Kripke's Finiteness Objection to Dispositionalist Theories of Meaning

Jussi Haukioja
Department of Philosophy
University of Turku, Finland

jussi.haukioja@iki.fi

ABSTRACT: It is often thought that Blackburn and Boghossian have provided an effective reply to the finiteness objection to dispositional theories of meaning, presented by Kripke's Wittgenstein. In this paper I distinguish two possible readings of the sceptical demand for meaning-constitutive facts. The demand can be formulated in one of two ways: an A-question or a B-question. Any theory of meaning will give one of these explanatory priority over the other. I will then argue that the standard reply only works if B-questions are seen as prior, while the dominant dispositionalist theories of meaning see A-questions as prior.

Kripke's Wittgenstein (KW\(^1\)) challenges theories of meaning to specify which facts about a speaker could conceivably make it the case that the words and symbols he or she uses possess determinate meanings. Most current answers to this question deploy the general dispositionalist strategy which KW aims to refute. These answers claim that the speaker's dispositions to apply terms to objects in the surrounding world constitute or determine, in some way, the meanings of these terms. KW presents a battery of argumentation against the dispositionalist. One can separate (at least\(^2\)) two strands in his argumentation: the normativity and the finiteness objections. Usually the normativity objection is taken to be the more powerful one. The finiteness objection is often dismissed more quickly.

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1 *i.e.* Wittgenstein as interpreted in Kripke (1982). All page references to Kripke are to this work.

2 In addition to these two arguments, some commentators also find a justification or an error objection. My view is that these objections collapse to the normativity objection (properly understood), but I will not argue for this here.
In this paper I am going to claim that there are two ways of reading KW's demand for meaning-constitutive facts, and that distinguishing between the two is crucial for the proper understanding of his objections to dispositionalist theories. I will concentrate on the finiteness objection. While I think that the distinction between the two readings which I will propose has important consequences to the proper understanding of the normativity objection as well, I believe its role is even more crucial in the case of the finiteness objection. In particular, the reasoning which is generally taken to give an answer to the finiteness objection presupposes one reading of the demand for meaning-constitutive facts, while the dominant dispositionalist theories have generally preferred the other.

These dispositionalist theories are put forward as theories of *mental content* rather than meaning. I will, however, follow Kripke in framing the question as one concerning word meanings. It is generally agreed that the problems are equally severe for dispositionalism about *meaning* and for dispositionalism about *content*, whatever view one prefers about the relationships between linguistic meaning and mental content.3 The problem arises from the notion of *correctness conditions*, and clearly such conditions exist for mental contents as well as for linguistic entities.

### 1. A-questions and B-questions

When KW asks us what facts determine the meaning of predicate P, we can take him as primarily raising one of two different questions:

(A) What facts about me make it the case that the correct application of predicate P (as I use it) is governed by intermediary entity A?

(B) What facts about me make it the case that it is correct to apply predicate P (as I use it) in previously unencountered instance I?

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3 See, for example, Miller (1998, 178-181).
In what follows, I will refer to these kinds of questions as 'A-questions' and 'B-questions'. (A) and (B) are formulated for predicates - and I will mostly be concerned with predicates below - but one could easily adapt them for other forms of expression.

Kripke's sceptic moves quickly from the one type of question to the other. Take Kripke's example of addition and quaddition. The sceptic starts out by asking what facts about me make it the case that '125' is the correct answer to the question 'What is 68+57?' (Kripke, 8). This is clearly a B-question, asking what makes it the case that this is the correct application in this previously unencountered instance. But shortly thereafter the skeptic starts to frame the question as an A-question, asking what facts about me make it the case that my usage of ‘+’ denotes the *addition function*, and not the *quaddition* function, which returns the value '5' when the numbers to be added (or, rather, *quadded*) are larger than any I have in fact added together (Kripke, 8-9). That is, what fact about me makes it the case that it is *this function* that sets the standard for my usage of ‘+’?

Similar sceptical worries can be raised about any predicate, and we can always formulate the sceptic's challenge as either an A-question or a B-question. Take 'red', for example. Suppose that I have never encountered objects which are both red and square. We can imagine Kripke's sceptic asking: what facts about me make it the case that I mean *red* rather than *red and not square* by my usage of 'red'? Again, we can take this in two ways. We can either ask an A-question: what facts about me make it the case that it is *the property of being red*, rather than *the property of being red and not square*, which sets the standard of correctness for my use of 'red'? Or we can ask a B-question: what facts about me make it the case that, when I come across a red and square object O, it is correct to apply 'red' to O?

In discussions of Kripke's problem, these formulations are often run together. It is assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that any answer to a B-question must be based on an answer to an A-question. In other words, it is assumed that the correctness of any *particular* application of a predicate is to be explained by the predicate's association with an intermediary object. On this
assumption, one takes answers to A-questions as primary to answers to B-questions, in an explanatory sense. I will call this assumption Meaning Platonism:

*Meaning Platonism.* If S means something by predicate P, something about S determines an intermediary entity A as the standard of correctness for P. When S correctly applies P to individual x, this correctness consists in the appropriate relation obtaining between A and x.

In the examples above, the intermediary has been taken to be an abstract object such as a property or a function (in which case the appropriate relation would be property exemplification, etc.). But there are other entities that might be invoked to do the same job – I am using ‘Platonism’ in a loose sense. For example, A could be a set (of entities or n-tuples; the *extension* of P), and the appropriate relation that of set membership. Unless one identifies properties and relations with such sets, these theories would differ in various respects. But they would share a commitment to Meaning Platonism: the correct use of predicate P consists in successfully tracking the requirements of the intermediary object picked out by whatever it is that one's competence in the use of P consists in.⁴

The key issue is the question of explanatory priority: if we explain the correctness conditions of particular applications in terms of an intermediary such as a set or a property, and give A-questions the priority, we are committed to Meaning Platonism. On the other hand, we could give B-questions the priority and seek to explain the correctness conditions of particular applications directly, without relying on intermediaries. A theory which gives B-questions explanatory priority could still think of predicates as having extensions or as referring to properties – the important point is that such entities would not be given an explanatory role. Instead, one would take the primary task to be that of explaining how correctness conditions arise for the use of a predicate, in an unbounded range of particular cases, and abstract away from particular cases to get the predicate's extension.

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⁴ Platonist theories of meaning are in an important sense like the theories Blackburn (1984b) calls “dog-legged”, with the following exception: Blackburn seems to count as dog-legged only those theories which rely on *mental* intermediaries, while I would count as Platonist theories with *any* intermediary. For the purposes of evaluating the finiteness objection, the nature of the intermediary is irrelevant.
2. The Finiteness Objection against Dispositionalism

Especially when we frame the question as a B-question concerning a moment of time in the past, some kind of dispositionalist answer seems compelling. If you are asked: "What makes it the case that, as you used '+’ yesterday, the answer you intended for ’57+68'? was '125’?”, it is natural to respond by relying, in one way or another, on the fact that '125’ is the answer you would have given, had you been asked that question yesterday. This is the basis for the dispositionalist response to Kripke's sceptic.

In its crudest form, dispositionalism would claim that "to mean addition by '+’ is to be disposed, when asked for any sum 'x+y' to give the sum of x and y as the answer" (Kripke, 22). It is obvious that the crude version fails - we are from time to time disposed to make errors, and the crude dispositionalist theory is unable to account for them.

The natural reaction would be to rely on ceteris paribus clauses to filter out errors and claim that correct application of one's terms coincides with one's dispositions to apply the term when conditions are favourable. Such sophisticated dispositionalism is Kripke's main target. As noted above, Kripke presents at least two objections to such theories. The normativity objection claims that sophisticated dispositionalism cannot account for the normativity of meaning. My focus in this paper is on the finiteness objection.

The finiteness objection (Kripke, 26-28) is based on the observation that the totality of my dispositions is finite, yet we take our understanding of '+’ or 'red' to determine their correct application in an infinity of possible instances:

(1) The facts which determine the meanings of the words I use must determine correctness conditions for their use in an infinite number of situations.

(2) I only possess a finite number of dispositions to apply words.

Therefore,
My dispositions to apply words do not suffice to determine the meanings of my words. Most commentators seem to think that this objection is not very damaging. The following reasoning is thought to provide an answer (Blackburn 1984a; Boghossian 1989). There is no limit to the range of situations in which dispositions (mental or non-mental) could be manifested. Thus, if my total dispositional state is to determine the correct application of my symbols, its finiteness does not seem to be a crucial shortcoming: the finite state can manifest itself in an infinite range of situations. In other words, although I possess a finite number of dispositions (however they are counted), there exists an infinite number of possible *manifestations* of my dispositions, because the number of *situations* in which my dispositions could manifest themselves is infinite. I believe this response is basically correct. However, I also believe that it has not been appreciated that this response is not available to all versions of dispositionalism. More precisely, it is only available to a *non-Platonist* version of dispositionalism.

A *Platonist* dispositionalist theory would claim that my total dispositional state, here and now, determines an intermediary which in turn determines the correct use of my terms. Thus, the theory would claim that the totality of my dispositions to use 'red' bears some non-trivial relation to the property of redness, or the set of all actual and possible red things, or what have you, but not to the property of being red and not square, or the set of all red and not square things, and so on. The thrust of Kripke's finiteness objection is that such a relation cannot be specified without circularity. My dispositional state is finite while the number of possible intermediaries is infinite – we cannot rule out all of the countless deviant interpretations.

If we appeal to the fact that dispositions can be manifested in an infinity of instances, we are no longer directly attempting to specify a relation between my dispositional state and an intermediary. Rather, we are saying that there is an infinity of possible *particular* situations in which my dispositions could be manifested. But then, in order to account for errors and normativity, we already need a way of filtering out the *incorrect* particular manifestations of our dispositions.
But if that is the case, we are no longer relying on an infinite set or anything of the sort to provide correctness conditions. In other words, then we are no longer committed to Meaning Platonism.

Thus, the stock answer is only available to a *non-Platonist* dispositionalist theory. This is remarkable, because the prominent dispositionalist reductions of meaning and content are, explicitly or implicitly, Meaning Platonist in character. Most clearly, Fodor's (1990) *asymmetric dependency* theory\(^5\) and Dretske's (1981) *causal* theory\(^6\) both take their task to be that of explaining how words and concepts get to have *properties* (and relations, etc.) as their referents: the correctness conditions for the use of words and concepts in particular situations are taken to follow from this relation. Thus, answers to A-questions are given explanatory priority. If I am correct in claiming that the plausible answer to the finiteness objection is only available to a non-Platonist dispositionalist theory, these theories and their descendants would then face a choice: either the theories have to be reformulated as non-Platonist, or another answer to KW's finiteness objection should be offered.

**References**


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\(^5\) Fodor's commitment to Meaning Platonism is particularly clear in the following quotation: “To apply a term to a thing in its extension is to apply the term correctly; once you've said what it is that makes the tables the extension of 'table's, there is surely no further question about why it's correct to apply a 'table' to a table.” (p. 135) Clearly, the A-question concerning extension is seen as prior in the explanatory sense.

\(^6\) Dretske's commitment to Meaning Platonism is implicit: in taking a subject's (primitive) concepts to correctly apply to things which are *of the same kind* as those present during the critical learning period, he is relying on kinds as intermediaries.