells us that there are at least two other indispensable platitudes surrounding the concept of meaning. There will be no point in establishing the possibility of occasional error, firstly, if it is impossible for the subjects in question to sometimes be aware they have made an error, and secondly, if it is not perspicuous that sometimes, when a subject is aware of an error, it is reasonable for him or her to react

in certain ways. These I shall call the platitudes concerning recognition of error and practicality of meaning.

Without these two platitudes the error platitude will not do the work for us it is supposed to do. We might know that error is possible, but it would be pointless for us to engage in disagreements about meaning, if we also know that we could never be aware of who is in error on a particular occasion. We might know that error is possible, and know who is in error, but it would be pointless to engage in disagreements about meaning if it is not clear that it is reasonable to react in certain ways.

I want to suggest that not only must the possibility of error be in place, but that it must be in place such that the platitudes about recognition and practicality are also in place. If not, then one's account of meaning is not adequate.⁶

4. A problem for Basic SP

My assessment of SP begins by considering *Basic SP*, which is the doctrine that an expression is related to its meaning in virtue of some primitive semantic fact such that an indefinite series of applications are determined as correct for that expression. Thus, we imagine that an expression like, 'dog' is related to the meaning *dog*, in virtue of some primitive meaning-fact. Notice that such relations are contingent, inasmuch as 'dog' could have meant something else. The thought is that this will resolve the main difficulty for an account of meaning and thus prevent the sceptical paradox from arising.

But Basic SP is nevertheless problematic. Consider how it would account for error. The mere possibility of error will be in place if our account of meaning allows that, on any occasion of application, by a subject S, of an expression ϕ , possibly, the application of ϕ is out of accord with ϕ 's

meaning. Presumably Basic SP will account for error like this: When S says ‘Fido is a dog’, then some primitive fact entails that the application of ‘Fido is a dog’ has certain correctness-conditions, to the effect, e.g., that ‘Fido is a dog’ means *Fido is a dog* on that occasion. Crucially, it will follow that if S says ‘Fido is a dog’, and ‘Fido is a dog’ means *Fido is a dog*, then, if Fido is a dog, S has said something true. On the other hand, if S says ‘Fido is a dog’ and still means *Fido is a dog*, but does it in a case where Fido is a cat, then S has said something false – she has said that the cat is a dog.

Now consider this *alternative story*. I noticed that, *ex hypothesis*, meaning-bearers will get their meanings assigned *contingently* by the primitive meaning-facts. (For example, it will not be an essential property of the expression ‘Fido is a dog’ that it means *Fido is a dog*). Reflect that this makes the following situation possible: S says ‘Fido is a dog’, and some other primitive meaning-fact determines that ‘Fido is a dog’ means *Fido is a cat* on that occasion, and it is a cat. In this situation, according to Basic SP, S has said something meaningful and true. But, now, which primitive *fact* distinguishes this case from the case where ‘Fido is a dog’ means *Fido is a dog* in S’s language, and where she consequently said something false? There is nothing in *this* primitivist doctrine which guarantees that, when we want to say that S said something false, she did not really just shift languages and in fact said something true.

By telling the alternative story we have created a situation which is fundamentally similar to the situation that gave rise to the sceptical paradox in the first place. As long as the alternative kind of story can be told it will not be a fact whether a particular further application of an expression is correct or not, for maybe S changes languages. This objection says that it is difficult to explain what it is for a speaker to be appropriately responsive to a language, just as the original objection says it is difficult to explain how a speaker can be appropriately responsive to past use. In other words, the original objection says that there is no physical/functional fact about S such that S’s application of ‘plus’ is

correct or incorrect; this new objection says that there is no Basic primitive fact about S such that S's application of 'plus' is correct or incorrect with respect to a language. As David Lewis notes, there is an indefinite number of possible languages, and we need to tell a story about what makes it the case that one of them is our language.⁷ Unless we can tell such a story we have not managed to avoid the sceptical paradox, for a potential error must be evaluated relative to a language, even though error may be possible within a language.

Notice that the point is not that the contingent relationality between meaning-bearer and meaning entails indeterminacy. Of course, for all I have said it is still possible that S *in fact* did not shift languages, just as, for all Kripke-Wittgenstein says, it is still possible that S may *in fact* continue the series '2, 4, 6, 8' by adding two all the time. The point of raising the possibility of an infinite number of possible interpretations, or an infinite number of possible languages, is that we have not been shown why it is a fact that a particular way of going on is correct or incorrect. Basic SP provides no fact such that an application is correct or incorrect. Just as continuing the series by saying '10' may be an error relative to another interpretation, continuing it by saying '10' may be an error relative to another language, even though the rules associated with the expressions of each possible language are determined for all applications within that language.

This problem forces Basic SP to say more. Positing primitive facts that determine the correctness-conditions for any expression in a language L is not enough. It must also be clear what it is for a subject to be a speaker of L, rather than L^{*}, otherwise the error platitude will not be satisfied. As I see it, Basic SP can be reinforced in two main ways. Either by giving more substantial accounts of the primitive facts, e.g., by providing a primitivist semantic epistemology, such that the alternative story

isn't damaging; or by preventing the alternative story from being told by relating meaning-bearers and meanings essentially. The first way I call *Contingent SP* and the second *Essential SP*.

5. Contingent SP

Contingent SP is similar to Basic SP in saying that which meaning an expression gets assigned is not dependent on any physical/functional facts about the use of the expression, instead it is a primitive semantic fact that this expression is related to that meaning. This doctrine is then strengthened by adding an intuitive epistemology such that subjects, perhaps via a faculty of semantic intuition, can know which meaning their sentences are related to. This would presumably be enough to satisfy the platitudes about error and recognition of error. Importantly, it seems to render the alternative story innocuous. If someone asks S whether what she did was an error, or whether she just shifted languages, she has an easy answer because she knows which meaning her expression is related to.

5.1. A problem about practicality?

We need, however, to ask how Contingent SP deals with the third core platitude about meaning, the aspect of practicality. This platitude is motivated like this: it is part of the notion of error that recognition of error has potential practical consequences. To be credited with understanding, say, 'there is a fine magpie' a subject must be willing to *withdraw* erroneous applications of it (say in cases where she calls a pie a 'magpie'). It will be rational for her to respond by withdrawing her application when she is reproached by her peers.

As it stands, Contingent SP does not say anything about this aspect of meaning. I think a brief analogy with another normative discourse can demonstrate that the practicality platitude is *prima facie* problematic for this type of primitivism. In metaethical theory there is a well-known case which also

concerns practicality. Assume that we can obtain true beliefs about what is objectively good by some faculty of intuition. For example, we obtain the true belief that feeding Fido the dog is a good thing to do all things considered. But now it is a further question why and how such a belief could motivate action. What is the nature of the moral facts such that it would be very odd if I refrain from feeding Fido, when I know that feeding Fido would be a good thing to do? Is it some internal connection between my beliefs and desires, or is it something about our reasoning about the objective facts? This question has proved very difficult to answer.⁸

Interestingly, the same style of questions arise for Contingent SP. Assume S, via her faculty of semantic intuition, obtains true beliefs about which applications of her expressions are correct and which are not. Now ask, what is the nature of the primitive semantic facts such that it would be very odd if S does not withdraw her application of ‘dog’ to a cat, when she knows that in her language ‘dog’ means *dog*? Given semantics and ethics share a strong feature of normativity we should, *prima facie* at least, expect this kind of question to be difficult to answer for semantics too.

There are of course various moves the primitivist can make, in order to answer this question, but I want to argue that Contingent SP cannot answer it whilst remaining primitivist.

5.2. *An internalist response to the problem about practicality*

It could seem that the primitivist can account for practicality quite easily. She can simply point out that it is characteristic of primitive meaning-facts that they bear a necessary connection to the subsequent actions of competent speakers. Accordingly, we let it be part of the primitive meaning-facts that they are linked to subsequent use, i.e. that they make the subject withdraw utterances when reproached. The meaning-facts can be conceived as simultaneously fulfilling two roles: making error possible and making the subject withdraw erroneous utterances.

But now this version of Contingent SP can be rephrased, for we know which kind of fact is the only candidate for simultaneously fulfilling both roles, viz. dispositions. If simply knowing meanings in this way makes the subject undertake the appropriate revisions of her use, then it seems straightforward to say that the primitive facts dispose her in that way. That is, we can tell the above story like this: primitive meaning-facts ensure that the subject knows the meanings of her sentences, and by thus knowing meanings she becomes *disposed* to respond in certain ways when she comes to recognise facts about error. But then, of course, primitivism ceases to be primitivist, for it becomes indistinguishable from dispositionalism.⁹

5.3. *An externalist, rationality-based response to the problem about practicality*

There is another way to account for the practicality of meaning. Assume that the primitive facts about meaning are external to us and our desires, and that S can recognise when she is in error. Now add the very plausible idea that when S recognises that an application was erroneous, then, to the extent she is a competent and rational language user, she will be willing to withdraw the application.

This is a plausible story, but I do not think it is available for the primitivist to tell. Let me give an example to show why. Imagine two isolated communities, C and C^{*}, which both have linguistic practices with the sentence ‘there is a kookaburra’. In C the use of the sentence is almost always in accordance with some meaning related to it by a *sui generis* primitive meaning-fact, although C-speakers of course make occasional errors. In C^{*} the use of the sentence is always out of accordance with the meaning of the sentence as determined by that primitive meaning-fact. According to the kind of primitivism under consideration, it would be rational for the speakers in C^{*} to revise their use of ‘there is a kookaburra’ because it is completely out of accord with its primitively determined meaning.

But this claim seems utterly implausible. It is very easy to imagine a scenario where it would *not* be rational for the speakers in C^* to change their practice, even though it is out of accord with its primitively determined meaning. Say the primitive meaningfacts determine that ‘there is a kookaburra’ should be used for all and only kookaburras, but that the C^* community uses the sentence for kookaburras plus a couple of very closely related species of birds, perhaps because those kinds of birds all taste delicious, and it is useful to have a way of talking about them. In that case it would be *irrational* for the C^* speakers to begin to change their linguistic behaviour for it would make it more difficult for them to trap and eat, and express thoughts about what they call ‘kookaburras’.¹⁰

In sum, this kind of primitivism is certainly *possible*, maybe there are such primitively determined semantic facts, but it has implausible consequences for our understanding of our concept of meaning and rational linguistic behaviour. It requires us to do irrational things in order to account for practicality. Of course, there is a way to remedy the situation exemplified in the case about C and C^* . The primitivist could admit that what is rational, and what isn’t, is connected to how the sentence is *used* in C and C^* . But this kind of move immediately turns the account into a non-primitivist, use-based account because it presupposes that there is a substantial story about how uses of expressions, and not primitive meaning-facts, determine meaning.

I conclude that Contingent SP does not work. It cannot make sense of the platitude about the practicality of meaning whilst remaining primitive.

6. Essential SP

I now turn to the other way in which the primitivist can respond to the problem for Basic SP. The problem for Basic SP is that it makes no advance on the sceptical paradox because it is always possible

that an alleged erroneous application was not an error but merely the correct application of a similar expression in another language. Essential SP prevents this alternative story from being told by letting an expression's meaning be determined *essentially* by the primitive meaning-facts such that the same expression cannot be related to two or more different meanings. This would have the effect that, when the sceptic objects that an alleged error could be the correct application in another language, the primitivist can say that in that case it could not be the same expression, for an expression cannot change its meaning and remain the same expression.

Essential SP has little plausibility as an account of *expression* meaning, for of course the expression 'dog' could have had the meaning *cat*, rather than the meaning *dog*. So we should think of it as an account of *mental content*. It is plausible, it seems, to say that the mental content-bearer DOG could not, in this world, have any other content than *dog*.¹¹

I want to raise a simple question for Essential SP. What must the primitive facts be like to ensure essential relations between content-bearers and content, such that error is possible and primitivism isn't reductive or dispositionalist? I think Essential SP cannot easily answer this question. The pattern of argument will be to show on a case-by-case basis that primitivism cannot both have essential relations *and* be non-reductionist. The general problem has the form of a dilemma: on the one hand, the kinds of facts which could ensure essential relations seem to be the kinds of facts which do not come apart from the physical/functional facts, and, on the other hand, in the cases where we allow the meaning-constituting facts to come apart from the physical/functional facts we are given no reason to believe that essential relationality is in place and that the problem of error is solved.

6.1. *Twin-Earth cases and externalist content*

Essential SP is not compatible with the semantic externalism associated with Putnam-Burge style anti-individualism. As Burge rightly points out, Twin-Earth cases concern mental content as well as linguistic meaning.¹² According to the externalist, mental contents themselves are to be understood as determined in virtue of S's interaction with her environment and other subjects. In one possible world the concept ϕ has, say, the content *dog*, in another possible world it has the content *dogs-or-wolves*. The semantic relation between the bearer of the mental content and the content it is assigned is therefore contingent, not essential. Consequently, mental concepts susceptible to the implications of Twin-Earth cases are not related essentially with their contents.

The primitivist could object that Essential SP is not intended to be so strong that it requires similar concepts in different possible worlds to have the same content. It is sufficient to avoid the problem for Basic SP that, once a concept has a content assigned in the actual world, then it cannot lose it and be assigned another content. And, the objection goes, Twin-Earth cases have no tendency to refute this modally weaker thesis. But Twin-Earth stories can be told in non-modal terms too. Earth and Twin-Earth can be two planets in the same world, but, say, on opposite sides of the sun.¹³ So a modally weaker type of Essential SP is not consistent with the possibility of externalist content either.

6.2. *Object-dependence*

The above objection to Essential SP works on the assumption that the primitivist is not averse to the idea that when something is a contentful state something else is the content-bearer. But the primitivist who believes in *strong* externalism – e.g., some kind of object-dependence – could deny this. She could claim that the Twin-Earth examples show that it is contingent which content a subject ends up having,

but hold that that content itself is essentially related to its content-bearer. Thus, in response to the above problem about externalist content, the primitivist could go the other way and opt for some kind of object-dependence. In this way, seemingly, there is essential relationality because a contentbearer is partly identified by its content. One way to capture the overall structure of such a view is by way of a disjunctive notion of perceptual knowledge: either the subject has direct cognitive contact with the object itself, in which case the experience is veridical; or the object of experience is a mere appearance.¹⁴

Object-dependent Essential SP is intended to solve the problem for Basic SP like this. If a content-bearer is identified by its content, then it will be settled that whenever the content-bearer is tokened its correctness should be evaluated relative to the content that identifies it, not relative to any other content. But this style of primitivism is not entitled to this conclusion. According to object-dependence, content-bearers are identified with contents *in tandem* with the application of the content-bearer. When the content-bearer is first used some primitive meaningfact assigns a content to it essentially. For example, when the concept DOG is first applied for a dog, some meaning-fact ensures that DOG is essentially related to *dog*. This does nothing to solve the problem for Basic SP. It is consistent with this story to say that when a content-bearer is applied in a purportedly erroneous way, say, DOG is applied for a cat, then a new and different contentbearer is created, with the content *cat*, and the application was not wrong after all. The reason is, of course, that on the object-dependent view, it is content which identifies the content-bearer, and in the purported error-scenario the content seems to be *cat*, not *dog*. In terms of the disjunctive view of perceptual knowledge, what prevents us from saying that the alleged appearance scenario really is a new veridical experience with the ‘appearance’ as its content?¹⁵

6.3. *Conceptual role semantics*

In response to the two previous objections it seems Essential SP should discard externalist content altogether and go individualist. One way to get essential relations in place would be to opt for a kind of individualised conceptual role semantics (CRS). According to CRS, a given content-bearer φ has the content p in virtue of φ 's conceptual role; were it not for that role, then φ would not be φ . This would give us essential relations, as there is no way φ could have had another content. Unfortunately, this kind of theory is not compatible with primitivism because CRS is basically just sophisticated reductive dispositionalism. So, if the primitivist thinks there are compelling reasons for adopting CRS, then the primitivist should think a version of dispositionalism is going to work. And then there would be no reason to adopt primitivism in the first place.

What, then, about a non-reductive CRS? In effect it makes no real difference to go non-reductive. Conceptual role semantics as such is faced with one paramount problem: what is the distinction between the basic, meaning-constituting, conceptual roles and the non-basic, non-constitutive roles? This is familiar,¹⁶ but here I want to phrase the problem in terms of Essential SP. So the question is: what is occasional error according to CRS? The answer must be this: It is when a concept is used out of accord with its meaning-constituting conceptual role. The problem is that Essential SP provides no fact that distinguishes an alleged error from the correct use of a concept in accordance with *another* conceptual role. This problem is analogous to the problem which Basic SP was shown to have, so it seems CRS is simply a poor candidate to avoid that problem. The move to a non-reductive CRS does nothing in itself to resolve this problem.¹⁷

I believe this problem is structurally similar to the problem I raised for object-dependence SP. These kinds of primitivism make the bond between content-bearer and content so strong that when the

time comes for explaining how the primitive facts determine whether an application was an error or not, they only manage to produce so many new pairs of content-bearers and contents. This suggests that Essential SP is only going to work if content-bearer and content can come apart, as when there is error, and yet it being a fact that the content-bearer retains the same content, in spite of the error.

6.4. Supervenience primitivism

Lastly, consider a very general form of primitivism which embraces a non-reductive supervenience thesis such that primitive meaning-facts supervene on, but are irreducible to, physical/functional facts.¹⁸ This could be a method of allowing the physical/functional facts to have a place in the theory without relinquishing primitivism. Of course, this move depends on the outcome of the as yet unresolved debate about the possibility of non-reductive supervenience, and I shall therefore not deal with the question of supervenience primitivism in sufficient detail here.

I will note, though, that this debate shares some features with my arguments above. In general, there are three types of supervenience-thesis: weak, global, and strong supervenience.¹⁹ I think that the supervenience primitivist faces a dilemma concerning the choice of supervenience thesis. On the one hand, if the primitivist chooses a weak or global supervenience thesis, then the modal force of the theory will be so weak that the semantic relations between contents and content-bearers will be contingent (shown, for example, by the fact that we can run Twin-Earth cases for such theories). This suggests that weak and global supervenience primitivism are susceptible to the problem I raised for Basic SP. On the other hand, if the primitivist chooses strong supervenience, then there will be strict psychophysical (or 'semanticophysical') laws between the subvenient physical facts and the supervenient semantic facts, and, as Kim has shown, this entails reduction.²⁰ This indicates that strong supervenience primitivism cannot be non-reductive.

So, supervenience primitivism is faced with the same kind of dilemma as the other types of primitivism: if its semantic relations are too weakly constituted, then it ceases to cope with the platitudes about meaning, but if the semantic relations are more strongly constituted, then it ceases to be primitivist.²¹

I will not go through any more candidates for mental content. The structure of argument would repeat itself. In the cases where we are given reason to think that there could be essential relations between content-bearers and contents, we also get potential reductionism. And in the cases where we grant that a position could be non-reductive we are given no reason to think that there are essential relations.

7. Conclusion

I have considered various candidates for non-reductive semantic primitivism. Each was found wanting in some way. Either it is unclear how it differs from dispositionalism, or its posited facts require that we make irrational adjustments to our linguistic practices, or it cannot make sense of the possibility of occasional error, or it is reductive. The overall pattern of argument, I think, exhibits a dilemma for primitivism. Either the primitive facts can come apart from the physical/functional facts, in which case it cannot make sense of our core platitudes about meaning; or, it cannot come apart from the physical/functional facts in which case it is not primitive any more.

I believe that this should make us reconsider some form of *use-dependence* in the theory of meaning (for example, some form of use-dispositionalism) in a more favourable light, even if this means that we must accept a more down to earth and reliabilist notion of the normative aspect of the concept of meaning. This impression is sustained, not just by the failure of primitivism, but by the nature of the arguments I have pressed against primitivism. Every time primitivism is required to

account, on its own terms, for the various platitudinous aspects of the normativity of meaning it transforms itself into some version of dispositionalism.

The arguments against primitivism do in fact provide us with a more positive lesson for the construal of an adequate dispositional account of meaning. Dispositionalism must be construed such that, of course, occasional error is possible, but also such that it is perspicuous that different communities' contemporary use allows them to express their thoughts and communicate in different ways, that speakers can disagree purposefully about meaning, and react to such disagreements in a rational way.²²

¹ S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p. 21, Ch. 2 *passim*.

² Here I follow P. Boghossian, ‘The Rule-Following Considerations’, *Mind*, 98 (1989), which provides the clearest account, and defence, of primitivism (about mental content) that I know of. Boghossian says ‘robust realism [about meaning is the doctrine that] judgements about meaning are factual, irreducible, and judgement-independent.’, *op. cit.* p. 547. Boghossian arrives at primitivism in despair over the failure of reductive accounts, such as dispositionalism. Apart from Boghossian, only few other philosophers have endorsed forms of primitivism. Katz’s ‘new intensionalism’ is some kind of non-natural Platonism, see J. Katz, *The Metaphysics of Meaning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990). Under some readings McDowell’s ‘re-enchanted’ world seem primitivist, see J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994). Some deflationists about truth and reference, such as Schiffer and Johnston, also seem primitivist; see S. Schiffer, *Remnants of Meaning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987), ch. 10; and M. Johnston, ‘The End of the Theory of Meaning’, *Mind and Language*, 3 (1988). (Whereas P. Horwich, *Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) is an example of dispositionalist deflationism about meaning).

³ Notice that my arguments will not turn on the possible queerness (see. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*, (London: Pelican, 1977), pp. 38–42) of the facts about meaning posited by the primitivist and causal theorist. I acknowledge, for the sake of argument, that there could be such facts, but I deny that they could fulfil the role they were intended to fulfil.

⁴ See Kripke, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 7–22.

⁵ Kripke, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 22–37.

⁶ This is in accordance with much of what Kripke argues. Recall that his discussion often revolves around the idea that one must be justified in going on in a certain way. My point just brings out that in order to be justified in a certain way one must i) be aware of errors, and ii) have an idea of why it is reasonable to withdraw an incorrectly applied statement. See, e.g., Kripke, *Wittgenstein*, p. 23.

⁷ See D. Lewis, 'Languages and Language', *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7; reprinted in D. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers, Vol. I* (Oxford: OUP, 1983); and D. Lewis, 'Meaning without Use: Reply to Hawthorne', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 70 (1992).

⁸ This kind of discussion is the core of M. Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). The metaethical theory I provide a brief sketch of, as an analogy with SP, is Moore's primitive moral factualism (without his supervenience thesis); see G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* [1903] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), §§6–10, 26.

⁹ But could there not be a primitive dispositionalism? That is, could one not hold that dispositions can be underwritten by counterfactuals with no categorical basis? Well, yes, but that was not the problem about dispositionalism in the first place. The problem was that dispositionalism cannot accommodate the error platitudes and a primitive dispositionalism does not address *that* problem.

¹⁰ In the case of ethics it may not be so easy to tell this story. Perhaps it is rational for us to be responsive to primitive values, but in the case of semantics it is hard to see why we should care as much as care about primitive meanings. Notice that this example does not commit me to teleosemantics, it just exploits ordinary means-ends reasoning, which is surely a paradigm of the rational. Also, the example is not wedded to some kind of relativism, it only builds on the truism that a sentence is true if things are as it says they are in our language.

¹¹ Boghossian, ‘The Rule-Following Considerations’, p. 541 makes a similar move to mental content, though not in the explicit context of defending Essential SP.

¹² See T. Burge, ‘Individualism and the Mental’, in P. French, T. Uehling & H. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 5: Studies in Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

¹³ For this distinction see, e.g., D. Braddon-Mitchell & F. Jackson, *The Philosophy of Mind and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 65–74.

¹⁴ See J. McDowell, ‘Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge’, in J. Dancy (ed.), *Perceptual Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 211. For object-dependence in general see G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁵ I believe this argument really shows that object-dependence is really a poor candidate for being a response even to the original Kripke-Wittgenstein problems (as I think Evans anticipates, see *Varieties of Reference*, p. 106).

¹⁶ See N. Block, ‘Advertisement for a Semantics for Psychology’, in P. French, T. Uehling, H. Wettstein. (eds.) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, 10: Studies in the Philosophy of Mind*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); J. Fodor and E. Lepore, *Holism, A Shopper’s Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 163–187; G. Harman, ‘Meaning Holism Defended’, in J. Fodor and E. Lepore (eds.), *Holism: A Consumer Update, Grazer Philosophischen Studien*, 46 (1993), p. 168; and P. Boghossian ‘Does an Inferential Role Semantics Rest Upon a Mistake?’, *Mind and Language*, 8 (1993). Notice that ‘two-factor’ CRS, and ‘long armed’ CRS both acknowledge Twin-Earth cases and thus will not be compatible with essential SP.

¹⁷ As I think Boghossian also indicates, in ‘Analyticity’, in C. Wright & B. Hale (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 353.

¹⁸ Perhaps this is more in accordance with Boghossian, see ‘The Rule-Following Considerations’, p. 549.

¹⁹ Weak supervenience: in any possible world, if x and y are P-indiscernible in that world, then they are M-indiscernible in that world. (‘P-indiscernible’ stands for ‘indiscernible in the set of physical properties’, ‘M’ stands for ‘mental’). Strong supervenience: for any individuals x and y, for any possible worlds w_i and w_j ; if x in w_i is P-indiscernible from y in w_j , then x and y in those worlds are M-indiscernible. Global supervenience: any two P-indiscernible possible worlds are M-indiscernible. See J. Kim, *Mind and Supervenience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 154ff. Also J. Kim ‘Supervenience’, in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 579–80. For global supervenience see J. Kim, *Mind and Supervenience*, pp. 82–90, 154–55, 276–78.

²⁰ See Kim, *Mind and Supervenience*, *ibid.*

²¹ I think J. Van Cleve, ‘Semantic Supervenience and Referential Indeterminacy’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 89 (1992), p. 361 suggests that Kripke’s worries about *sui generis* meaning-facts (Kripke, *Wittgenstein*, p. 50ff) are underpinned by similar kinds of worries about supervenience. The debate about non-reductive supervenience is far from closed, see, e.g., E. Lepore and B. Loewer ‘Mind Matters’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 84 (1987) and their ‘More on Making Mind Matter’, *Philosophical Topics*, 19 (1989). But see also B. Leiter and A. Miller, ‘Mind Doesn’t Matter Yet’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 72 (1994), J. Kazez, ‘Can Counterfactuals Save Mental Causation?’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1995), and especially J. Kim ‘Explanatory Exclusion and the

Problem of Mental Causation', in C. Macdonald & G. Macdonald (eds.), *Philosophy of Psychology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) who gives, I think, many arguments that support my general line. Lepore and Loewer, in 'Mind Matters' and 'More on Making Mind Matter', suggest a global supervenience thesis such that mental causation is weak, i.e. underwritten by counterfactuals, not strict laws. Kim notes that if strong causation entails weak causation, then we have overdetermination, and if strong causation does not entail weak causation then we violate the closure of the physical. My own general view is that mental causation is best dealt with by a functionalist approach, e.g., in terms of Jackson and Pettit's notion of programme causation, see F. Jackson and P. Pettit, 'Functionalism and Broad Content', *Mind*, 97 (1988). But note that this notion is compatible with reduction.

²² I would like to thank Linda Barclay, Richard Holton, Frank Jackson, Daniel Nolan, Philip Pettit, Michael Smith, Daniel Stoljar, and Tom Stoneham for helpful comments and conversations on earlier drafts. Thanks also to audiences at seminars at the Australian National University and at the Truth and Knowledge Conference at the University of Aarhus 1997.