Bartosz Brożek
Jagiellonian University
Copernicus Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

The Normativity of Meaning[1]

One of the most heated debates in contemporary analytical philosophy pertains to the problem of the normativity of meaning. It revolves around the question of what is the status of the criteria for the application of words: are they descriptive or prescriptive? In this essay, I would like to shed some light on this issue. I begin by outlining the normativity of meaning debate and identifying its key problems, conclusions and controversial theses. Then, I present two views of language: the formal and the embedded, and show that they imply different conceptions of the normativity of language. As a result, I offer my own conception of the normativity of meaning, and argue that contemporary solutions to the problem are essentially flawed.

1. The Normativity of Meaning Debate

Since Saul Kripke's much celebrated book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*,[2] a multifaceted discussion has commenced pertaining to the problem of the normativity of meaning. Kripke's argu-

[2] Cf. S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1984.

ment – in a nutshell – is that meaning is inherently or intrinsically normative, as there is no fact in virtue of which one can decide as to what is the correct application of words. The soundness of this claim notwithstanding, the debate initiated by Kripke led to painstaking analyses of the problem of whether meaning is normative. There is no need to review all the arguments in this debate, the following observations suffice.

What does it mean that meaning is normative? The notion of the normativity of meaning is rendered in various ways. One can say, for example, that meaning is normative because there exist criteria for the correct use of linguistic expressions; or that there exist rules governing the application of those expressions; or that there exist right and wrong (correct and incorrect) ways of using language; or that there is a way in which one should use words; or that "what you mean by a word determines how you ought to use that word".[3] I do not want to suggest that all the above quoted formulations are equivalent. They rather serve to collect some intuitions as to what is at stake when one debates the normativity of meaning.

Painting with a broad brush, there are three general stances in the discussion pertaining to the normativity of meaning: non-normativist, extrinsic-normativist and intrinsic-normativist. Let us have a closer look at them.

(A) **Meaning is non-normative.** According to this view, meaning rules are just descriptions of what is the correct or incorrect use of language. This conception hangs together with the claim that such notions as 'correct', 'right' or 'should', may be understood in two distinct ways: prescriptively and descriptively (or non-normatively), and in the case of linguistic rules they should be interpreted in the latter way. Hattiangadi considers the following three statements:

---

[3] A. Hattiangadi, *Some More Thoughts on Semantic Oughts: a Reply to Daniel Whiting*, "Analysis" 2009, vol. 69, no. 1, p. 54.

(i) an application of 'rich' to a poor person is incorrect,

(ii) an application of 'rich' to a poor person is wrong, and

(iii) 'rich' should not be applied to a poor person.[4]

She claims that in all three cases the seemingly normative operators ('incorrect', 'wrong' and 'should not') are to be understood in a non-normative way. Firstly, "to say that you have applied 'rich' incorrectly is just to say that you have applied 'rich' to someone of whom 'rich' is not true."[5] Secondly, Hattiangadi observes that we often use the terms 'right' and 'wrong' in a non-normative way, as when we say that there is a right answer to the question – we are not claiming in this case that it is the answer we ought to give.[6] Similarly, "to say that your application of 'rich' was wrong can be just to say that you have applied 'rich' to someone of whom 'rich' is not true. And the fact that you have applied 'rich' to someone of whom 'rich' is not true does not imply that you have done something you ought not to have done".[7] Thirdly, and finally, Hattiangadi believes that statements such as "'Rich' should not be applied to a poor person" do not express genuine obligations; at best, they are 'ought to be', and not 'ought to do' statements. In consequence, they do not establish someone's personal obligation to do something. When we say that "There should be no suffering!", we are not expressing anyone's obligation. In other words, there is no transformation of such impersonal obligations as "There should be no suffering!" or "'Rich' should not be applied to poor persons" into the corresponding personal obligations ("A person x should see to it that there is no suffering" or "A person x should not apply 'rich' to poor persons"). The major argument Hattiangadi cites in this context is the principle 'ought implies can'; indeed, it is impossible to stop the suffering in the world, so it cannot be anyone's obligation. Similarly

---

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 60.

[5] *Ibidem*.

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] *Ibidem*.

– says Hattiangadi – it is impossible to apply 'rich' to rich people only, under all circumstances imaginable, and so there is no obligation to do so.[8]

(B) Meaning is extrinsically or hypothetically normative. According to this stance, "the only imperatives that flow from attributions of linguistic meaning are hypothetical imperatives".[9] How to understand this claim? As Boghossian puts it, "even though I mean addition by '+' and know therefore that it would only be correct to say that '68+57=125', I might still not choose to say it because I might deliberately not choose to say what I know to be correct."[10] In other words, one may have an obligation to apply a word correctly only if the source of the obligation lies outside of language. For instance, I may embrace the moral obligation to tell the truth and be obliged to follow the rules of meaning. At the same time, there may be some extra-linguistic reasons not to tell the truth or not to follow the correctness criteria of language: they may result from moral, but also legal, prudential or conventional considerations. Thus, "it is misleading at best to use the label 'the normativity of meaning' (...) since (...) there is nothing obviously normative about the notion of a truth condition or a satisfaction condition."[11] The only possible way of attributing normativity to meaning is to use a weak notion thereof – meaning is normative only conditionally, or – to put it in a different way – the sources of meaning's normativity lie outside of language. Such a hypothetical normativity, claims Boghossian, "is uninteresting: every fact is normative in that sense. (Compare: if it's raining, and you don't want to get wet, you should take your umbrella)".[12]

---

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 61.
[9] P.A. Boghossian, *Is Meaning Normative?*, [in:] *Philosophy-Science-Scientific Philosophy,* eds. Ch. Nimtz, A. Beckermann, Mentis, Paderborn, p. 212.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 212.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 208.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 207.

(C) Meaning is intrinsically normative. This final view is based on the claim that one ought to follow meaning rules "quite independently of moral, prudential, legal and other considerations, and independently of one's desires or communicative intentions".[13] Of course, the proponents of the intrinsic normativity of meaning are not naive: they do not suggest that the obligation to apply meaning rules correctly is indefeasible or that it should be followed under any circumstances. The claim is that it is not merely hypothetical. Rather, the argument runs, meaning rules give rise to *prima facie* obligations. Under some particular circumstances such an obligation, say, to use the word 'rich' only in reference to rich persons, may be in conflict with some other obligations (say, a moral one) which dictates that a poor person should be described as 'rich'. And, given such circumstances, the obligation based on meaning rules can be defeated by the moral one: the all-things-considered obligation is to follow the moral ought, not the meaning rule. It may even be the case that – when there is a conflict of two obligations – the moral one always defeats the linguistic one.[14] However, it changes little as to the character of the semantic 'ought' – it remains a genuine obligation. In order to establish it, it suffices to show that semantic obligation may be defeated or overridden by some other obligation, but not by mere desire. Whiting believes that "I might not follow the norm for the use of an expression simply because I do not feel like doing so. But that alone does not show that there is no norm in force; my use of the expression should still be judged incorrect. Of course, the violation is not very serious (the mistake is semantic, not ethical) but that does not establish that it lacks a normative status altogether."[15] Moreover, semantic rules cannot give rise to hypothetical obligations. Such obligations are contingent upon one's desire to achieve a certain goal; when the desire changes, the

---

[13] A. Hattiangadi, *Some more thoughts on semantic oughts…*, *op. cit.*, p. 54–55.
[14] Cf. D. Whiting, *The Normativity of Meaning Defended*, "Analysis" 2007, vol. 67, no. 2, pp. 133–140.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 139.

obligation disappears. For instance, if I want to learn how to drive a car, I ought to take driving lessons. But when I change my mind and do not wish to drive a car anymore, it would be no sense to say that I am doing something incorrectly or am violating some obligation by not taking driving lessons. "In contrast, given what 'rich' means, that I ought to apply the term to a person only if she is rich does not seem contingent upon (say) my desire to speak truthfully. If that desire changes, and I apply the term to a poor person, it remains the case that I am not applying it as it should be applied, but rather incorrectly. Here, it seems one is properly entitled and it makes full sense to judge that, desire notwithstanding, I am using the expression wrongly. (Of course, I could excuse my behavior by citing the relevant desire, but that is not the same as overriding the norm)."[16]

How to sum up the discussion pertaining to the normativity of meaning? In literature there are three different answers to the question of whether meaning is normative which are represented: the non-normative conception of meaning, the theory of extrinsic normativity of meaning and of intrinsic normativity of meaning. I submit that there are problems with all three stances.

Firstly, the argument for the non-normative character of meaning hangs together with the thesis that such notions as 'right' or 'should' or 'correct' – in relation to meaning – are not to be understood prescriptively. This view is, in turn, connected to the claim that genuine obligations or prescriptions are always personal obligations; when we say that "There should be no suffering!" we are not expressing a genuine obligation as the norm implicates no person or persons as responsible for the fulfillment of what the norm prescribes. This view is flawed in an important way. Hattiangadi, who advocates it, conflates two different problems pertaining to obligations. On the one hand, one can distinguish between personal and impersonal obligations (which are not identical, as Hattiangadi

---

[16] *Ibidem.*

seems to suggest, with the distinction between 'ought-to-be' and 'ought-to-do');[17] on the other hand, there are two kinds of rules: those which are practically realizable, and those which set some maximal goals, but are never fully realizable. Now, given that a person x is obliged to follow a certain system of rules, their impersonal formulations (e.g., "The word 'rich' should be applied only to rich persons") may easily be transformed into personal ones ("A person x should apply 'rich' only to rich persons"). This anyway is the case in many legal systems in which such provisions as "Tax returns should be filed by April 30 each year", or "The speed limit should be observed", are often enacted, and there seems to be no trouble in realizing that they express obligations which should be fulfilled by individuals. In addition, it is difficult to agree with Hattiangadi that it is impossible for a person x to follow the rule "person x should apply 'rich' only to rich persons" under all circumstances. This rule seems practically realizable, as practical realizability is not endangered by the fact that in some situations the rule is not followed because of a desire not to follow it or the existence of a conflicting obligation (again, the same holds for legal norms). A rule is practically realizable if it is in principle physically possible to fulfill it. It is not the case, however, with "There should be no suffering in the world!". When we transform this rule into "A person x should see to it that there is no suffering in the world", it is physically impossible for x to fulfill this obligation. The contemplated rule sets a maximal goal or an ideal obligation. In legal theory, such rules are called principles or optimization criteria, and are understood as expressing the following: a person x should do everything to reduce suffering in the world given the factual and normative limitations (e.g., the existence of a competing legal obligation). It seems, therefore, that Hattiangadi's argument to the effect that meaning rules cannot be considered as expressing genuine obligation fails.

---

[17] Cf. B. Brożek, *Games, Trees and Deontic Logic*, [in:] *Studies in the Philosophy of Law 7*, eds. J. Stelmach, W. Załuski, Copernicus Center Press, Kraków 2011, pp. 101–114.

Second, Boghossian's view that meaning rules express only hypothetical obligations is also troublesome. There are two problems worth considering here. The minor one is that – *contra* Boghossian – the fact that meaning rules may be ascribed hypothetical normativity is not "uninteresting". The same may be said, for instance, of legal rules. One of the widely accepted paradigms of accounting for the law's normativity is conventionalism. On this view, legal rules are similar to the rules of chess: they constitute a certain "game" and generate the "internal" normativity of law. However, the decision to "play the game of law" requires extrinsic considerations (moral or prudential). Thus, legal rules are ultimately hypothetically normative: if (for some moral or rational reasons) one decides to embrace law, one is obliged to follow legal rules.[18] Observe that the same line of argument may be applied in the case of Boghossian's analysis. One may distinguish between the "internal" normativity of language, and the external reasons that justify our playing by the meaning rules. Moreover, the same strategy may be used in relation to paradigmatically intrinsically normative rules, e.g., moral ones. In the case of morality one has two options: either to look for the source of moral normativity in the transcendent sphere (e.g., Kant's moral subject is rooted in the noumenal reality), or claim that morality is ultimately justified by recourse to the rules of rationality. Thus, I posit that even in the case of morality one can argue that moral rules are hypothetically normative.

Boghossian's answer to this argument may be the following: one should distinguish between two types of conventionalism: global and local. A global conventionalist claims that the subject of conventional decision is to accept or reject an entire system of rules (legal, moral, chess, etc). When one makes such a global choice, one is at no liberty anymore to violate the rules of the accepted normative system: one has to follow them. Local conventionalism, on the other hand, holds

---

[18] Cf. A. Marmor, *The Conventional foundations of Law*, [in:] *New Essays on the Normativity of Law*, eds. S. Bertea, G. Pavlakos, Hart Publishing, Oxford 2011, pp. 143–157.

that each and every rule of some normative system is hypothetical, i.e. one may decide, in relation to each and every rule, under the given circumstances, whether to follow it or not. Now, Boghossian's counterargument may be that while law or morality may be conceived of as conventional in the global sense only, language is locally conventional: under the given circumstances one is free to follow or not follow any particular meaning rule. Such a defense may be understood as positing a descriptive or a normative thesis. As a descriptive thesis it is true: one is usually at liberty to follow or to break a meaning rule. This holds, however, also for other kinds of rules, be they legal, moral or prudential. So, this line of defense is insufficient. Understood normatively, the argument boils down to saying that each and every application of a meaning rule may be subject to a decision, i.e. to the evaluation against some normative standard. In other words, one needs to decide, under any particular circumstances, whether the application of a rule "The expression 'rich' should be applied only to rich persons" is fair or instrumentally rational or economically advantageous, depending on the normative criterion one utilizes. The point is, however, that many ethical theories sketch an analogous process of following rules. For instance, according to Kant, any particular principle of behaviour is to be followed if it is universalizable, or complies with the Categorical Imperative. Hence, there is nothing trivial or 'uninteresting' in the hypothetical normativity of meaning rules, be it understood globally or locally.

Still more importantly – and this is my major reservation regarding Boghossian's analysis – I believe that the hypothetical account of the normativity of meaning is descriptively inadequate. Linguistic standards are irrelevant with regard to our desires and goals in exactly the same way legal rules are. I may not follow a legal rule because of some other considerations or even a desire, but this does not change the fact that by not following it I break it. Similarly, when I apply a word incorrectly (because I have a desire or even a reason to do so), I break a meaning rule. An example of a meaning rule is "A person x should apply 'rich' only to rich persons", and not "If a per-

son *x* has a reason to do so, or merely wishes so, *x* should apply 'rich' only to rich persons".

Third, the thesis that meaning is intrinsically normative is also questionable. The proponents of this view make use of the conception of *prima facie* obligations. However, it sounds 'weird' that a moral obligation can defeat a linguistic obligation (or *vice versa*). In other words, linguistic obligations – if they exist – are of a different kind than moral or legal ones. Usually, when one speaks of legal or moral rules as possessing normative force, one considers them reasons for action. More precisely, a rule of behavior is a reason for action if: (a) it is objective; (b) it is followed consciously; and (c) it may be used to justify a course of action.[19] Within such a framework, it is understandable why a moral reason may defeat or outweigh a legal or instrumental reason. At the same time, rules of language seem not to constitute reasons for action (in the sense specified) as they cannot serve to justify action.

The moral to be drawn from the above considerations is that the three enumerated stances towards the question of the normativity of meaning lead to troublesome theoretical consequences. At the same time, each of them seems to capture some important intuition pertaining to what language is. The non-normative theory puts emphasis on the fact that we often treat linguistic norms as descriptions of what is the correct use of language. The view that the normativity of meaning is hypothetical stresses the relative insignificance of the linguistic 'ought' *vis a vis* moral or legal obligations. Finally, the intrinsic normativity theory uncovers the objective, non-conventional dimension of language.

In the face of those conflicting intuitions, there is a pressing question as to how to reconcile them, or how to explain why the analysis of semantic rules gives rise to such differentiated accounts for the normativity of meaning?

---

[19] Cf. B. Brożek, *Normatywność prawa*, Wolters Kluwer Polska, Warszawa 2012, pp. 11–21.

2. The Formal View of Language

I believe that in order to properly address the problem of normativity in language, and – in particular – the normativity of meaning, it is necessary to answer a more general question: what is language? I submit that – from the most general perspective – one can distinguish between two views of language: the formal and the embedded.

The formal conception of language – as instantiated (to various degrees) in the conceptions of Bertrand Russell, 'early' Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap or, in the area of linguistics, Noam Chomsky – is based on the following three theses:

(The Isolation Thesis) Language is an isolated (or relatively isolated) system of rules. This thesis boils down to the claim that one can identify a system of the rules of language, which are separated from other rules (moral, legal, prudential).

(The Distinction Thesis) It is possible to distinguish between form and content in language. The distinction thesis boils down to the claim that within language one can identify at least two distinct kinds of rules: formal (or syntactic) and semantic. An illustration may be found in *The Logical Syntax of Language* where Carnap declares:

> The rules of the calculus determine, in the first place, the conditions under which an expression can be said to belong to a certain category of expressions; and, in the second place, under what conditions the transformation of one or more expressions into another or others may be allowed. Thus the system of a language when only the formal structure (...) is considered, is a calculus. The two different kinds of rules are (...) the rules of formation and transformation - namely, the syntactical rules in the narrower sense (...) and the so-called logical laws of deduction. (...) When we maintain that logical syntax treats language as a calculus, we do not mean by that statement that language is nothing more than a calculus. (...) In addition any particular language

has, apart from that aspect, others which may be investigated by other methods. For instance, its words have meaning; this is the object of investigation and study for semasiology.[20]

(The Primacy of Form Thesis) The formal aspect of language is its definitional aspect: language is what it is due to its formal structure. In *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein embraces the famous 'picture theory of meaning', he claims that linguistic expressions are pictures or models of reality.[21] Now, "in order to be a picture [they] must have something in common with what [they] picture" (2.16). And "what the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner – rightly or falsely – is its form of representation" (2.17). Thus Wittgenstein submits that language can perform its function – to picture the reality – only due to its formal aspect. In other words, the form of language – a thing that language shares with the pictured reality – is what makes languages what they are.

A similar emphasis on the formal dimension of language is to be found in Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz's theory of meaning.[22] Ajdukiewicz attempted to construct a theory of language that would stay clear of the dangerous waters of semantic notions, which were known to give rise to various paradoxes. Ajdukiewicz avoided semantic problems by postulating that meaning is derived from three types of directives which constitute language:

1. Empirical directives, which prohibit the rejection of sentences in the face of certain empirical data (e.g., given the fact that person x feels pain she cannot reject the sentence "I feel pain").
2. Axiomatic directives, which require one to unconditionally accept sentences because they are meaning postulates (e.g., "If

---

[20] R. Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, Open Court, Peru, Ill. 2002, p. 4–5.
[21] Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge, New York 2005. Below, I will refer to *Tractatus* by citing the number of the quoted thesis only.
[22] The below presentation of Ajdukiewicz's theory is based on K. Ajdukiewicz, *Sprache und Sinn*, "Erkenntnis" 1934, vol. IV, pp. 100–138.

today is Sunday, tomorrow will be Monday" or "A bachelor is an unmarried man").

3. Deductive directives, which prescribe the acceptance of a sentence on the basis of the acceptance of some other sentences (e.g., when one accepts two sentences: "Today is Sunday or Monday" and "Today is not Sunday", one must accept that "Today is Monday").

Interestingly, Ajdukiewicz claims that the three kinds of directives enumerated may serve to define synonymy, and hence – meaning. To do so, one needs to construct the language matrix, i.e. a matrix containing all the axiomatic, deductive and empirical theses of the given language. Now, two expressions A and B have the same meaning if replacing A with B and B with A in the entire matrix does not change the matrix itself. Hence meaning is a feature which is common to synonymous expressions, i.e. it is their place in the matrix. The possible critique of this conception notwithstanding, the important thing is that Ajdukiewicz claims it is possible to capture the notion of meaning by scrutinizing the formal aspect of language.

Now, the question is how can one define normativity in the context of the formal theory of language? The answer is as follows. First, one can speak of the "internal" normativity of language. For obvious reasons, this problem is similar to the question of whether logic is normative. Robert Hanna suggests that the normativity of logic may be rendered either as categorical (X is categorically normative if and only if humans ought to believe or do Y because of X under all sets of circumstances) or hypothetical, and opts for the former view.[23] This is in compliance with the traditional view of logic as a standard for reasoning in any context. Now, when the formal conception of language is embraced, together with the primacy of form thesis, the normativity of language rules must be understood as categorical.

---

[23] Cf. R. Hanna, *Rationality and Logic*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2006, pp. 203–204.

However, the question remains of what contributes to one accepting a given language. There are two options: the choice of language is a conventional one, or it is rather a metaphysical necessity. The first of the views may be ascribed to Carnap and Ajdukiewicz. For instance, Carnap formulates his famous principle of tolerance: "it is not our business to set up prohibitions, but to arrive at conventions".[24] What he means is that "everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments".[25]

On the other hand, one can defend the thesis that the choice of language is not conventional, or more precisely: there is no real choice at all here. There is only one logic and hence one formal structure of language. Such an absolutist view may be ascribed to early Wittgenstein (as, e.g., Carnap does in *The Logical Syntax of Language*, § 52). There is considerable textual evidence to support this interpretation of *Tractatus*, such as:

> 1.13. The facts in logical space are the world.
> 5.61. Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.
> 6.124. The logical propositions describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they present it. (...) In logic it is not we who express, by means of signs, what we want, but in logic the nature of the essentially necessary signs itself asserts.

Or consider what Wittgenstein adds in the *Notebooks*:

> And it keeps on forcing itself upon us that there is some simple indivisible, an element of being, in brief a thing … And it appears as if that were identical with the proposition that the world must be what it is, it must be definite.[26]

---

[24] R. Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
[25] *Ibidem*, p. 52.
[26] L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, Blackwell, Oxford 1979, p. 62.

Of course, it is not impossible to interpret Wittgenstein's ideas in a different, more convention-friendly manner. The point is, however, not an exegetic one, but rather systematic: when one embraces the formal view of language, one ends up with the following conception of language's normativity. Having accepted a language, one ought to follow the rules of that language unconditionally; if one does not, one is not speaking the language anymore. The prior decision as to the choice of language is either conventional or it 'has been taken for us' – the structure of the world determines the structure of language. The key observation is that even on the conventionalist reading, the normativity of language remains categorical in the sense that one either accepts a language *tout court* – and should follow all its rules – or rejects it entirely. In other words, the formal view of language allows two solutions to the problem of the normativity of meaning: either language rules are necessary, or hypothetically normative in the global sense. There is no place here for following some rules of language and disobeying others.

3. The Embedded View of Language

The alternative view of language may be called the usage-based conception or the theory of 'embedded language'. At the most general level, one can argue that the embedded theory rejects all three assumptions of the formal conception: language is not an isolated system of rules, one cannot distinguish between syntactic and semantic rules, and – what follows – the primacy of form thesis should also be rejected. Instead, the embedded approach may be characterized by the following theses:

(The Embedded Thesis) Language is embedded in a larger system of rules governing social interactions.
(The Abstraction Thesis) The formal reconstruction of language is an idealization or an abstraction from actual rules governing language use.

There are various philosophical and linguistic conceptions that embrace – to some extent at least – the above formulated theses. The most important of those is the 'theory'[27] presented by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*.[28] Wittgenstein sets off by criticizing a view of language which he illustrates with the passages from St. Augustine. The view is based on the assumption that words in a language stand for, or refer to, things in the world, or – speaking figuratively – that language is a mirror of reality. This theory of meaning (embraced also by Wittgenstein himself in his earlier *Tractatus*) is mistaken. Words stand in no referential relation to things; rather, words are tools we use for various purposes, not only to describe or communicate something, but also to bring about changes in the world. Rules constitute what Wittgenstein calls language games. Here is how the concept is introduced:

§23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command? – There are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call 'symbols', 'words', 'sentences'. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. (We can get a rough picture of this from the changes in mathematics.) Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring to prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. One may review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others: Giving orders, and obeying them – Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements – Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) – Reporting an event – Speculating about an event – Forming and testing a hypothesis – Pre-

---

[27] I put the word ‚theory' into quotation marks as Wittgenstein would never describe his remarks concerning language as providing any theory of language.
[28] See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 2009. Below I refer to *Philosophical Investigations* by indicating the paragraph from which the text is quoted.

senting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams – Making up a story; and reading it – Play-acting – Singing catches – Guessing riddles – Making a joke; telling it – Solving a problem in practical arithmetic – Translating from one language into another – Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. – It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)

Now, the crucial point is that – on an acceptable interpretation – Wittgenstein claims that the use of linguistic expressions is always a part of some social interaction. The rules that govern the use of words are not separate linguistic rules, but rather rules of how to do things in social settings. To see this, one must analyze in some detail Wittgenstein's remarks concerning rule-following. I cannot go into the details of various possible interpretations of this problem. Instead, I shall offer the following outline of my own interpretation.

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein probes into the phenomenon of rule-following. Let us consider, he says, the following example. Imagine that you ask someone to add 2, starting with 0. In reply, you get the following sequence of numbers: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, ... 1000. At this point, something surprising happens. After 1000 you hear 1004, then 1008, then 1012, etc. At your insistence that this sequence is incorrect – it should be 1002, 1004, 1006 – your interlocutor says that she is certain of her response. The question Wittgenstein poses in this context is: how do we know that '1002' is *the correct* answer? He notes (§186):

(…) How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage? – "The right step is the one that accords with the order – as it was meant" – So when you gave the order '+2' you meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000 – and did you also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on – an in-

> finite number of such propositions? – "No: what I meant was, that
> he should write the next but one number after every number that he
> wrote; and from this all those propositions follow in turn." – But
> that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from
> that sentence (...).

Wittgenstein's question may seem crazy. That – in adding 2 – 1002
follows 1000 is obvious. However, it is the task of a philosopher to
question the obvious. It is relatively easy to show the difficulty in-
volved in capturing why a rule contains 'all those propositions'.
From the point of view of mathematics, the rule '+ 2' is a function,
i.e. an infinite set of pairs of numbers, of which the antecedent is the
one to which we add 2, and the consequent is the result of addition.
To know such a rule means to be able to contemplate the actual in-
finity. This we can't do, however. There must be a different way in
which a rule enables us to 'capture' the potentially infinite number
of cases of its application. Therefore, we can note here an impor-
tant intuition concerning the concept of a rule: rules are patterns of
behavior (or: contain patterns of behavior). Let us call it 'the pat-
tern condition'.

The second Wittgensteinian insight concerning the concept of
a rule is that they constitute reasons for action. Wittgenstein notes
(§222):

> "The line intimates to me the way I am to go." – But that is of course
> only a picture. And if I judged that it intimated this or that as it were
> irresponsibly, I should not say that I was obeying it like a rule.

Put differently: even if we understood how a rule contains 'all those
propositions', it would not be sufficient to explain rule-following.
Rules (at least *some* rules) must be objective reasons for action. Even
if there are rules, how is it possible, that we *should* follow them? A
complete theory of rules must reply to this question (let us deem it
'the reason condition').

Against this background, Wittgenstein rejects some traditional conceptions of rules. The typical interpretation of *Philosophical Investigations* posits that Wittgenstein undermines three theories of rules: mechanicism, Platonism and mentalism. Firstly, rules are not dispositions to act in a given way (e.g., to answer '1002'). We do not follow rules 'automatically' as such an account is at odds with the reason condition. Secondly, rules are not mental states. Wittgenstein observes that one can imagine rules as some kind of picture. However, it is difficult to comprehend how such a picture can 'contain' all the cases of a rule's application (e.g., for '+ 2' this is an infinite number of cases). Thus, rules-as-pictures cannot account for the pattern condition. Thirdly, the same holds true for Platonism. Were rules platonic objects, we would be able to imagine them only as some kind of pictures.

It is much more difficult to present Wittgenstein's solution to the problem of rule-following in a coherent way. However, a number of aspects of the solution may be identified. Firstly, Wittgenstein claims that one cannot speak of rule-following outside of a community. As Saul Kripke observes, "if one person is considered in isolation, the notion of a rule as guiding the person who adopts it can have no substantive content."[29] The situation changes when we "widen our gaze from consideration of the rule follower alone and allow ourselves to consider him as interacting with a wider community. Others will then have justification conditions for attributing correct or incorrect rule following to the subject."[30]

This observation is based on a number of Wittgenstein's remarks in which he stresses the communal character of rule-following. For example, he says:

> The phenomenon of language rests on regularity, on agreement in acting. Here it is of the greatest importance that all of us, or the over-

---

[29] S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, op. cit.*, p. 66.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 66.

whelming number, agree on certain things. For example, I can be sure
that the color of this object will be called 'green' by most people who
see it.[31]

Thus, rules are neither mental states, nor platonic objects. One can
speak of rule-following for we participate in a certain social practice;
a practice based on common agreement.

Secondly, the sole regularities of social behavior are insufficient
to justify speaking of rule-following. As Susan Hurley observes:

> [I]t is not an adequate answer to say that the solution [to the prob-
> lem of rule-following] practices provide is a skeptical one, that noth-
> ing underwrites content and we just, contingently, happen to agree
> in doing this rather than that. (…) [T]he full force of the skeptical
> view dissolves our capacities for intentional action, for trying and
> choice, however arbitrary, as much as for perception and thought.
> It takes the ground out from under the feet of pragmatism and con-
> ventionalism, as much as Platonism and psychologism. It rules out
> appeals by the skeptic to our intentional responses, our attributions,
> our constructions, our investigations, our procedures of verification
> or ratification, etc.[32]

In short: Hurley tries to say that in order to speak of rule-following
one needs not only agreement in social reactions but also certain men-
tal attitudes: that I believe that the given behavior is obligatory (com-
plies with a rule).

Thirdly, Wittgenstein claims that rule-following has a systematic
character. Put differently, speaking of rule-following is possible only
against a background of a complex system of behavior and mental at-
titudes. One can say that one followed a rule only because there are a

---

[31] L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, The MIT Press, Cam-
bridge, Mass. 1967, p. 342.
[32] S. Hurley, *Consciousness in Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
2002, p. 234.

large number of cases in which one can speak of following different rules. Wittgenstein notes:

> We say that, in order to communicate, people must agree with one another about the meanings of words. But the criterion for this agreement is not just agreement with reference to definitions, e.g., ostensive definitions – but also an agreement in judgments. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgments.[33]

Fourthly, in light of the above, an important if not decisive role is played by very simple, basic rules. In §219 Wittgenstein observes:

> "All the steps are really already taken" means: I no longer have any choice. The rule, once stamped with a particular meaning, traces the lines along which it is to be followed through the whole of space. – But if something of this sort really were the case, how would it help? No; my description only made sense if it was to be understood symbolically. – I should have said: This is how it strikes me. When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly.

Crispin Wright claims that such basic cases of rule-following, in which one tends to speak of following a rule 'blindly', are the key to understanding the phenomenon of rule-following. These 'reactions' – although they are full-blooded rule-following, as "they are rational in the sense that they involve intentionality and a willingness to accept correction in the light of inadvertent breaches of the rule"[34] – are to a great extent derived from our biological underpinning. Thus, it is no surprise that we agree when we determine colors: "[T]hat is no miracle: it is just what is to be expected of biologically and neuro-

---

[33] L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, op. cit.,* VI, 39.

[34] C. Wright, *What is Wittgenstein's Point in the Rule-Following Considerations*, http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/philo/courses/rules/papers/Wright.pdf., p. 25.

physiologically similar creatures, hardwired and trained in similar ways."[35] On the other hand, the agreement in the most basic cases constitutes the foundation for the phenomenon of rule-following in more complicated situations, when it is more proper to say that following a rule is not 'blind', that it requires a 'decision' (cf. §186 of *Philosophical Investigations*). Thus, Wittgenstein observes that 'obeying a rule' has many faces (§235): there are cases in which we are prone to say that we follow a rule 'blindly' or 'unconsciously'; in other instances, however, obeying a rule is best described as a decision, when we consciously reflect upon the required course of action. Wittgenstein's key point is that the 'conscious' or 'complex' rule-following is possible *because* there is regularity or 'an agreement in action' between us, which is a manifestation of obeying 'simple' rules in an 'automatic' way.

Fifthly, at the basic, 'unconscious' level, the phenomenon of rule-following displays a feature that may be called 'normative unity'. What I have in mind is that at the basic level one cannot distinguish between different kinds of rules. Some commentators claim that Wittgenstein speaks only of language rules yet this is a mistake. Nowhere does Wittgenstein limit – at least *explicitly* – his remarks to language. Moreover, his favorite example – of the rule '+2' – is hardly an instance of a purely linguistic rule. If it were, the same would hold of *any* rule: 'One should not kill other people', 'One should pay taxes', or 'One should maximize her utility function.' Of course, *Philosophical Investigations* are centered around language but, as I stressed above, Wittgenstein offers a new conception of the relationship between language and reality. It is no longer understood in terms of the language as means for describing or depicting the world. For Wittgenstein, language is a tool for *acting* in the world. In this way, the dichotomy of 'language – reality' loses its importance. One cannot clearly distinguish between linguistic and other kinds of rules: each rule, be it mathematical, moral or legal, has its

---

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 31.

linguistic dimension, is an element of a language-game, i.e. determines the uses of certain expressions. This is especially visible at the level of the most basic rules. Only through an *ex post* reflection, through the application of abstract categories of mathematics or linguistics, can we judge that the utterance of '1002' after '1000' was an instance of the application of a mathematical rule, while the utterance of 'green' was a result of applying a linguistic one.

This analysis shows that Witgenstein's view of language embraces both the Embedded Thesis and the Abstraction Thesis. 'Language in action', to borrow a term from American legal realists, is a part of social interactions in such a way, that it is impossible to unequivocally describe some situation as an application of a meaning rule or a moral or prudential one. Wittgensteinian basic rules are neither language rules, nor moral ones, nor instrumental ones; they are just simple patterns of behavior one learns to follow in particular social interactions. At the same time – and here we embrace the Abstraction Thesis – one can speak also of 'language in books'. When one begins to reflect on one's patterns of behavior, one may distill various aspects thereof, and in this way formulate language rules, moral rules, etc. This process consists in abstracting from other aspects of the contemplated behavioral patterns, and – in the case of language – leads to the development of the idea of language as an idealized system of rules governing the use of words.

Importantly, Wittgenstein's analysis of rule-following and language is not a philosophical extravagance – it finds solid justification in some recent findings of evolutionary theory and neuroscience: a conception of language advocated by such scholars as Merlin Donald, Michael Tomasello, Michael Arbib and others. Two central claims of their approach – which embraces the Embedded Thesis – are: (a) that language is not a stand-alone evolutionary adaptation, but an effect of communication-enabling and culture-creating adaptations; and (b) that the key role in the process of cultural evolution is played by the ability to imitate. More particularly, an evolutionary scenario sketched by Merlin Donald in relation to the emergence of language

is as follows.[36] Donald claims that the sources of human ability to use language are based on *mimetic skills*, which evolved some 2 million years ago. He distinguishes between mimicry, imitation and mimesis. Mimicry is a simple copying of some action, with no understanding of its goal. Imitation is more abstract and flexible, as it takes into account the goal of the action. Finally, mimesis is defined as "the reduplication of an event for communicative purposes. Mimesis requires that the audience be taken into account. It also demands taking a third-person perspective on the actor's own behaviour. Some examples are children fantasy play, the iconic gestures used in a social context, and the simulation of a 'heroic' death during a theatrical performance."[37] Mimetic skills are thus founded on the ability to imitate, which in turn is conditioned by mimicry skills.

Donald identifies four main types of mimetic representation, which are key to the transmission and propagation of culture: (1) re-enactive mime, characteristic of role-playing; (2) precise means-end imitation (as in learning how to fry an egg); (3) the systematic rehearsal and refinement of skill (as in learning how to drive a car); and (4) nonlinguistic gesture (as in learning how to dance). He further claims that these mimetic skills were the foundation for the emergence of language and all the other forms of culture. He stresses that his proposal differs from the traditional scenarios which condition the emergence of culture on the prior emergence of language (the *language first* theory). According to Donald, some forms of culture, based on the mimetic skills, must have *preceded* language and enabled its evolution (the *culture first* theory).

Donald's theory leads to profound consequences. Firstly, he claims that the human mind is intimately linked to the society in which it flourishes. One can even say that it is *co-created* by the community. Communal practices are constitutive of the human mind, both

---

[36] Cf. M. Donald, *Imitation and Mimesis*, [in:] *Perspectives on Imitation*, vol. 2: *Imitation, Human Development, and Culture*, eds. S. Hurley, N. Chater, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 283–300.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 286.

in their phylogenetic and ontogenetic dimensions. Secondly, language is not an individual but a network-level phenomenon: its evolution resembles the evolution of an ecosystem rather than of a single organism. Thirdly, it follows that "cognitive neuroscientists are unlikely to find an innate language acquisition device, and should redirect their investigations toward the powerful analogue processing systems out of which language can emerge in group interactions."[38]

A similar theory – but in the context of neuroscience – is advocated by Michael Arbib.[39] He attempts to answer the question of what is the neuronal basis for a certain feature of language – *parity* – which manifests itself in our ability to recognize what our interlocutor wants to say. He observes that the Broca's area – traditionally considered the region of the brain responsible for the production of speech – is one of the areas in which there is a complex system of mirror neurons. Thus, Broca's area is implicated in the production of various multimodal linguistic actions (utilizing the hands, face and voice). In connection to this Arbib formulates the Neuron System Hypothesis: the parity condition is fulfilled due to the fact that Broca's area has been evolutionarily built upon a perception system responsible for the recognition and execution of manual actions. Arbib believes that the hypothesis is backed by both the arguments resulting from neuro-imaging experiments (execution and perception of manual gestures activate neurons located within or in the proximity of Broca's area) and the anatomical facts (it is assumed that the F5 region in the brains of macaques, where the mirror neurons were discovered, is an analogue of the Broadmann 44 area in human brain, which is a part of Broca's area)

Arbib presents also an evolutionary hypothesis pertaining to the probable development of mirror neurons. The first stage consisted in the emergence of mirror systems dedicated to the perception and

---

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 294.
[39] Cf. M. Arbib, *The Mirror System, Imitation, and the Evolution of Language*, [in:] *Imitation in Animals and Artifacts*, eds. Ch. Nehavin, K. Dautenhahn, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2002, pp. 229–280.

execution of manual actions. In the second stage, those mirror neurons served as the basis for the development of the ability to imitate manual gestures: simple forms of such imitation are found in apes, more complex forms are exclusively human. The third stage was the emergence of pantomimic skills, and the fourth stage led beyond simple reenactment of human behavior (some gestures were recognized as standing for something else, e.g. waving one's hand was interpreted as imitating a flying bird). The fifth stage is the emergence of proto-signs, or conventional gestures which made pantomime more precise (e.g., they enabled to distinguish gestures representing birds and the process of flying). Finally, the sixth stage resulted in the development of proto-language, which emerged through the separation of conventionalized manual, mimic and vocal gestures from pantomime.

Arbib claims further that if the above sketched evolutionary scenario is sound, then the human brain is *language-ready*, but *does not 'have' language*. Thus, we are forced to reject Chomsky's theory of universal grammar and the conception of brains 'having language'. This conclusion is further reinforced by the following two observations: firstly, the ability to learn and use language is not confined to spoken language, but embraces a combination of manual, vocal and mimetic skills. Secondly, proto-language was based on proto-phrases: proto-words functioned as our sentences, not our words.

4. Janus-Faced Normativity

The above reported evolutionary and neuroscientific conceptions constitute – in my view – a powerful argument backing the Wittgensteinian stance towards rule-following and language. But where does it leave us philosophically regarding the problem of the normativity of language? I suggest the following ontological stance. There are two kinds of rules: the rudimentary and the abstract. Rudimentary rules emerge from the regularities of social behavior coupled with spe-

cial mental attitudes. At this level, there are no individual, stand-alone rules. We must rather speak of a system of rules. Moreover, I also posit that rudimentary rules cannot be unequivocally individuated. In other words, one cannot provide a set of absolute criteria for rule-individu-ation. Speaking metaphorically, the same 'amalgam' of rudimentary rules may be divided in various ways, giving different sets of fully in-dividuated rules. What follows, at the rudimentary level no absolute cri-terion exists for distinguishing kinds of rules. One is in no position to ascribe different rules to different categories (linguistic, legal, moral, mathematical). Rudimentary rules are (relatively) normatively unified.

The second view is that of *abstract rules*. They are abstract entities, which can exist in isolation (i.e., apart from a system of rules). What follows is that such rules can be unequivocally indi-viduated; one can also ascribe them to some rule-categories (legal, linguistic, etc.). I also claim that the emergence of abstract rules is the result of us reflecting upon our behavior. It is only through re-flection that we can categorize different kinds of rules, ask what the criteria for distinguishing legal, moral, linguistic, mathemati-cal and other types of rules are. Finally, in order to categorize ab-stract rules, one needs to *express them in language*. Thus, abstract rules are *linguistic entities*.

Now, the crucial step is to recognize that both stances are compat-ible. In other words, the ontology of rules proposed here can be encap-sulated in the thesis that regularities of social behavior and some men-tal attitudes give rise to the emergence of rudimentary rules, which, in turn, are the 'scaffolding' for the abstract rules.

Against this background we may revisit the problem of norma-tivity in language. I propose that there are two kinds of normativity corresponding to two kinds of rules: rudimentary and abstract. Rudi-mentary normativity is a feature of rudimentary rules. It can be ana-lyzed into the following three aspects:

    a.   rudimentary rules are objective; the objectivity in question is a direct consequence of the social character of rudimentary

rules. They are patterns of behavior that are propagated within
a community through the process of imitation;

b. rudimentary rules may be applied correctly or incorrectly, and
it is the reaction of the community that indicates which is the
case. At the same time, rudimentary rules cannot be cited as
reasons for acting in a certain way, i.e. they cannot justify a
given course of action;

c. rudimentary rules are followed 'blindly' or unconsciously.
Such unconscious decisions to use a certain word in relation
to the given object or to act in some way are not reasoned. One
needs to keep in mind, however, that this mode of rule-follow-
ing is not merely a biological adaptation – we learn most of ru-
dimentary rules through social training.

It is essential to notice that rudimentary normativity is not a norma-
tivity of language, or morality or rationality. At the rudimentary level
one cannot distinguish between kinds of rules, and so – between kinds
of normativity. Still, rudimentary normativity is an absolute or intrin-
sic feature of rudimentary rules; it is a characteristic of what those
rules are. To put it in a different way: the normativity of the rudimen-
tary rules is not conditional – it is generated by the regularities of so-
cial behaviour coupled with some mental attitudes, and we never de-
cide whether to accept the system of rudimentary rules.

The situation changes at the level of abstract rules. Abstract rules
are linguistic expressions of obligatory (or necessary) patterns of act-
ing, which result from our reflection over the rudimentary rules we
follow. It is at this level that one may distinguish kinds of rules simply
by *formulating a theory* of how to act morally, legally or in a linguisti-
cally correct way. Our ethical systems are systems of abstract (moral)
rules; our legal acts are collections of abstract (legal) rules; our dic-
tionaries and grammar books describe systems of abstract (syntactic
and semantic) rules. Importantly, the abstract rules we formulate in-
fluence – through a feedback – our rule-following practices at the ru-
dimentary level.

Those abstract (legal, moral, language) rules may be formulated in different ways, and so different theories of morality, law or language may be developed. In morals, one can advocate utilitarianism, Kantianism, etc. In legal philosophy, one can be a positivist or a non-positivist. In linguistics one may embrace various accounts of language. In other words, there are not – and cannot be – absolute or true definitions of morality, law or language as these normative systems are, in a sense, our constructions. However, it is important to realize that the very possibility of those constructions (e.g., various theories of morality) is conditioned on the existence of the system of rudimentary rules (which are not such a construction).

Within such a setting one can defend various conceptions of abstract normativity. For instance, the normativity of moral rules can be described as being *sui generis* or as having its ultimate sanction in the standards of rationality. The normativity of law may be said to result from moral or instrumental considerations, or to be an intrinsic feature of ideally existing legal rules. The conception of normativity one embraces hangs together with the theory of morality or law one accepts. And again, abstract normativity depends on or is conditioned by the rudimentary normativity. In ethics and law it is often assumed that moral rules are normative as they constitute objective reasons for action. It means that moral rules are (a) objective; (b) may serve as justification for a course of action; and (c) are usually followed consciously. It seems clear that such a conception of the normativity of ethics is constructed upon the rudimentary form of normativity. The fact that one formulates moral rules in language makes it possible for moral rules to have justificatory force as well as to be followed consciously (in a 'reasoned' way).

The above analysis leads to the following solution to the normativity of meaning puzzle. The fact that – at the level of abstract rules – one can 'see' language in various ways, makes it possible to defend various stances regarding the normativity of meaning. Firstly, proponents of the non-normative understanding of meaning may argue that what we call the rules of language are in fact only descrip-

tions of (some aspects of) rudimentary rules. Secondly, defenders of the extrinsic normativity of meaning may construct language in such a way that meaning rules become conditional (e.g., they may embrace a purely formal view of language, but one in which language is chosen by a conventional decision). Similarly – thirdly – the supporters of the intrinsic normativity thesis may assume that language is metaphysically necessary, and hence both the internal and the external normativity of meaning is categorical.

My crucial point is that *none of these stances are true*, despite the fact that the normativity of meaning debate is so phrased as to suggest that a true picture of the workings of language is at stake. On my account, the problem of the normativity of meaning is not the question of truth, but rather of purpose: one can develop diametrically different theories of the normativity of meaning, which are better or worse relative to the accepted cognitive and practical goals.

Now, why has the contemporary debate pertaining to the normativity of meaning been led astray? I suspect that the reason for this is connected to the conception of language assumed by the disputants. It seems to me that the debate over the normativity question revolves around a formal view of language, or at least all its participants embrace the Isolation Thesis: that language is an isolated system of rules. Only on such an assumption does the discussion between non-normativists, extrinsic-normativists and intrinsic-normativists have any sense. The problem is that – as I believe – without a broader perspective, one that embeds language (in some way) into social interactions, the question of the normativity of meaning becomes an artificial or far-fetched one. No answer defended in such a debate has any theoretical or pragmatic value: it is pure and futile scholasticism (in the pejorative sense of the word), one based on false assumptions and leading to unsolvable and useless quibbles.