NORMATIVITY OF MEANING: A SELLARSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: According to Sellars, our talk about meanings is essentially normative: meanings are roles confered on expressions by our linguistic rules. The opponents of this view argue that there is no kind of normativity affecting semantics. In this short paper I expose the sources of Sellars's normativism and I defend it against the objections of the anti-normativists.

KEY WORDS: Meaning, semantics, normativity, rule, Sellars.

In his letter to Roderick Chisholm, Wilfrid Sellars wrote: « "…" means – is the core of a unique mode of discourse which is as distinct from the *description* and *explanation* of empirical fact, as is the language of *prescription* and *justification*».[1] In this way, Sellars warned against taking the meaning talk at face value, as simply stating facts.[2] Most of Sellars' followers (Brandom, 1994; Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne, 1997) diagnosed the source of the peculiarity of semantic talk as the essential *normativity* of meaning, with the fact that meanings are best seen, as Sellars himself urged, as *roles* confered on expressions by *rules* to which we subordinate the expressions. Let us stress that this is *one of many possible ways* of viewing meaning as something normative (with, of course, the potential for much mutual incompatibility). Indeed, Hattiangadi's (2006) overview of all those who march under the «normativist» banners includes Baker and Hacker, Bloor, Brandom, Boghossian, Glock, Kripke, Lance and O'Leary Hawthorne, McDowell, McGinn, Millar, Miller, Pettit, and Wright; hence a host of people who certainly do not all share anything more substantive than that they have flirted with normativity in semantics.

But whoever might belong to the normativist camp, there is also a rather militant 'anti-normativist' movement; witness Wikfors (2001), Boghossian (2005 obviously a renegade!), Hattiangadi (*ibíd.*), Glüer and Wikfors (2009). In her recent article, Hattiangadi (2009) replies to the arguments of Whiting (2007), who defends a version of the normative construal of meaning. In this short paper, I do not mean to enter into this dispute; though my views to some extent chime with Whiting's, I would prefer to examine how normativity of meaning looks from the Sellarsian perspective sketched above, and how the arguments of Hattiangadi fare in this light.[3]

It seems that where there is no quarrel between the «normativists» and the «anti-normativists» is that linguistic expressions can be used correctly or incorrectly. To say *This is a dog!* when pointing at a dog is correct, whereas to say the same when pointing at a spider is incorrect. Where controversy begins is that whereas this fact implies that we *ought to* use the sentence in a certain way (namely the correct one), Hattiangadi argues that although we can say this, if we do, then we will be using a «non- intrinsic» *ought to*:

> «There may be moral, prudential, legal, pragmatic or even aesthetic "ought's governing what to say, but there are no intrinsic semantic ones. In many cases, putative semantic "oughts" are merely hypothetical, means-end "ought's contingent on desires or intentions».[4]

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[1] CHISHOLM, R. M. & W. SELLARS (1958): «Intentionality and the Mental: Chisholm-Sellars Correspondence on Intentionality», in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. II, eds. H. Feigl, M. Scriven, and G. Maxwell, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p.527

[2] Sellars's views on meaning are presented especially in in Sellars (1954; 1953; 1949; 1974).

[3] For a much more detailed exposition of my views of the normativity of meaning see PEREGRIN (2010; 2011; 2012; 2014)

[4] HATTIANGADI, A. (2009): «Some more thoughts on semantic oughts: a reply to Daniel Whiting», *Analysis* 69, p.59

Why should «hypothetical, means-end "ought's» not qualify as «intrinsic» *ought*s? Though the intuition behind this might seem to be clear, it is good to anatomize it, for we might consider (at least) two subtly different (though interrelated) reasons. First, the reason might be that only *ought*s that are independent of any contingent circumstances are worth the name. I do not think such an absolutism is tenable (though I admit that many philosophers take it for granted); but I postpone the discussion of this 'normative absolutism' for later. Second, the reason might be that though we can use *ought*s in the context of «hypothetical, means-end» claims, this is merely a *façon de parler* which succumbs to easy rephrasing using just straightforwardly non-normative vocabulary. To say «If you want to prepare a good chili, you ought to add enough pepper» is merely a way of saying «If (or perhaps only if) you add enough pepper, you will prepare a good chili». As the latter reason may be viable even if the former one were not, let us now concentrate on it.

What «desires or intentions» are the metaphoric semantic *ought*s «contingent on»? Hattaingadi writes:

> «For example, suppose that you want to express the false proposition that snow is black. Given the straightforwardly non-normative fact that the English sentence "snow is black" means that snow is black, you ought to (or at least may) utter the sentence "snow is black". This is a hypothetical "ought" (or "may") contingent on your desire to assert the proposition that snow is black. Uttering the sentence "snow is black" is a means to satisfying your desire to assert that snow is black in English».[5]

From the Sellarsian perspective I am presenting here, this account is hopelessly circular. First and foremost, that a sentence means thus and so is not seen as «straightforwardly non-normative». (The idea is that it *is* normative, in a crucial sense of the word; and that even if an opponent does not want to grant this, it is impossible to start from taking for granted the opposite.) The primary place where we need to invoke rules and normativity, is in making sense of «expressing propositions» (or meanings in general). Of course, if you accept the picture that propositions are something that you have in your mental storage, and that when you communicate you merely pick one up and express it, then you may describe the whole process of using language in non-normative terms; but are there really any arguments (from empirical psychology, say) to support this view? Even leaving aside the whole host of arguments against the psychological construal of meanings (Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson,...), there is a deeper problem concerning the very notion of *expressing* a mental content. There seems to be no evidence of any mental process that could correspond to such a label. Let us give voice to Wittgenstein:

> «To say that we are trying to express the idea which is before our mind is to use a metaphor, one which very naturally suggests itself; and which is all right so long as it doesn't mislead us when we are philosophizing. For when we recall what really happens in such cases we find a great variety of processes more or less akin to each other. We might be inclined to say that in all such cases, at any rate, we are guided by something before our

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[5]   *Ibíd.*, p. 59

mind. But then the words "guided" and "thing before our mind" are used in as many senses as the words "idea" and "expression of an idea"».[6]

Of course, a semanticist like Hattiangadi may have her own view: I am not interested, she may contend, in psychology of speech and my talk about expressing propositions is not a talk about what happens in an individual mind, it is something more abstract! But then the crucial question is *what exactly are we talking about when we talk about expressing propositions*? Wittgenstein's answer is that our talk about expressions' expressing meanings is best understandable as talk about their instantiating certain roles:

> «Compare the meaning of a word with the "function" of an official. And "different meanings" with "different functions"».[7]

And this is the train of thought taken also by Sellars: as we have already noted, his peculiar version of the view is that meanings are *roles* vis-à-vis the *rules* of our language games. Hence from this perspective, normativity is buried much deeper in the foundation of language than to be explained away by helping ourselves to ready-made propositions and the like.

Could we say that when we claim that the sentence *This is a dog* ought to be used when pointing at a dog, this *ought* can be explained away by saying that it is contingent on our desire to make a certain move in a language game? Not really. The game does not exist aside of the rules including the one involving this *ought*. Just as you cannot say that the fact that you ought to move a bishop only diagonally is contingent on your desire to move it to some other part of the chessboard (because the very desire to *move*, in the sense of the word used in chess, presupposes the concept of a legitimate move and hence the rules of chess), so we cannot say that it is our desires to communicate that bring the rules of communication into being.

But does not complying with the rules presuppose the desire to comply with them; and can we then not say that the *ought* is contingent on the desire to achieve something plus this very desire? Still not really. Being bound by rules does not necessarily go hand in hand with a desire (though in many cases it does). I do not remember having ever desired to speak Czech. I was introduced to the rules of Czech grammar and of the usage of Czech expressions by my parents and teachers, and now I respect the rules in the sense that I recognize inappropriate usage of Czech expressions; and treat it as such (i.e. in some contexts I correct those who are guilty of them, sometimes I laugh, often I just ignore them, sometimes I cease to treat those who make frequent errors as speakers of Czech ...).

Hence I do not think we can say that the rules of language, which are the source of the corresponding *ought*s (or maybe we should say that they are *correlates* of the *ought*s, for when I say that there is a rule I do not have in mind anything over and above the fact that people assume certain «normative attitudes» to other people's doings). This is also clear from the fact that we have so many languages: there are many ways to assert that snow is black, hence no particular way is derivable from an intention. True, when you want to tell somebody who you know speaks only English that snow is black (or, for that matter,

6   WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1958): *The Blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 41.
7   WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1969): *Über Gewissheit*, Blackwell, Oxford, §64.

something more urgent), one may say that you ought to use an English sentence, using the *ought* in a «non-intrinsic» (i.e. so that the *ought* can be explained away), but this is only because you and the person co-inhabit the same «space of meaningfulness», which is, from the Sellarsian viewpoint, constituted by *rules* and hence built on essential *oughts*.

Let us now return to the «normative absolutism». Hattiangadi seems to take for granted: it seems that according to her, the only genuine («intrinsic») *oughts* are those which are *indefeasible*. This is what is supposed to substantiate the claim that we can use the terms *right* and *wrong* also in a sense that is not normative:

> «Both "right" and "wrong" have non-normative uses. For example, to give the right answer to a question, or in an exam, is to give the answer that is true or otherwise satisfies the expectations of the questioner or examiner. To say that an answer is right is not to say that it is the answer that you ought to give. If "right answer" just meant "answer that you ought to give", it would sound odd to say "you should not give the right answer", or "you should give the wrong answer". However, these are perfectly reasonable things to say in some situations for example, if by answering truthfully you will incriminate a friend you know to be innocent».[8]

Why would it sound odd to say «You should not give the right answer» if we were to read the *right* «normatively»? Obviously, on Hattiangadi's construal it is not possible that one kind of correctness is trumped by another kind (if this is possible, then it is no genuine correctness at all). In contrast to this, I think that there are always many levels of correctness, some of them quite easily able to trump others, others being able to constitute much less easily resolvable conflicts. As Davidson puts it, not even in the narrower realm of *moral* norms, where the expectation to find absolute norms would be the strongest, is this expectation justified:

> «The situation is common; life is crowded with examples: I ought to do it because it would save a life, I ought not because it would be a lie; if I do it I will break my word to Lavina, if I do not, I will break my word to Lolita; and so on. ... principles, or reasons for acting are irreducibly multiple». [9]

From our perspective, the reason 'normative absolutism' makes little sense is that the only possible source of normativity is society; and there is nothing that could prevent society (or societies, for one need not be a member of only a single one) from issuing conflicting norms. True, one is not automatically bound by all the norms that are around; but on the other hand one is never immune to conflicts which may result from binding oneself (willingly or unwillingly; consciously or unconsciously) to norms which are actually incompatible.

The Sellarsian model for understanding what meaning is and how linguistic communication functions I offer is often envisaged by comparing language with chess.

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8 HATTIANGADI, A. (2009): «Some more thoughts on semantic oughts: a reply to Daniel Whiting», *Analysis* 69, p. 60.

9 DAVIDSON, D. (1970): «How is Weakness of the Will Possible?», in J. Feinberg (ed.): *Moral Concepts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; reprinted in and quoted from Davidson: *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 34.

Just as the rules of chess cause pieces of wood to become something over and above their physical constitution (viz. pawns, bishops, rooks) and enable us to engage in a brand new activity (viz. playing chess), so the rules of language (which, unlike the rules of chess are usually merely implicit to our linguistic practices) cause sounds or inscriptions to become something over and above their physical constitution (viz. meaningful words and phrases) and enable us to engage in a brand new activity (viz. linguistic communication). If you have an alternative explanation of what meanings are (which I think is not really available, but this is not part of my current argument), then perhaps you can defend a non-normative picture but this is not what Hattiangadi does, for she is attempting to refute the normativity of meaning independently of any such theoretical background.

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