

## IN DEFENCE OF AUSTERE NON-REDUCTIONISM

In an impressive series of articles, Hannah Ginsborg has recently developed and defended a new account of meaning and rule-following which, she maintains, avoids the pitfalls of the two accounts most commonly encountered, viz., dispositionalism and anti-reductionism. Contra dispositionalism, she tries to accommodate the ineluctably normative aspect of meaning. But, contra anti-reductionism, she wants to do this by proposing a kind of normativity, which she calls primitive, which, though it is not to be conceived of in purely naturalistic terms, is nonetheless to be applied to states or facts that are not fully intentional or contentful in that they are “below the level” of meaning facts. Ginsborg’s main target on the non-reductionist side is Barry Stroud, who has long been forcefully arguing against the possibility of explaining meaning without appeal to full-blown intentional notions, a view which Ginsborg calls austere non-reductionism, in contrast to her own partial reductionism.

Ginsborg’s starting point is Saul Kripke’s influential Wittgensteinian articulation of a sceptical problem about meaning. As is well-known, Saul Kripke argues that there are many facts that could not constitute the meanings of expressions because they are as much subject to interpretation as the linguistic signs they are supposed to endow with meaning. This problem, however, according to Ginsborg, does not affect dispositional facts because these are not supposed to be grasped by the mind and guiding our linguistic applications. Now Ginsborg does not reject dispositional facts, as she claims Kripke does, because they cannot be guiding. Rather, she argues, dispositionalism “does not do justice to the normative attitudes which are a necessary aspect of the meaningful use of language.” (forthcoming a, p.39) It cannot distinguish between linguistic use that is genuinely meaningful, produced by intelligent beings, and that which is not, produced by automata or animals. Ginsborg, then, proposes to modify the dispositional view in such a way that these problems disappear.

She writes: “The meaningfulness of expressions on this account is constituted, as on the reductive view, by the fact that we are disposed to use them in certain regular ways, but with the proviso that, in using them we take our uses to be appropriate in [a] primitive way.” (forthcoming a, p.40) And for someone to take her response to be “primitively appropriate” is for her to take her response to “fit” the context of utterance, to see it as “belonging” to a pattern of responses she has previously given, without however, and this is crucially important, taking the response to be in accord with any meaning it expresses or with any rule governing its use – there may not even be any such meaning or rule. Two features of Ginsborg’s account need to be stressed. First, the thinking and understanding involved in the consciousness of appropriateness are, as she puts it, intentional – the agent thinks or understands that “*this* (what he is now doing) is appropriate to *that* (what he has just heard).” (forthcoming a, p.37) But they are not, as I would put it, propositional – the agent can think or understand something with the above content prior to grasping the meaning of the sound he is responding to. Second, for someone to deem a response to be “primitively appropriate”, she does not have to recognize or be aware of the contrast between appropriate and inappropriate responses. The contrast is with the “broader class of responses which lack the feature of being appropriate.” (forthcoming a, fn 17) And this, Ginsborg maintains, is what allows her account not to be circular. For it is meaningful uses of expressions that count as correct or incorrect. Thus, if we want to explain the notion of meaning,

we must appeal to a notion that does not depend on those of correctness and incorrectness. Ginsborg's notion of primitive normativity does just that explanatory job. (forthcoming b, p.19)

In the end, then, Ginsborg's account is reductionist, since it explains meaning in non-semantic terms. But it is only partially reductionist, involving as it does at least one intentional notion. And it is the deployment of this notion, the primitive normative attitude one has towards one's uses of terms, that, according to Ginsborg, enables us to distinguish between intelligent and merely reflexive or automatic linguistic behavior. It "gives life to the signs of a language" precisely by "making the difference" between the two kinds of behaviour. (forthcoming a, p.38) Further, Ginsborg thinks that she is in a position to maintain, against the reductive dispositionalist, that meaning is constituted by facts about correct use. "[T]he idea of your doing or not doing what you are disposed to regard as appropriate gives us what is needed for you to count as responding correctly or making a mistake." (forthcoming b, p.17)

I believe Ginsborg misidentifies the real problem with dispositionalism and that her own account suffers from that problem. The problem is not just that dispositionalism fails to capture our intuitive idea that meaning is in some sense normative. The problem is that dispositional facts are just as subject to interpretation as are other facts. As a result, dispositions cannot provide standards of correctness for the applications of linguistic expressions, and so they cannot provide them with meaning. Ginsborg's primitive normativity, because it is quasi reductive, cannot accomplish that task either. I share, however, Ginsborg's dissatisfaction with Stroud's claim that nothing philosophically illuminating can be said about how people's use of expressions may amount to meaning, aside from the observation that this use must occur in the context of established linguistic practices. Moreover, I believe that Ginsborg is right in suggesting that language users themselves have a role to play in determining the standards of correctness of the expressions they use. But the feelings she invokes cannot play that role because they are quasi intentional and thus, again, open to interpretation. It is only when language users are equipped with full-blown intentionality that they can establish standards of correctness for the use of their expressions. Thus, no reductive or even quasi reductive explanation of meaning is forthcoming. Still, something can be said about what puts people in a position to have linguistic standards: it is the awareness, not of the appropriateness of their responses, but of there being a distinction between correct and incorrect responses.

#### References:

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