

## Society as the source of the normativity of meaning

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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*. (Chisholm and Sellars, 1958, p. 527).

In this way he urged for a *normative* construal of meaning. 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 (*ibid.*), 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 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, more generally, how normativity of meaning looks from a perspective which I take to be Sellarsian (though nothing hangs on my being faithful to Sellars in all details)<sup>1</sup>, and how the arguments of Hattiangadi fare in this light.

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. 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 (*ibid.*, 59) argues that although we can say this, if we do, then we will be using "non-intrinsic" *ought's*, which "are merely hypothetical, means-end 'ought's contingent on desires or intentions":

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.

On my view, this account is hopelessly circular. For the primary place where we need to invoke rules and normativity, is in making sense of "expressing propositions" (or meanings in

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<sup>1</sup> The perspective is presented especially in Sellars, 1954, 1953, 1949, 1974. See also Peregrin (2010, 2011a, 2011b).

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 accepting such a picture would require a substantiation, which is notoriously lacking in the anti-normativists' accounts.

The Sellarsian alternative is seeing 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. This, I am convinced, pre-empts the argument resulting into the conclusion that the rules of language, which are the source of the corresponding *oughts*, are "contingent on our desires".

In fact, what Hattiangadi appears to take as the hallmark of the "non-intrinsic" nature of an *ought* is its *defeasibility*. 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 (*ibid.*, 60):

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.

However, the 'normative absolutism' equating "intrinsic" *oughts* with indefeasible ones is, I think, misguided, for it would render the class of "intrinsic" *oughts* vacuous. 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. The reason 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.

Hence we have a model for understanding what meaning is and how linguistic communication functions. It is often envisaged by comparing language with chess. 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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