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## What is the Sceptical Solution?

Alexander Miller

In chapter 3 of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Kripke's Wittgenstein offers a "sceptical solution" to the sceptical paradox about meaning developed in chapter 2 (according to which there are no facts in virtue of which ascriptions of meaning such as "Jones means addition by '+'" can be true). Although many commentators have taken the sceptical solution to be broadly analogous to non-factualist theories in other domains, such as non-cognitivism or expressivism in metaethics, the nature of the sceptical solution has not been well-understood. The main aim of this paper is to advance our understanding of the nature of the non-factualism about meaning proposed in the sceptical solution. It attempts to outline some desiderata that should be respected by interpretations of the sceptical solution and considers two objections raised against it in Barry Stroud's paper "Wittgenstein on Meaning, Understanding and Community". It attempts to correct misconstruals of the sceptical solution that have been promulgated by Davidson and some of his followers and suggests that the sceptical solution developed by Kripke's Wittgenstein is best viewed as a form of quasi-realism about meaning. It ends by outlining what it takes to be the most pressing challenges facing the sceptical solution.

# What is the Sceptical Solution?

Alexander Miller

## 1. Introduction

Suppose that a truth-conditional account of meaning is appropriate for moral sentences. Suppose, also, that moral facts, if they exist, would have to be, as Mackie (1977) puts it, objective and categorically prescriptive: they would have to provide categorical reasons for action, reasons capable of motivating any rational agent independent of facts about that agent's contingent desires. So we have:

- (1) "It is right for Jones to assist the injured child" is true if and only if there is a categorical reason for Jones to assist the injured child.

Suppose, too, that Mackie's "argument from queerness" succeeds in establishing that there are no categorical reasons for action, so that we have:

- (2) There are no categorical reasons for action.

It apparently follows from (1) and (2) that:

- (3) "It is right for Jones to assist the injured child" and other atomic, positive moral sentences are false.

One way of attempting to avoid this apparently unpalatable conclusion would involve giving up the truth-conditional account of the meanings of moral sentences: to embrace a form of non-factualism about moral thought and talk. The emotivism of Ayer and Stevenson, Hare's prescriptivism, and the expressivism of

Blackburn and Gibbard, could all be cited as instances of this approach to avoiding an error-theory of moral judgement.<sup>1</sup>

Now suppose that a truth-conditional account of meaning is appropriate for ascriptions of meaning themselves. Suppose, also, that semantic facts, if they exist, would have to be both correctness determining and normative. So we have:

- (4) "Jones means *addition* by '+'" is true if and only if there is a fact about Jones or his speech community which (a) makes it the case that " $x + y = z$ " is correct iff  $z$  is the *sum* of  $x$  and  $y$  and (b) tells Jones how he ought to use "+".<sup>2</sup>

Suppose, too, that the sceptical argument in chapter 2 of Kripke (1982) succeeds in establishing that even idealised access to facts about Jones or his speech community fails to turn up facts that are both correctness determining and normative, so that:

- (5) There are no facts about Jones or his speech community capable of satisfying both (a) and (b).

Then, as in the moral case, we are apparently pushed towards an error theory:

- (6) "Jones means *addition* by '+'" and other atomic, positive ascriptions of meaning are false.

This is the predicament we are left in given the argument of the sceptic in chapter 2 of Kripke (1982): it appears that "all language is meaningless" (1982, 71) and "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air" (1982, 22). What I'm concerned with in

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Ayer (1946), chap. 6, Stevenson (1937), Hare (1952), Blackburn (1984a, 1993b, 1998), Gibbard (1990, 2003). See Blackburn (2011, 8) and Blackburn (2013a, 273) for especially clear illustrations of how this type of view attempts to sidestep the error theory.

<sup>2</sup>I'm vastly oversimplifying here, especially with respect to (b), since none of the complications bear on the main points in the paper. For an account of some of the complications, see Hattiangadi (2017).

this paper is the response that Kripke's Wittgenstein (as opposed to Kripke's Sceptic) offers in response to this predicament in chapter 3 of [Kripke \(1982\)](#), where he develops his "sceptical solution" to the sceptical argument of chapter 2. Although I will sketch tentative responses to two lines of objection developed by Barry Stroud against the sceptical solution, my primary aim in this paper is not to defend it, but simply to advance our understanding of its nature. Inter alia, I will attempt to correct some misunderstandings about the sceptical solution that have been promulgated by Davidson and some of his his followers. I'll end by outlining what I take to be the two most serious challenges facing the sceptical solution.

## 2. The Sceptical Solution

Kripke describes the conclusion of the sceptic's argument as "insane and intolerable" (1982, 60) and "incredible and self-defeating" (1982, 71), and distinguishes between two sorts of solution that might be developed in response. *Straight solutions* would attempt to deny (5) (or to defend an account of meaning facts less demanding than that involved in (4))<sup>3</sup>, while sceptical solutions would *concede* (5) to the sceptic but avoid the error theory by giving up on a truth-conditional account of the meanings of ascriptions of meaning.<sup>4</sup> Citing Michael Dummett's famous

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<sup>3</sup>An example of attempting to defend an account of meaning facts less demanding than that in (4) is the view developed in [Fodor \(1990\)](#). Fodor first of all rejects the idea that meaning facts have to be normative in any sense stronger than that associated with the idea that they determine correctness conditions, so that (b) is effectively deleted from (4); he then proceeds to identify facts capable of satisfying condition (a) using the notion of an "asymmetric dependency base". There is of course a whole literature about the precise nature of condition (b) and its analogues, but as noted above we can put this aside for the purposes of the present paper.

<sup>4</sup>The distinction between straight and sceptical solutions could be deployed in the moral case also. Ayer, Stevenson et al could be regarded as proffering sceptical solutions. [McDowell \(1998\)](#) could be regarded as giving a straight

review of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Kripke suggests that in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein rejects the truth-conditional account of meaning advocated in the *Tractatus* and proposes to replace it with an account of meaning in terms of assertibility conditions:

As Dummett says, "the *Investigations* contains implicitly a rejection of the classical (realist) Frege-*Tractatus* view that the general form of explanation of meaning is a statement of the truth-conditions". In place of this view, Wittgenstein proposes an alternative rough general picture . . . Wittgenstein replaces the question, "What must be the case for this sentence to be true?" by two others: first, "Under what conditions may this form of words be appropriately asserted (or denied)?"; second, given an answer to the first question, "What is the role and utility, in our lives of our practice of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions?"

([Kripke 1982](#), 73, quoting [Dummett 1959](#))

Thus, to account for the meaning of a given sentence we should describe the conditions in which there is a license to assert it, and show that the practice of licensing its assertion in these conditions has a certain utility in our lives. The central idea in Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptical solution is that we can avoid the "insane and intolerable" error theory by applying this model of meaning to ascriptions of meaning themselves:

We have to see under what circumstances attributions of meaning are made and what role these attributions play in our lives. Follow-

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solution hospitable to the idea of moral facts as characterised by (1), while [Railton \(1986\)](#), [Brink \(1989\)](#) and the like attempt to defend straight solutions by weakening the account of moral facts in play in (1) (by denying that we need to think of moral facts as intrinsically reason-giving). In viewing the sceptical solution in the meaning case as promoting a form of non-factualism I am agreeing with [Wright \(1984\)](#), [McGinn \(1984\)](#) and [Boghossian \(1989\)](#) and disagreeing with some recent commentators who view the sceptical solution as factualist. See, e.g., [Wilson \(1994\)](#), [Byrne \(1996\)](#), [Davies \(1998\)](#), [Kusch \(2006\)](#). I am not going to argue for the non-factualist aspect of the interpretation in the present paper as I have done so elsewhere: for a full defence of the non-factualist interpretation and a critique of some of the main forms of factualism, see [Miller \(2009\)](#).

ing Wittgenstein's exhortation not to think but to look, we will not reason *a priori* about the role such statements *ought* to play; rather we will find out what circumstances *actually* license such assertions and what role this license *actually* plays. (Kripke 1982, 86–87)

Kripke argues that when we do this, it transpires that meaning is possible only in a communal context<sup>5</sup>, that there could not be a practice of ascribing meanings in the case of an individual solitary from birth, or “considered in isolation from any community”.<sup>6</sup>

Consider the case of Jones, a lifelong solitary. If we initially think of the assertibility conditions of a sentence as conditions in which the participants in the practice of using S regard the utterance of S as justified, we can say that the assertibility conditions of

(7) “Jones means *addition* by ‘+’”

are conditions in which Jones is confident that he knows “how

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<sup>5</sup>We'll take a community to consist of two or more people capable of linguistic interaction at a given time, and who share “innate similarity responses” (see Section 4 below). This means that a cross-temporal sequence of time slices of an individual—in the manner of Blackburn 1984b—don't count as a community for our purposes here. For further discussion of some of the issues here, see Wee Ming Kho (2015).

<sup>6</sup>The phrase is from Kripke (1982, 110). Kripke writes: “The falsity of the private model does not mean that a physically isolated individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather that an individual, considered in isolation (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so”. It is not obvious to me that this holds in the case of a lifelong solitary individual: from the fact that a lifelong solitary individual could be said to be following rules if we imagined him to be a member of our community, it does not obviously follow that a lifelong solitary individual could follow rules (for some relevant commentary see Loar 1985, 279–80). The issues are delicate and require a fuller discussion than I can attempt here, but I don't think any of my substantive claims or arguments turn on them. So for our present purposes I simply take “an individual considered in isolation from any community” to refer to a lifelong solitary individual and focus on the question whether such an individual could be a genuine rule follower. (For a useful discussion of some of the options here, see Ahmed 2007, 155–63.)

to go on” in responding, e.g., to arithmetical queries featuring “+”. Now, the assertibility conditions of

(8) “It seems to Jones that he means *addition* by ‘+’”

will be identical to those of (7): the utterance of (8) will be regarded as justified by Jones when he is confident that he knows “how to go on”.

Likewise, in this context the assertibility conditions of

(9) “‘125’ is the correct response to ‘68 + 57 = ?’”

are conditions in which Jones is confidently inclined to respond ‘125’, and the assertibility conditions of

(10) “It seems to Jones that ‘125’ is the correct response to ‘68 + 57 = ?’”

will again be identical to those of (9), namely conditions in which Jones is confidently inclined to respond “125”.

The key point for Kripke's Wittgenstein is that in both cases the “seems right/is right” distinction necessary for the propriety of meaning-talk collapses. Matters stand differently when Jones is a member of a community. The assertibility conditions of

(11) “Jones means *addition* by ‘+’”

will now be conditions in which Jones is inclined to give the same answers as the community when it is confident that it knows “how to go on”, whereas the assertibility conditions of

(12) “It seems to Jones that he means *addition* by ‘+’”

will be conditions in which Jones is confident that he knows “how to go on”.

Likewise, the assertibility conditions of

(13) “‘125’ is the correct response to ‘68 + 57 = ?’”

will be conditions in which the community is confidently inclined to respond “125”, while the assertibility conditions of

(14) “It seems to Jones that ‘125’ is the correct response to ‘ $68 + 57 = ?$ ’”

will be conditions in which Jones is confidently inclined to respond “125”.

In the communal context the assertibility conditions of “is right” sentences (such as (11) and (13)) can come apart from the assertibility conditions of “seems right” sentences (such as (12) and (14)) when Jones’s inclinations clash with those of the community, so the “seems right/is right” distinction is preserved. And the utility of the practice of ascribing meanings under the relevant conditions is that in uttering, e.g., “Jones means *addition* by ‘+’” we can admit Jones into our community or signal our confidence that he can be trusted to answer as we do. (Clearly, this is useful: if Jones means *quaddition* rather than *addition* one should be careful when lending him money!). None of this applies in the case of the lifelong solitary individual, so the practice of ascribing meanings cannot get a grip in that context.

### 3. Three Desiderata

In this section I’ll outline three desiderata that we should attempt to respect when giving an exposition of the sceptical solution.

#### 3.1. Communitarian straight solutions and communitarian sceptical solutions

First, we should respect the fact that Kripke explicitly distinguishes between communitarian straight solutions and communitarian sceptical solutions to the sceptical paradox. Kripke wants to reject the former, but argues in favour of the latter. This is clearest in the following passage:

Wittgenstein’s theory should not be confused with a theory that, for any ‘*m*’ and ‘*n*’, the value of the function we mean by ‘plus’, is

(by definition) the value that (nearly) all the linguistic community would give as the answer. Such a theory would be a theory of the truth-conditions of such assertions as “By ‘plus’ we mean such-and-such a function” . . . this would be a social, or community-wide, version of the dispositional theory, and would be open to at least some of the same criticisms as the original form. (Kripke 1982, 111)

We can illustrate this point by considering a recent interpretation of the sceptical solution which arguably fails to respect it. In a recent book, Claudine Verheggen writes:

Kripke’s answer [to the sceptical paradox] is that ascriptions of meaning to a speaker’s utterances have assertibility conditions rather than truth-conditions. They are justified if the speaker’s applications of her words agree consistently with those made by competent members of her community. (They are also justified in terms of the role and utility they have in peoples lives.) Thus, in effect, the meanings of a speaker’s words are determined by what the members of her community mean by those words. Correct applications are applications that conform to the conditions of correctness at play in her community. (Verheggen 2016, 90)

Verheggen here appears to ascribe a communitarian *straight* solution to Kripke’s Wittgenstein, thereby missing the crucial “sceptical” nature of the solution that he offers. As above, let the assertibility conditions of a sentence *S* be the conditions under which speakers are regarded by participants in the relevant practice as justified in uttering *S*, and let the truth conditions of *S* be the conditions whose obtaining is necessary and sufficient for *S*’s truth. On a realist “truth-conditional” picture of meaning, the fact that *S* has the assertibility conditions it has will be explained in terms of its having the truth-condition that it has. Thus, that I am regarded as justified in uttering “It is currently raining in Roslyn” by the fact that there is moisture streaming down my window and on the paving stones outside can be explained by the relationship between that fact and the sentence’s truth-condition: there is (we can suppose) a causal relationship between the fact that it is raining and the presence of moisture

on windows and paving stones. And something like this appears to be what is suggested by Verheggen on behalf of Kripke's Wittgenstein in the passage above: that I agree with the members of my community determines that I mean addition by "+", and this fact about agreement with communal meaning explains why the assertion of "Alex means addition by '+'" is regarded as justified when my answers to arithmetical queries involving "+" are along the lines of those that members of my community are inclined to give. Recall, however, that at this point in the development of the sceptical solution Kripke's Wittgenstein has jettisoned the realist, truth-conditional picture of meaning, and replaced it with a view on which the practice of asserting the relevant sentence under the relevant conditions is justified, not by any relationship between the obtaining of those assertibility conditions and a truth-condition, but by the utility of the practice that allows the assertion of the sentence under those conditions. This is all that is available in the meaning case, given that the sceptical argument of chapter 2 could just as easily be utilised by the sceptic to show that there is no fact capable of making it the case that the *community* means one thing rather than another by the expressions of its language.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. Ethical expressivism and the sceptical solution

Second, we should note a difference between Kripke's Wittgenstein's response to the threat of an error theory about meaning and broadly expressivist responses to the parallel threat in the

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<sup>7</sup>Paul Horwich appears to make a similar mistake to Verheggen in his critical notice of Kripke's book. According to Horwich's construal of the sceptical solution, "what someone means by 'plus' is not, as assumed in the skeptical argument, an intrinsic property of that person. Rather, his meaning is determined by the meaning of "plus" within a community language which he speaks. Such a community is the external source of the normative standards that will permit some of a speaker's dispositions to qualify as mistaken" (Horwich 1984, 166). The problem for this suggestion (and the point Kripke (1982, 111) is emphasising) is that the sceptic can run his argument against even *extrinsic* candidate meaning-constituting facts.

moral case. In the latter, a non-factualist approach to meaning is advocated in a limited number of special cases such as moral sentences, but not in general: the emotivists and expressivists have no wish to reject truth-conditional accounts of the meanings of, e.g., sentences attributing physical characteristics to medium-sized physical objects. In the case of the sceptical solution, in contrast, we have a rejection of truth-conditional accounts of meaning *across the board*, so that the rejection of such an account in the case of ascriptions of meaning themselves is an instance of a general strategy that includes sentences from any area of thought and talk within its scope.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3. The nature of assertibility conditions

Third, although Kripke introduces the distinction between assertibility conditional and truth-conditional accounts of meaning in the context of a reference to Michael Dummett's piece on Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics, it is important to note that the notion of an assertibility condition that figures in the sceptical solution is completely different from the notion that appears in Dummett's writings on realism and anti-realism. An assertibility condition, in this latter, more familiar sense, is a condition in which there is evidence that the truth-condition of a sentence obtains. There are at least two reasons why this can-

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<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Kripke (1982, 71–75). On Kripke's reading, the switch from the *Tractarian* account of language in terms of truth-conditions to that put forward in the *Philosophical Investigations* in terms of assertibility conditions does not apply only to ascriptions of meaning, but to sentences of any sort. In noting this I'm signalling my agreement with a point that George Wilson makes against the accounts of the sceptical solution adumbrated by Crispin Wright (1984) and Paul Boghossian (1989): contrary to Wright and Boghossian, there is no "gap" in the sceptical solution between the rejection of truth-conditional accounts of ascriptions of meaning and the rejection of truth-conditional accounts generally, hence no need for Kripke's Wittgenstein to construct a "globalisation argument" taking us from the specific to the general. However, on the issue of whether the sceptical solution is factualist or non-factualist, I side with Wright and Boghossian (who take it to be non-factualist) against Wilson (who takes it to be factualist). See Miller (2009).

not be the notion that Kripke's Wittgenstein is deploying in the sceptical solution. First, in order for an ascription of meaning to have an assertibility condition in this sense it would need to *have* a truth-condition. But the sceptical argument showed—didn't it?—that if we think of ascriptions of meaning as having truth-conditions we will have to view them as systematically false. So deploying this notion would appear not to save us from the clutches of the sceptical paradox. We can reinforce this point by considering the change in Dummett's conception of semantic anti-realism signalled in the preface to his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (1978, xxii). There, Dummett suggests that the proper way to express semantic anti-realism is not in terms of an adherence to an assertibility conditional theory of meaning, but rather in terms of adherence to a truth-conditional account of meaning in which the notion of truth is epistemically constrained (i.e., where we reject the idea that the applicability of the principle of bivalence is not restricted by epistemic considerations). Since the role of assertibility conditions in Dummett's earlier writings is (post-1978) played by epistemically constrained truth-conditions, we can surmise that Dummett's assertibility conditions play the same role in the anti-realist theory of meaning as epistemically unconstrained truth-conditions play in the realist theory of meaning or epistemically constrained truth conditions play in the post-1978 anti-realist theory of meaning. Since the account of the meanings of ascriptions of meaning given by each of these latter two positions would straightforwardly succumb to the argument of Kripke's sceptic, we can infer that the sceptical solution cannot be viewed as utilising the Dummettian notion of an assertibility condition on pain of leaving itself exposed to the sceptical paradox.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Note that restricting the search for truth-conditions for ascriptions of meaning to states of affairs that are not potentially evidence-transcendent actually makes it harder to find a straight solution in response to the sceptic's argument. Whatever the sceptical solution is, it is not a form of Dummettian semantic anti-realism. It seems to me that the argument of Wright (1984, 105–106)—to the effect that the sceptical paradox can be re-deployed to establish an inde-

So, the assertibility condition of an ascription of meaning in the sceptical solution is not a situation in which there is evidence warranting the assertion that its truth-condition obtains—at the point at which the sceptical solution takes off we have given up the idea that accounting for the meaning of a sentence of any sort is a matter of identifying its truth-conditions. I think that this is what Kripke is emphasising when he writes:

It is important to realize that we are *not* looking for necessary and sufficient conditions (truth conditions) for following a rule, or an analysis of what such rule-following 'consists in'. Indeed such conditions would constitute a 'straight' solution to the sceptical problem, and have been rejected. (Kripke 1982, 87)

Overall, then, any account of the sceptical solution must respect the distinction between straight and sceptical forms of communitarianism, the fact that the scope of the sceptical solution is general and not just restricted to ascriptions of meaning, and the fact that Kripke's Wittgenstein's assertibility conditions are not assertibility conditions in the sense familiar from the literature on semantic anti-realism.<sup>10</sup>

terminacy result against the sceptical solution—depends on construing the notion of an assertibility condition in the sceptical solution along Dummettian lines. In an interesting discussion, Daniel Boyd (2017) argues that Wright's argument fails even given the usual notion of an assertibility condition. He distinguishes between, e.g., "Jones associates assertibility condition *X* with expression *Y*" and, e.g., "Expression *Y* is warranted in condition *X*" and suggests that Wright's argument fails because we could accept a non-factualist construal of the former whilst retaining a factualist construal of the latter, which is what Kripke's Wittgenstein needs to make the sceptical solution workable. However, if we think of assertibility conditions as akin to rules governing the use of expressions, Boyd's suggestion amounts to the idea that there could be facts about rule *compliance* (i.e., accord and failure to accord with a rule), even if there were no facts about rules being *followed* by agents. This is highly implausible, and it is hard to see Kripke's Wittgenstein accepting it: the idea of a rule with determinate compliance conditions but which it is in principle impossible to follow is merely paradoxical, and Kripke (1982, 55) moves seamlessly from the absence of rule following to the absence of accord/conflict with rules.

<sup>10</sup>The full significance of this last point will not become apparent until the end of the paper.

#### 4. Stroud's "Nothing for us to Assert" Objection

So what *are* Kripke's Wittgenstein's assertibility conditions? We can work towards an answer to this question by considering an objection to the sceptical solution developed by Barry Stroud. Stroud writes:

[Kripke's Wittgenstein's] suggestion that "assertibility-conditions" for ascriptions of meaning and understanding are all we can find or even hope for can make no sense of *what* we are said to be justified in asserting when the assertibility conditions are fulfilled... [I]f what is to be asserted has no "truth-conditions", there would seem to be nothing for us to assert. (Stroud 1990, 89)

So far, this really only amounts to the observation made above, to the effect that Kripke's Wittgenstein's assertibility conditions can't be viewed as "Dummettian" assertibility conditions. However, Stroud goes on to make a useful suggestion about how the notion of an assertibility condition in the sceptical solution might be understood:

[Perhaps] it would be enough simply to say that there is an expression we would be justified in using assertively in certain circumstances, without our having to identify anything that could be called the content of that expression, or saying what it means. (Stroud 1990, 90)

Perhaps we can build on this suggestion on behalf of Kripke's Wittgenstein. If, like Quine (1960, 29–30) with his notion of "assent", or Davidson (1984, 135) with his notion of "holding true", we can identify what it is for a sentence to be used assertively independently of an assumption about the meaning of that sentence, this can be pressed into service in the manner described by Stroud.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>I'm working here on the assumption that if a notion is acceptable to Quine, invoking it in the course of constructing the sceptical solution is not unacceptable. See Lepore and Ludwig (2005, 177) and Glüer (2011, 73) for the Quine-Davidson link.

However, Stroud himself thinks that the suggestion he contemplates fails in the case of ascriptions of meaning:

[T]he suggestion... fails because using assertively the expression "He means plus by that sign" is not the same thing as asserting that the person means plus by that sign. What assertion you are making in using a certain expression assertively depends in part on what the expression you are using means. If you use an expression in order to ascribe a specific, determinate meaning or understanding to a community or a person, the expression you use must itself have a determinate meaning. But the notion of "assertibility conditions" and the suggestion which speaks only of the assertive use of certain mentioned expressions was introduced precisely because it held that there was no such fact as the fact of an expression's having a determinate meaning, or someone's meaning some particular thing by an expression he uses. (Stroud 1990, 90)

Arguably, though, this objection is unconvincing. If you think of meaning in terms of truth-conditions, then in assuming that ascriptions of meaning don't have truth-conditions, you are thinking of them as lacking meaning: in which case, as Stroud points out, there is no sense to the idea of using them assertively. But if, like the purveyor of the sceptical solution, you have given up thinking of meaning in terms of truth conditions, the objection lapses. To put it another way, the objection only works if we have to think of meaning in terms of truth-conditions—so since the sceptical solution has rejected that idea, the objection simply begs the question against the sceptical solution.

We can see this even more clearly by recalling Kripke's comment about the language game of arithmetic:

Wittgenstein asks that we discard any *a priori* conceptions and *look* ("Don't think, look!") at the circumstances under which numerical assertions are actually uttered, and at the roles such assertions play in our lives. (Kripke 1982, 75)

Kripke's Wittgenstein's idea is that we *look* at the conditions in which there is assertoric use by the community of ascriptions of meaning and tell a story about the pragmatic utility of that



practice. To be sure, in identifying those conditions we will not be identifying the *content* of ascriptions of meaning or materials that could be used in an analysis of them—but as we saw (see again Kripke (1982, 87), quoted above) Kripke has already explicitly put that idea to one side. So Stroud has given us no reason to think that Kripke's Wittgenstein's conception of assertibility conditions is problematic, other than the observation that on it ascriptions of meaning are not assigned truth-conditions. In the context, in the absence of further argument, Stroud is simply begging the question against the alternative proposed in the sceptical solution by assuming that ascriptions of meaning could not be regarded as meaningful if they are not assumed to have truth-conditions.

## 5. Stroud's "Specificity" Objection

In fact, Stroud has a prior worry about the assertibility conditions provided by the sceptical solution. In this section, I will outline this objection and sketch a response. Then, in the next section I will use this response to clear up some confusions about the nature of the sceptical solution on the part of Davidson and some of his followers.

Stroud outlines what we might call his "specificity" worry as follows:

[E]ven restricting ourselves to the conditions under which [ascriptions of meaning] are justifiably asserted, the mere facts of general consensus in the community or the conformity of individual speakers could not give us what we want. Knowing only that all members of a community use the word "otiose" in the same way does not justify us in asserting that what "otiose" means is functionless. And knowing only that someone uses a certain sign he puts between two numerals in the same way as everyone else in the community uses that sign does not in itself justify us in asserting that what he means or understands by that sign is plus. Nor is that justified by my knowing only that he uses or responds to that sign in the

same way that I do. We are never justified in making such specific ascriptions on such general and indiscriminate grounds.

(Stroud 1990, 89)

And he continues:

[M]ere conformity to community practice does not justify us in uttering "He means plus by that sign" rather than, say, "He means times by it" or "He means larger than", as long as his use of the signs for those other functions also conforms to the community's use of them. . . . There is conformity in each case. If conformity to community practice is the only evidence, nothing in the evidence shows why we could use only the one expression assertively and not the others.

(Stroud 1990, 90)

On Kripke's Wittgenstein's account—Stroud argues—the assertibility conditions of "Jones means times by '×'" are circumstances in which Jones's responses to arithmetical queries involving the '×' sign are the same as those of the community. But the assertibility conditions of "Jones means plus by '+'" are also circumstances in which Jones's responses to arithmetical queries involving the "+" sign are the same as those of the community. In each case, since all that is mentioned is conformity with communal use, the relationship between Jones's use and community use is the same, so according to Stroud the sceptical solution assigns the same assertibility conditions to "Jones means addition by '+'" and "Jones means times by '×'", so that it is mysterious why "Jones means addition by '+'" is assertible rather than "Jones means times by '+'". He concludes that the assertibility conditions provided by the sceptical solution are simply too "general and indiscriminate" to capture the differences between specific ascriptions of meaning.

If the sceptical solution were indeed unable to discriminate between the assertibility conditions of, e.g., "Jones means addition by '+'" and "Jones means times by '+'" this would constitute a serious worry for the account: it is surely a requirement that it pin down assertibility conditions that are suitably specific to

“Jones means addition by ‘+’”. We can work towards remedying this apparent defect in the sceptical solution by considering the assertibility conditions we provided earlier for

(11) “Jones means *addition* by ‘+’”.

These were conditions in which Jones gives the same answers as those the community is inclined to give when it is confident that it knows “how to go on”. This appears to be susceptible to the worry adumbrated by Stroud, since “Jones means times by ‘+’” too will be assertible when Jones gives the same answers as those the community is inclined to give when it is confident that it knows “how to go on”. But we can start to add the requisite specific detail by including a reference to communal inclination to judgement: the assertibility condition of (11) will now be the circumstance in which Jones gives the same answers as the community when *it* is inclined to judge that “+” means *addition*. Clearly this is different from the circumstance in which Jones is gives the same answers as the community when it is inclined to judge that “+” means times. (For example, the first circumstance would be one in which Jones answered “125” to the query “ $68 + 57 = ?$ ” while the second circumstance would be one on which Jones answered “3876”). However, the reference to communal judgement in these assertibility conditions is illegitimate—the use of the that-clause is not allowed given that the sceptical solution has disavowed the attribution of truth-conditions to ascriptions of meaning. We can overcome this, though, by replacing the reference to communal judgement by a reference to communal dispositions to assertive use, deploying the notion of uttering a sentence assertively that we introduced in the previous section.<sup>12</sup> In other words, we can say that the assertibility conditions of (11) are circumstances in which Jones

<sup>12</sup>Note that this is not intended as an *analysis* of the relevant communal judgement—such an analysis is the preserve of straight solutions to the paradox. Rather, we are cashing out the assertibility conditions by using communal dispositions to use a sentence assertively in order to avoid importing any resources off limits to sceptical—as opposed to straight—solutions.

gives the same answers as the community when it is disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means *addition*”. This solves the specificity worry. Giving the same answers as the community when it is disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means *addition*” would involve answering “125”, whereas giving the same answers as the community when it is disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means *times*” would involve answering “3876”.

Overall, then, we can take the assertibility condition of a sentence to be conditions in which the participants in the relevant practice are disposed to utter it assertively. In the kind of communal context envisaged in the sceptical solution, the community will be disposed to utter assertively “Jones means addition by ‘+’” in conditions in which Jones gives the same answers the community is inclined to give when it is disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means *addition*”.<sup>13</sup> Given the question-begging nature of the “nothing to assert” objection considered in the previous section, we can tentatively conclude that on the account offered here the sceptical solution succumbs to neither of Stroud’s objections.

## 6. Strong Communitarian and Interpersonalist Conceptions of Meaning

We can build on the account sketched above to get clear on the respect in which the sceptical solution involves a broadly social (as opposed to individualistic) conception of meaning. Claudine

<sup>13</sup>To be fair, I should say that in replying to the specificity objection in this way, I’m going beyond anything that Kripke says explicitly in the text. I hope, though, that the proposal is at least a plausible extension of his development of the sceptical solution so that it can count as “constructive” exegesis. There may well be other ways of dealing with the specificity objection, perhaps by deploying the disquotational rule that we can always assert that we use “+” to mean +. (This, together with the fact that Jones’s use of “+” accords with ours, would license the assertion that he means + by “+”). If this other way of dealing with the problem works, that’s fine by me. (I’m grateful here to an anonymous referee).

Verheggen draws a distinction between two ways in which an account of meaning can be social. According to communitarian views, “having a (first) language essentially depends on meaning by one’s words what members of some community mean by them” (Verheggen 2016, 84). I’ll refer to this type of view as *strong communitarianism*. In contrast, interpersonalist views hold that “the possession of language and thought essentially depends on having [interacted] linguistically with others . . . [but] does not require that [those involved in the interaction] assign the same meaning to the same words” (Verheggen 2016, 84).<sup>14</sup>

Verheggen takes the sceptical solution to be putting forward a strong communitarian view in this sense. Recall her comment that according to Kripke’s Wittgenstein “[T]he meanings of a speaker’s words are determined by what the members of her community mean by those words” (Verheggen 2016, 90). Other writers view the sceptical solution in the same way. For example, Åsa Wikforss and Kathrin Glüer take Kripke’s Wittgenstein to be proposing a view on which the meanings of linguistic expressions are determined by “conventions adopted by whole speech communities” (Glüer and Wikforss 2018, §2.2.2). Further, Davidson himself views the sceptical solution in this way. He takes Kripke’s Wittgenstein to be proposing a view on which “to mean something in speaking, one must mean the same thing by the same words as others do” (Davidson 1992, 114), and he characterises “Kripke’s criterion for speaking a language” as involving the idea that “speaking a language . . . depends . . . on speaking

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<sup>14</sup>I’ve changed the characterisation very slightly. Where Verheggen speaks of “triangulation”, I have spoken simply of “interaction”. For Verheggen, Davidson’s view—which is couched in terms of triangulation—is the paradigm example of an interpersonalist view, but we should at least leave open the possibility that there are ways other than triangulating in which language users can interact as part of a story about the constitution of meaning. Note too that Verheggen speaks of communitarianism and interpersonalism whereas I speak of strong communitarianism and interpersonalism. This leaves open the possibility of describing interpersonalist views as “weak communitarianism”. Nothing hangs on this terminological preference.

as someone else does (or as many others do)” (1992, 115). In the middle of a critical discussion of Kripke’s Wittgenstein, Davidson contrasts his own view with one on which being understood “involves shared rules or conventions” (1992, 114), and elsewhere he construes Kripke’s Wittgenstein as holding that “communication depends on speakers using the same words to express the same thoughts” (1992, 209 n 1).

All of these views of Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s sceptical solution seem to me to make two mistakes. First, and most obviously, they mistakenly construe Kripke’s Wittgenstein as proposing a *straight* solution according to which what an individual means by an expression is determined by facts about rules or conventions adopted by his community. Of course, this cannot be right: it is easy for the sceptic to repeat at the level of the community as a whole the arguments he deployed at the level of the individual. What facts about the community make it the case that it is *these* conventions rather than *those* that govern the linguistic activity of its members? Recall (from Section 3 above) that Kripke himself makes it clear that his Wittgenstein is not proposing a communitarian straight solution to the sceptical paradox: “a social, or community-wide, version of the dispositional theory . . . would be open to at least some of the same criticisms as the original [i.e., individualistic] form (Kripke 1982, 111).<sup>15</sup>

Second, and less obviously, the sceptical solution is consistent with Davidson’s interpersonalism and weak communitarianism. We can see this by asking: is there space within the framework provided by the sceptical solution for it to be assertible that an individual speaker means something different from what the rest of the community means by a given expression? It seems to

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<sup>15</sup>Davidson himself writes, “I have ignored a very important aspect of Kripke’s discussion, his claim that Wittgenstein’s ‘solution’ to the problem is ‘skeptical’” (1992, 113 n 7). But the “sceptical” nature of Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s position is not just a “very important aspect” that can be downplayed if the discussion seems to demand this, but an absolutely essential aspect that cannot be suppressed without seriously distorting the position.

me that the answer is yes: this will be assertible when the individual concerned uses the expression in the way the community *would be* inclined to use it *were* they to judge that they mean what he says he means by it (where, as above, the reference to communal judgement is eliminated and replaced by a reference to communal dispositions to utter sentences assertively). For example, suppose that Jones is inclined to utter “I mean hexagonal by ‘green’”. The assertibility condition of “Jones means hexagonal by ‘green’” will be that Jones uses “green” in a way that agrees with how the community *would* use it *were* they to be disposed to utter assertively “‘green’ means hexagonal”—and, crucially, this can be so even if the community is in fact disposed to utter assertively “‘green’ means green”.<sup>16</sup> Or, again, “Jones means *quaddition* by ‘+’” would be assertible in circumstances in which Jones gives the same answers as the community would have given if it had been disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means *quaddition*”—and this is consistent with the community being in fact disposed to utter assertively “‘+’ means addition”. So it is consistent with the sceptical solution that “Jones means *quaddition* by ‘+’” is assertible even though it is assertible that the rest of the community means addition.

Thus, it is consistent with the sceptical solution that agreement with such *counterfactual* inclinations of the community will license the assertion that an individual means something by an expression, but something different from what the community takes itself to mean. And even though this is not agreement with the way the community actually uses the word, it will often be

<sup>16</sup>An anonymous referee has helpfully pointed out that there may be a simpler way—than referring to the counterfactual inclinations of the community—to spell out the assertibility condition for “Jones means hexagonal by ‘green’”. We could instead say that this is assertible when Jones’s use of “green” agrees with our (the community’s) inclinations to use “hexagonal”. I’ve held off from replacing the counterfactual analysis with that suggested by the referee because I’m not sure that the simpler formulation is conservative with respect to my reply to the second objection I try to address in Section 7 below. It would be fine by me if that were so.

enough in practice to provide them with a basis for interpreting and understanding the individual. The utility of meaning ascriptions taken up by the sceptical solution is preserved: by saying that Jones means such and such by an expression we can signal to our fellow community members that we can expect him to act as we would were we to judge that we mean such and such by the expression, and this expectation can form the basis for interpretation and understanding even if we do not in fact judge that we mean such and such by the relevant expression ourselves.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is consistent with the sceptical solution that an individual can mean something by his words—and be understood accordingly—even if he does not mean the same thing by his words as his interpreters. So the sceptical solution as such is consistent with the Davidsonian interpersonalist view favoured by Verheggen: in our terminology, the sceptical solution is consistent with weak communitarianism.

## 7. Four Notes

We can make four notes following on from the discussion in the previous section. Firstly, it is true that the argument in Section 6 to the effect that the sceptical solution is consistent with an interpersonalist or weak communitarian account of meaning rests in part on the solution to Stroud’s “specificity” objection as outlined in Section 5. Note, though, that the sceptical solution faces the “specificity” worry even on a *strong communitarian* interpretation, so that the possibility of an interpersonalist/weak communitarian reading is opened up by a solution to a problem also faced by the sceptical solution on strong communitarian readings. It follows that anyone proposing a strong communitarian reading cannot object to our interpersonalist or weak communitarian reading unless they provide a different way of dealing

<sup>17</sup>As above, strictly speaking the references to judgements about meaning here should be replaced by references to dispositions to use the relevant sentences assertively.

with Stroud's "specificity" problem—in particular, a way that doesn't open up the possibility of an interpersonalist construal of the sceptical solution.

Secondly, it might be argued that the "interpersonalist" version of the sceptical solution sketched in Section 6 is still appreciably stronger than Davidson's interpersonalist view, insofar as for an individual, Jones, to mean something by an expression it has to be something that his community *could have* meant by the same expression, i.e., something that the community means by the expression in some other possible world.

In reply, however, it can be argued that the condition imposed by our reading of the sceptical solution is so weak that even Davidson has to accept it. Consider the sort of example sketched in Davidson (1986). Mrs Malaprop uses the word "derangement" to mean arrangement, and the word "epitaph" to mean epithet, in an exchange with Smith. Now, even though Smith does not mean these himself by "derangement" and "epitaph" (we can suppose that he means *madness* and *short text honouring a dead person*), he is able, on the basis of the relevant clues, to understand what Mrs Malaprop is saying when she utters "A nice derangement of epitaphs". In particular, he can form reasonable expectations about her future use of the words (perhaps that she will say "That is not a nice derangement of epitaphs" on looking at such and such a text). The key point is that Smith would not be able to do this if it was not possible for him to have meant arrangement by "derangement" or epithet by "epitaph". So it appears that the story Davidson tells about Mrs Malaprop involves an interlocutor satisfying the condition imposed on the community in the type of interpersonalist sceptical solution sketched in the previous section (Mrs Malaprop doesn't mean the same as Smith by "derangement" and "epitaph", but there are possible worlds in which Smith means what she means in the actual world).

Thirdly, in Miller (2017) I suggested that Davidson and Kripke's Wittgenstein impose conditions of equal strength on

the possibility of meaning and communication: that there be creatures who share the same "innate similarity responses".<sup>18</sup> Olivia Sultanescu and Claudine Verheggen (2019) question this claim. They point out that, in the sceptical solution "what is necessary is that there be agreement with respect to the ways in which expressions are applied in particular contexts" (Sultanescu and Verheggen 2019, 22 n 30), and, furthermore, that "the agreement that is necessary on Davidson's picture concerns 'facts about salience, attention and tendencies to generalize in some ways rather than others' (Davidson 1990, 61), which may not result in agreement with respect to the ways in which expressions are applied" (*ibid.*). This is because for Davidsonian triangulation to be possible we need to be able "to discriminate, pre-semantically, green things from things that are not green" (*ibid.*). But this does not require that we also "agree in the particular applications we make to green objects or in the ways we categorize those objects" (*ibid.*). So, Sultanescu and Verheggen conclude, the pre-conditions for the possibility of meaning imposed by Davidson are in fact weaker than those imposed by Kripke's Wittgenstein in the sceptical solution.

In reply to this, I concede that the sort of agreement required by the sceptical solution (as I sketched it above) requires agreement vis a vis the application of linguistic expressions. However, since it is consistent with the sceptical solution that the relevant speakers do not mean the same thing by the same words, they do not have to apply, e.g., "black" to the same class of objects. For example, in order for "John means green by 'black'" to be assertible, John's linguistic inclinations have to be the same as the linguistic inclinations the community would have if they were disposed to utter assertively "'black' means green". And, crucially, this will be so only if the community and John have similar innate similarity responses vis a vis green things—but, for all that, the community may in fact be disposed to utter as-

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<sup>18</sup>This phrase is taken from Davidson (1992, 120).

sertively “‘black’ means black”, so that while it applies “black” to the bottom half of the anarchist flag, John does not. So it turns out, again, that the condition on the possibility of meaning imposed by Kripke’s Wittgenstein is no stronger than that imposed by Davidson.

Finally, in discussion Timothy Williamson raised the worry that there is a damaging circularity in the account of the assertibility conditions of e.g. “Jones means quaddition by ‘+’” used in the previous section to argue that the sceptical solution is consistent with Davidsonian interpersonalism. It will easiest to outline this using the case of Mrs Malaprop. The account offered in our construal of the sceptical solution contains claims like the following:

**(Assertibility)** The assertibility condition of “Mrs Malaprop means epithet by ‘epitaph’” = circumstances in which Mrs Malaprop’s use of “epitaph” is the same as that the community would have displayed if it had been inclined to utter assertively “‘epitaph’ means epithet”.

We have to assume that in the set of possible worlds relevant to the evaluation of the counterfactual that appears on the right-hand side of **(Assertibility)**, “epithet” means the same as it means on the left-hand side, otherwise the identity will be false. But an assumption like this is a substantial assumption about meaning the making of which would import a damaging circularity into the sceptical solution. (To see why the assumption is necessary, imagine a world in which by “epithet” the community means *epiphany*. In such a world, the community’s use of “epitaph” will be quite different from Mrs Malaprop’s use of it in the actual world: the community will apply it to, e.g., moments of revelation experienced by characters in Joyce’s stories, while Mrs Malaprop will refrain from doing so).

I’ll make two comments in response. First, it is not obvious that such an assumption induces a fatal circularity, given that **(Assertibility)** is not put forward as an *analysis* or *explanation*, but rather as shorthand for the empirical claim that the community

is disposed to utter assertively “Mrs Malaprop means epithet by ‘epitaph’” when and only when Mrs Malaprop’s use of “epitaph” is the same as that the community would have displayed if it had been inclined to utter assertively “‘epitaph’ means epithet”.

But second, and even putting that point to one side, we can deal with the putative problem without making any substantial assumptions about meaning. Suppose that the left-hand side of **(Assertibility)** is true. Then note that the right-hand side is the following counterfactual:

(C) If the community had been inclined to utter assertively “‘epitaph’ means epithet”, the community’s use of “epitaph” would be the same as Mrs Malaprop’s use of the expression in the actual world.

What is required for the truth of (C) is that in the closest worlds to the actual world in which the community is disposed to utter assertively “‘epitaph’ means epithet”, the community’s use of “epitaph” would be the same as Mrs Malaprop’s in the actual world. We could stipulate that only worlds in which the community means what it means by it in the actual world count as close, but this raises the worry about circularity voiced above. Instead, let’s stipulate that for the purposes of confirming (C), the only worlds to count as close are those in which the community’s non-semantically and non-intentionally characterised use of “epithet” corresponds to its non-semantically and non-intentionally characterised use in the actual world. This rules out the kind of “epiphany” world mentioned in the objection: in such a world the community’s non-semantically and non-intentionally characterised use of “epithet” will be different from that in the actual world. Hence, the claim that **(Assertibility)** is true needn’t introduce a damaging circularity into the sceptical solution.

## 8. The Sceptical Solution and Quasi-Realism

In Section 3 above, I noted some dissimilarities between the non-factualist position about meaning advocated in the sceptical so-

lution and the sort of non-factualism exemplified in broadly expressivist and non-cognitivist theories of moral judgement. In this section, I will try to shed further light on the nature of the sceptical solution by discerning some *similarities* between the two, taking as my paradigm expressivist view the sort of quasi-realism developed by Simon Blackburn.<sup>19</sup> I'll then outline what I take to be the two most serious challenges facing this position.

In Blackburn's work, the fundamental task of metaethics is explaining the nature of moral or ethical judgement.<sup>20</sup> A realist about moral judgement is someone who starts off the attempt to explain the nature of moral judgement by locating distinctively moral states of affairs. Once identified, we can explain moral judgement as the expression of belief about the obtaining or otherwise of these states of affairs. To cut a long story short, the realist account falters because of a dilemma that opens up at the outset of the realist's attempt to deploy this strategy. If we think of the distinctively moral states of affairs as natural<sup>21</sup>, we run afoul of (something like) Moore's open-question argument: we fail to capture the action-guiding nature of moral judgement.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, if we think of the distinctively moral states of affairs as non-natural, we face the metaphysical and epistemological worries routinely taken to undermine the non-naturalism of Moore and the intuitionists who followed him in the first third of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> The moral that Blackburn draws from this dilemma is that we should not begin our attempt to explain the nature of moral judgement from the starting point favoured by the realist, i.e., by isolating states of affairs that we deem to be

<sup>19</sup>See in particular Blackburn (1984a), chaps. 5 and 6.

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Blackburn (1993a, 368): "[M]y instinct is to start, with Kant, as far back as possible: how *can there be* such a thing as moral judgement?"

<sup>21</sup>Where natural properties are (something like) those that are part of the natural and social sciences (a conception of natural that derives from Moore 1903).

<sup>22</sup>For a good account of this, see the opening sections of Darwall, Gibbard and Railton (1992).

<sup>23</sup>See Miller (2013), chaps. 2 and 3, for a summary.

distinctively moral. Rather, we should "in the first instance, think of moral judgements as expressing states of mind whose function is not to represent anything about the world" (Blackburn 1988, 184), and otherwise restrict ourselves to a methodologically naturalist toolkit which includes only: natural states of affairs (none of which we try to identify with moral states of affairs), beliefs about natural states of affairs, and desires/sentiments towards natural states of affairs.<sup>24</sup> In Blackburn's quasi-realist project, we use these materials to construct a notion of moral truth, inter alia solving the Frege-Geach problem and the other familiar problems that beset classical emotivism.<sup>25</sup> A "first approximation" might be that an expression of a moral attitude is true if and only it belongs to the set of attitudes "which would result from taking all opportunities for improvement of attitude" (Blackburn 1984a, 198). If we pull off this task, we can happily conclude that, e.g.,

(15) "Torture is wrong" is true if and only if torture is wrong.

and, indeed, that the judgement that torture is wrong is true. In concluding thus, though, we will not have "sold out" to moral realism: moral states of affairs and beliefs about them were not part of the methodologically naturalist toolkit we deployed in giving the account, so we have not made the assumptions that generated the damaging dilemma for the realist.<sup>26</sup> The states of

<sup>24</sup>For "toolkit", see, e.g., Blackburn (1993a, 378). I say "methodologically" naturalist, because although Blackburn is attempting to give a naturalistically respectable account of moral judgement, there is no attempt to specify purely naturalistic truth-conditions for moral judgements, or naturalistic semantic values for moral predicates.

<sup>25</sup>The Frege-Geach problem is the problem of accounting for the role of, e.g., moral statements, as construed by the emotivist, in the antecedents of conditionals such as "If lying is wrong, getting little brother to lie is wrong". For an overview, see Miller (2013), chaps. 3 and 4.

<sup>26</sup>It might look like I'm misconstruing quasi-realism here, insofar as I'm viewing it as providing truth-conditions for moral claims. However, commenting on the nature of quasi-realism, Blackburn himself writes: "Initially,

affairs designated on the right-hand sides of (15) and the like are not natural (wrongness is not a property attributed by any of the natural or social sciences), and the role given to desire and sentiment in the explanation of moral judgement ensure that the view we have reached is immune to worries relating to the open-question argument and the motivational characteristics of moral judgement. But, in addition, because there were no irreducibly moral states of affairs in our methodologically naturalist toolkit, the metaphysical and epistemological worries that afflicted Moorean non-naturalism don't arise. Since the state of affairs designated on the right hand of (15) is not assigned a role in the quasi-realist explanation of the nature of moral judgement, there is no need for us to give a metaphysical account of its nature, or an epistemological story about how we access it, over and above a story about the nature of, and our access to, states of affairs the description of which utilises materials from the methodologically naturalist toolkit used in the quasi-realist construction of moral truth.

I think that we can view the sceptical solution as having a similar overarching structure to the position of Blackburn's just outlined. In the general case, if we were giving a realist account of the judgement that snow is white we would do this via a truth-

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*an expressive theory stands in stark contrast to one giving moral remarks truth-conditions.* But if we sympathise with the pressures I have described, we come to appreciate why it should be natural to treat expressions of attitude as if they were similar to ordinary judgements. We come to need a predicate, whose behaviour is like that of others. Why not regard ourselves as having *constructed* a notion of moral truth? If we have done so, we can happily say that moral judgements are true or false, only not think that we have sold out to realism when we do so" (1984a, 196, emphasis on first sentence added). Blackburn's point is that although *initially*, an expressive theory contrasts sharply with those theories which give moral remarks truth-conditions, *once the quasi-realist project has been executed* we can happily view moral remarks as having truth-conditions without thereby "selling out" to realism. Ironically, among commentators this aspect of Blackburn's view has been best appreciated by one of his most trenchant opponents, John McDowell. See §2 of McDowell (1987).

conditional account of the meaning of, e.g., "snow is white". We would attempt to identify a state of affairs whose obtaining is necessary and sufficient for its truth: a state of affairs, in other words, that *makes it the case* that snow is white. In the case of meaning itself, if we were aiming to give a realist account of, e.g., the judgement that Jones means addition by "+", we would do this via a truth-conditional account of the meaning of the sentence "Jones means addition by '+'" and attempt to identify a state of affairs whose obtaining makes it the case that Jones means addition by "+". Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptic's argument shows, we are supposing, that the two constraints (4(a) and 4(b) on page 1 above) that have to be met in order for such an account to be successful cannot in fact be met. In a quasi-realist style of reconstruction of the sceptical solution there would be no requirement to identify such a state of affairs, since we have self-consciously given up the aspiration to explain the nature of the judgement that Jones means addition by "+" in terms of a state of affairs. So the sceptical argument of chapter 2 of Kripke (1982) cannot get a grip. Instead of attempting to account for ascriptions of meaning in terms of their truth-conditions, in the first instance we think of them as expressing states of mind whose function is not to represent the world, and then move from that starting point to construct a notion of truth genuinely applicable to them. Ascriptions of meaning, such as "Jones means addition by '+'", can in the first instance be viewed as marking our acceptance of Jones as a member of our linguistic community and expressing our trust in him to respond to arithmetical queries involving "+" just as we would (Kripke 1982, 93, 95). We then identify the assertibility conditions of such ascriptions and tell a story about the utility of the relevant practice. Finally, we use the assertibility conditions identified in the sceptical solution to construct a notion of truth in semantics in a manner analogous to Blackburn's quasi-realist construction of moral truth. Then, if all went well, we would end up with e.g.



(16) “Jones means addition by ‘+’” is true iff Jones means addition by “+”.

Since we are not trying to explain the meaning of the ascription of meaning in terms of a condition whose obtaining is necessary and sufficient for its truth, we are under no obligation to tell a story about what makes it the case that that state of affairs obtains. And the epistemological challenge that beset non-reductionism about meaning—to account for the first-person authority and non-inferential character of knowledge of meaning—lapses also.<sup>27</sup> On a realist picture, knowledge of the meaning of an ascription of meaning involves knowledge of the state of affairs that makes it the case that you mean what you mean, and it was difficult to see how this picture could adequately capture the first-person epistemology of meaning.<sup>28</sup> On the alternative, quasi-realist, story, the first person epistemology simply falls out of the assertibility conditions that figure in the sceptical solution:

The criterion by which others judge whether a person is obeying a rule in a given instance cannot simply be his sincere inclination to say that he is; otherwise there would be no distinction between his thinking he is obeying the rule and his really obeying it (§202), and whatever he thinks is right will be right (§258). However, *after* the community judges (based on the original criteria) that he has mastered the appropriate rule, the community may (for certain rules) take the subject’s sincere claim to follow it in this instance as in itself a new criterion for the correctness of his claim, without applying the original criteria. (Kripke 1982, 101 n 82)

<sup>27</sup>See, e.g., Wright (1989a, 177–78). As Wright sees it, the epistemological challenge is to account for the non-inferential, first-person authoritative character of knowledge of meaning while accommodating its “disposition-like theoreticity” (Wright 2001, 87).

<sup>28</sup>The realist runs into trouble because he has to see the knowledge as a matter of cognizing or tracking independent states of affairs, but has nothing useful to say about how this alleged “tracking” accomplishment underwrites the first-person authority of meaning. See Wright’s critique of McGinn on this point (Wright 1989bb, 147–50). The issues here are probably best framed in terms of the cartography of debates about realism developed in Wright (1992). For a useful discussion, see Butler (2019).

The “normativity” of meaning is also easily captured. If Jones desires to tell the truth and means addition by “+”, then he ought to answer “125” in response to “68 + 57 = ?”—and there is no need to capture this normative fact on the basis of a state of affairs necessary and sufficient for Jones’s meaning addition by “+”.<sup>29</sup>

## 9. Questions and Challenges for the Sceptical Solution

I’ll finish by noting some questions and challenges for the sceptical solution construed as we have construed it.

How, in detail, do the assertibility conditions in the sceptical solution feed into a broadly quasi-realist construction of truth applicable to ascriptions of meaning? In the moral case, this involves dealing with the Frege-Geach problem, earning the right to the idea of improvement and deterioration of ethical sensibilities, then characterising truth for moral commitments in terms of membership of the set of attitudes that remains after all opportunities for improvement have been taken (see again Blackburn 1984a, 198)—all on the basis of the “methodologically naturalist” toolkit outlined in Section 8. One possible disanalogy with Blackburn’s approach as outlined above is that Kripke’s Wittgenstein appears to shy away from any attempt to confront the Frege-Geach problem and related issues. Kripke writes:

Like many others, Wittgenstein accepts the ‘redundancy’ theory of truth: to affirm that a statement is true (or, presumably, to precede it with ‘It is a fact that . . .’) is simply to affirm the statement itself, and to say it is not true is to deny it: (‘*p*’ is true = *p*). However, one might object: (a) that only utterances of certain forms are called ‘true’ or ‘false’—questions, for example, are not—and these are so

<sup>29</sup>Kripke’s remarks on “inversion of conditionals” (1982, 93–95) are relevant here. Note that I’m glossing over the issue, central to discussions of the alleged normativity of meaning (i.e., condition 4(b) on page 1 above), as to whether the “ought” here would survive the removal of the background desire.

called precisely because they purport to state facts; (b) that precisely the sentences that ‘state facts’ can occur as components of truth-functional compounds and their meaning is hard to explain in terms of assertibility conditions alone. Wittgenstein’s way with this is also short. We *call* something a proposition, and hence true or false, when in our language we apply the calculus of truth conditions to it. That is, it is just a primitive part of our language game, not susceptible of deeper explanation, that truth-functions are applied to certain sentences. (Kripke 1982, 86)<sup>30</sup>

This appears to militate against our construal of the sceptical solution as a kind of quasi-realism insofar as that must include an attempt to solve the Frege-Geach problem. However, we should note that so far in this paper we have been construing quasi-realism as what Blackburn calls “slow-track” quasi-realism. Speaking of the quasi-realist attempt to explain why, e.g., ethical sentences “sustain a fully propositional role”, Blackburn writes:

[W]e should distinguish between a slow track and a fast track to this result. The slow track involves patiently construing each propositional context as it comes along. This is the line I took in trying to meet Geach’s problem. (Blackburn 1988, 185)

And he continues:

Fast-track quasi-realism would get there in better style. It would make sufficient remarks about truth to suggest that we need a comparable notion to regulate evaluative discourse (even though this is nonrepresentational) and then say that our adherence to propositional forms needs no further explanation than that. (Blackburn 1988, 185)

Perhaps Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s disavowal of the need to account for how ascriptions of meaning “can occur as components of truth-functional compounds” is consistent with his embracing a

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<sup>30</sup>Note that Kripke actually misquotes Wittgenstein in this passage: in *Philosophical Investigations* §136, Wittgenstein does not italicise “call” but rather “in our language”.

position similar to the fast track variant of quasi-realism? I won’t attempt to answer this question here, but will finish by pointing out what I take to be the two main challenges facing the sceptical solution.<sup>31</sup>

The first challenge concerns the scope of the quasi-realism advanced by Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s solution to the paradox. As noted in Section 3 above, expressivist accounts such as Blackburn’s only apply to specific areas of thought and talk, such as morals (or causation or modals), and not across the board. Blackburn is a projectivist quasi-realist about morals, for example, but not about medium sized dry goods. In contrast, the quasi-realism of the sceptical solution would appear to be global: recall that in Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s account the truth-conditional account of meaning is rejected, not just for ascriptions of meaning, but for all areas of thought and talk. Perhaps, ultimately, this will prove to be its undoing: does its global nature mean that in any given attempt to carry out its explanatory project the “tool-kit” of admissible materials that can figure in its explanations turns out to be empty? If so, the sceptical solution, construed as we have construed it, appears to be in serious trouble.<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, although the task facing the quasi-realist in, e.g., the case of morality is daunting, requiring as it does a solution to

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<sup>31</sup>That is to say, challenges *over and above* those faced by non-factualist positions about any area of thought and talk.

<sup>32</sup>Perhaps this shouldn’t come as a surprise, given that other non-factualist and projectivist construals of the sceptical solution point to its tendency to “globalise” as a potential source of worry. See, e.g., Wright (1984) and Boghossian (1989). Blackburn himself considers a worry of the sort outlined in the text, and tentatively floats the idea that although forms of quasi-realism akin to what he calls “foundational pragmatism” won’t globalise without leaving us prone to an “empty toolkit” worry, less hegemonic forms of quasi-realism akin to what he calls “rolling pragmatism” may be able to do so (see Blackburn 2013b, 78–81). Although Kripke’s Wittgenstein does not loom large in them, the kind of sceptical solution discussed in the text may be a relative of the “global expressivism” or “global anthropological pragmatism” discussed in a series of fascinating works by Huw Price. See in particular McArthur and Price (2007) and Price (2015).

the Frege-Geach problem, the task facing the quasi-realist sceptical solution to Kripke's Wittgenstein's challenge is even more forbidding. Recall that the quasi-realist attempts to construct a notion of moral truth whose "first approximation" (Blackburn 1984a, 198) goes roughly as follows: a remark expressing a moral attitude is true if the attitude belongs to the set of attitudes that results from taking all opportunities for improvement of moral attitude. We can view this as an attempt to construct a notion of moral truth on the basis of a notion of justification that (according to the quasi-realist) can itself be explicated independently of the notion of moral truth: for example, an attitude can be regarded as justified insofar as it is the product of an admirable moral sensibility.<sup>33</sup> In effect, this is to attempt to construct a notion of moral truth out of the notion of assertibility: a moral statement is assertible to the extent that the attitude it expresses is the product of an admirable moral sensibility. On the face of it, it looks like the quasi-realist in the case of meaning faces an analogous task. In the case of meaning, we take the assertibility conditions of ascriptions of meaning as the basis for constructing a notion of truth applicable to them, and this notion of assertibility is held to be explicable independently of the notion of truth in semantics: roughly, an ascription of meaning is assertible if the relevant speaker's use of the relevant expression agrees with that of the community. Despite this similarity, though, there is a key difference. In the case of morals, for example, the quasi-realist is attempting to construct a notion of truth out of a notion of assertibility, where this is a notion of *justification*; or, as we may put it, a notion of *correctness* applicable to moral attitudes that meet a particular *standard*. The moral quasi-realist is thus attempting to construct one notion of correctness (truth) out of another (assertibility construed as a form of justification). Although not readily

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<sup>33</sup>For our purposes here, a moral sensibility can be thought of as a disposition to have moral attitudes in response to naturalistically characterised states of affairs. See McNaughton (1988, 183) for a clear explanation of the notion as it is deployed by Blackburn.

apparent, the quasi-realist position about meaning, although it too is attempting to construct a notion of truth out of the notion of assertibility, is faced with an altogether more radical task. This can be seen by reflecting on an insufficiently appreciated remark made by Paul Boghossian about a comment on the rule-following considerations contained in a classic paper by Simon Blackburn. Blackburn wrote:

I intend no particular theoretical implications by talking of rules here. The topic is that there is such a thing as the correct and incorrect application of a term, and to say that there is such a thing is no more than to say that there is truth and falsity. I shall talk indifferently of there being correctness and incorrectness, of words being rule-governed, and of their obeying principles of application. Whatever this is, it is the fact that distinguishes the production of a term from mere noise, and turns utterance into assertion—into the making of judgment. (Blackburn 1984b, 28–29)

Boghossian comments:

My only disagreement with this passage concerns its identification of correctness conditions with truth conditions. Truth conditions are simply one species of a correctness condition; proof conditions or justification conditions supply further instances. (Boghossian 1989, 152 n 18)

Although Boghossian himself does not draw any conclusions from this in his own subsequent discussion of the sceptical solution and semantic non-factualism, we can see that it has potentially devastating consequences for Kripke's Wittgenstein's reconstructive project. Since the notion of assertibility condition at play in the sceptical solution is *entirely* divorced from *any* notion of correctness, from *any* notion of a *standard* that utterances of ascriptions or meaning might or might not meet, the quasi-realist about meaning (unlike his cousin in the moral case) is not attempting to construct one notion of correctness (truth) out of another (justification), but rather attempting to construct a notion of correctness out of materials which are to be described with

no invocation of any notion of correctness whatsoever. That is to say, although the quasi-realist in the moral case is barred from simply assuming that moral sentences have truth-conditions, he is permitted view moral discourse as regulated by standards that can be explicated without recourse to the notion of a moral truth-condition; the quasi-realist about meaning, however, can have no recourse to the notion of a standard of any sort, irrespective of whether that standard can be explicated without recourse to the idea of a meaning-constituting state of affairs. Whereas the quasi-realist in the moral case may (perhaps unfairly) be accused of trying to have his cake and eat it, the proponent of the analogous position in the case of meaning appears to be attempting to conjure something out of nothing.<sup>34</sup> I suggest that dispelling this impression is the most pressing task facing any future development of Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptical solution.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>In note 26 (page 14 above), I noted that quasi-realists are happy to view moral remarks as having truth conditions. It may be objected that although this is the case, quasi-realists don't have to view themselves as *specifying* the truth conditions of the target sentences, so that the objection in the text lapses (since the quasi-realist in the meaning case is no longer expected to specify determinate truth conditions for ascriptions of meaning on the basis of assertibility conditions). In reply, however, we can say that a quasi-realist who sees themselves as engaged in constructing a notion of truth applicable to, e.g., moral sentences *is* committed to specifying their truth conditions. To see this, recall from §8 above that, in the moral case, "a first approximation" to the notion of moral truth involves the idea that an expression of a moral attitude is true if and only if it belongs to the set of attitudes "which would result from taking all opportunities for improvement of attitude" (Blackburn 1984a, 198). In any given case, the application of this strategy *cannot but* issue in a specification of a truth condition for the relevant sentence, the details of which will depend on the details of the debate at the level of normative ethics about what can and cannot be regarded as an improvement in a moral sensibility. So there is no escape route here for a quasi-realist about meaning, since the task of constructing a notion of truth applicable to semantic discourse and the task of specifying truth conditions for ascriptions of meaning go hand-in-hand, and cannot be separated in the manner envisaged in the objection. (I'm grateful here to an anonymous referee).

<sup>35</sup>Given the broad structural similarities between Blackburn's position and the sorts of position developed in Gibbard (1990) and (2003), it seems to me

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highly likely that worries of the sort outlined in this section will arise for the account of ascriptions of meaning proposed in [Gibbard \(2012\)](#). I pursue this issue in work-in-progress.

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