

THE MEANING OF MEANING ASCRIPTIONS.  
ASSERTIBILITY CONDITIONS AND MEANING FACTS\*

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1. The sceptical problem

In Chapter 2 of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Saul Kripke presents an argument, inspired by Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations, for the conclusion that there can be no facts as to what a speaker means by a linguistic expression. Call these facts, whose inexistence the argument purports to establish, *meaning facts*. Kripke refers to the result that there are no meaning facts as the *sceptical paradox*. He doesn't endorse the argument, or its attribution to Wittgenstein, but for simplicity I'm going to refer to the argument, and to the views expressed in the book as if they were Kripke's.

The sceptical paradox poses a problem for the task of explaining the meaning of meaning-ascribing sentences, such as "Jones means addition by 'plus'". The problem concerns the task of specifying what makes it the case that meaning-ascribing sentences have the meaning they have—the fact in virtue of which they have this meaning. I'm going to refer to the fact that plays this role with respect to a linguistic expression as its *meaning ground*. The problem posed by the sceptical paradox is that, if there are no meaning facts, we can't apply to meaning-ascribing sentences a strategy for specifying the meaning ground of a declarative sentence which, according to Kripke, "may seem not only natural but even tautological" (Kripke 1982: 73). On this strategy, the meaning of a declarative sentence is given by its truth conditions—by the possible state of affairs on whose obtaining or otherwise the truth value of the sentence depends. A declarative sentence, on this approach, has the meaning it has by virtue of its relation to the state of affairs playing this role. Kripke sees the thought that the meaning ground of every declarative sentence is given by its truth conditions as the simplest and most basic idea of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

a declarative sentence gets its meaning by virtue of its *truth conditions*, by virtue of its correspondence to facts that must obtain if it is true. For example, "the cat is on the mat" is understood by those speakers who realize that it is true if and only if a certain cat is on a certain mat; it is false otherwise. The presence of the cat on the mat is a fact or condition-in-the-world that would make the sentence true (express a truth) if it obtained. (Kripke 1982: 72)

Meaning ascriptions are expressed by declarative sentences, but if there are no meaning facts, there is no 'fact or condition-in-the-world' that would make the sentence "Jones means addition by 'plus'" true. It follows that this sentence, and other sentences ascribing meanings to linguistic expressions, can't have a truth-functional meaning ground. If we want to preserve the idea that meaning-ascribing sentences are meaningful, and that their

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\* I've presented versions of this material at the Saul Kripke Center (online), the University of Sydney and the University of York, Ontario. I am grateful to these audiences.

meaning is not primitive, but grounded in some other fact, we must find an alternative, non-truth-conditional meaning grounds for them.

## 2. The sceptical solution

Kripke's proposal is to employ for this purpose a strategy that he finds, following Michael Dummett, in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

Wittgenstein replaces the question, "What must be the case for the 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 the utility, in our lives of our practice of asserting (or denying) the form of words under these conditions?". (Kripke 1982: 73)

Kripke proposes to apply this strategy to the task of specifying the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions. Thus, for the sentence "Jones means addition by 'plus'", he offers first a specification of its assertibility conditions, which are different for Jones himself and for other speakers:

*Jones* is entitled, subject to correction by others, provisionally to say, 'I mean addition by "plus",' whenever he has the feeling of confidence—'now I can go on'—that he can give 'correct' responses in new cases. (Kripke 1982: 90)

*Smith* will judge Jones to mean addition by 'plus' only if he judges that Jones's answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure. (Kripke 1982: 91)

Then he provides an account of the role played in our lives by an assertoric practice with these rules—one in which "Jones means addition by 'plus'" is correctly asserted by other speakers when Jones's answers to addition problems agree with ours. He illustrates this role in terms of an interaction between a customer and a grocer:

The customer, when he deals with the grocer and asks for five apples, expects the grocer to count as he does, not according to some bizarre non-standard rule; and so, if his dealings with the grocer involve a computation, such as '68+57', he expects the grocer's responses to agree with his own. Indeed, he may entrust the computation to the grocer. (Kripke 1982: 92)

Asserting "the grocer means addition by 'plus'" in the conditions in which, on Kripke's account, it is correctly asserted enables interactions of this kind to take place.

## 3. Assertibility conditions and representation

The first component of Kripke's account is familiar from proposals put forward by other philosophers for specifying the meaning grounds of declarative sentences. Michael Dummett, on one reading of his ideas, proposed to specify the meaning grounds of the declarative sentences of certain discourses in terms of their assertibility conditions. The idea

was also developed by philosophers in the 1960s and 70s who sought to build a semantic theory on Wittgenstein's notion of a criterion.<sup>1</sup> However, in these proposals, the second component of Kripke's treatment of meaning-ascribing discourse is conspicuously absent. These philosophers seemed to think that a specification of the assertibility conditions of a sentence can serve as a full specification of its meaning ground, without needing to identify in addition, the function that asserting the sentence in those conditions might play in our lives.

Kripke, by contrast, sees the second component of his account as indispensable. The reason he gives is that, in its absence, meaning-ascribing discourse would be without function:

granted that our language game permits a certain 'move' (assertion) under certain specifiable conditions, what is the role in our lives of such permission? Such a role must exist if this aspect of the language game is not to be idle. (Kripke 1982: 75)

The threat of idleness is generated by the sceptical paradox. If a sentence succeeds in representing things as being a certain way, then there is a state of affairs that the sentence represents as obtaining—on whose obtaining or otherwise the truth value of the sentence depends. If there are no meaning facts, then there are no facts playing this role for meaning-ascribing sentences. It follows that these sentences cannot be construed as successfully performing the function of representing the world. If we want to avoid construing them as failed representations, we must ascribe to them an alternative non-representational function. I think this is the line of reasoning that leads Kripke to the inclusion of the second component of his account.

Advocates of Dummett-style accounts of meaning didn't see themselves as facing this challenge. They thought that their account of the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of assertibility conditions was compatible with the idea that the sentence successfully performs the function of representing the world. Crispin Wright puts the point very clearly, referring to Dummett's views:

it is consistent with anti-realism in this sense to retain the idea that a discourse is representational, and answers to states of affairs which, on at least some proper understandings of the term, are independent of us. (Wright 1992: 5)

Thus, according to Wright, specifying the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of its assertibility conditions is compatible with the idea that there is a state of affairs that the sentence represents as obtaining. Call this view *compatibilism*. Compatibilism faces two important challenges.

The first is what I've called elsewhere the problem of harmony (Zalabardo forthcoming-a). If the assertibility conditions of a sentence are what makes the sentence have the meaning it

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<sup>1</sup> For Dummett's assertibility-based semantics, see, e.g., (Dummett 1976). In some of his writings, Dummett appears to have no quarrel with a truth-conditional account of meaning, so long as the notion of truth is epistemically constrained. Crispin Wright highlighted the connections between anti-realist ideas and Wittgenstein's notion of a criterion in (Wright 1982), but later distanced himself from this approach (Wright 1984). For views based on Wittgenstein's notion of a criterion, see (Pollock 1967; Lycan 1971).

has, it follows that having those assertibility conditions is sufficient for the sentence to have that meaning. But if the sentence represents the world, there has to be a state of affairs that the sentence represents as obtaining. And its relation to this state of affairs has to be a necessary condition for the sentence to have the meaning it has—if the sentence didn't represent this state of affairs, it would not have the meaning it has. The problem is that these two claims are incompatible, unless its assertibility conditions are sufficient for the sentence to represent the state of affairs it represents. It follows that the compatibilist needs to offer an explanation of how the assertibility conditions that figure in the meaning ground of a target sentence necessitate the relation between the sentence and the state of affairs it represents.

The second challenge for compatibilism is to explain how the existence of a state of affairs that a sentence represents doesn't render an account of its meaning ground in terms of assertibility conditions redundant. If there is a state of affairs that a sentence represents, we should be able to ascribe to it a truth-conditional meaning ground, maintaining that the sentence has the meaning it has by virtue of its relation to this state of affairs. This suggests that whenever we ascribe an assertibility-conditional meaning ground to a representational sentence, a truth-conditional alternative will also be available.

In any case, a compatibilist treatment of meaning-ascribing discourse in particular seems to be blocked by the sceptical paradox. Even if we accept that it is in principle possible to treat a sentence with an assertibility-conditional meaning ground as performing the function of representing the world, we won't be able to extend this treatment to meaning ascriptions. This would require that there are facts for these sentences to represent, and according to the sceptical paradox there can't be any facts playing this role.

My goal in this chapter is to outline a proposal for how the compatibilist can overcome these challenges. I'm going to argue that we can specify the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of its assertibility conditions and treat it as representing a state of affairs with the following features: on the one hand, the assertibility conditions of the sentence are a sufficient condition for the sentence to represent this state of affairs; on the other hand, this state of affairs would not sustain an alternative, truth-conditional account of the meaning ground of the sentence. I will then consider the application of this approach to meaning-ascribing discourse. I'm going to argue that if meaning facts are construed along the lines of my compatibilist proposal, Kripke's sceptical argument doesn't succeed in establishing that they don't exist. This paves the way for a compatibilist account of meaning-ascribing sentences, with their meaning explained in terms of the first component of Kripke's proposal, while the second component is rendered unnecessary by the existence of meaning facts. Meaning ascriptions will have assertibility-conditional meaning grounds but they will still succeed in performing the function of representing the world.

#### 4. Assertibility conditions

I'm going to focus on compatibilist views based on a specific type of assertibility-conditional meaning grounds. The assertibility conditions of a sentence are conditions under which the

sentence is correctly asserted, and the notion can receive different construals depending on the kind of correctness on which it's based. One salient possibility is to construe the notion epistemically, as conditions in which assertion of the sentence will accrue some positive epistemic status, e.g. justification or warrant. On this construal, if the meaning ground of a sentence is given by its assertibility conditions, it has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its assertion is justified/warranted under certain conditions.

Another possibility is to construe the notion semantically, as conditions under which the sentence is actually asserted, or the procedure by which assertion of the sentence is actually regulated. Correct assertion, on this reading, is assertion that's regulated by a procedure that makes the sentence have the meaning it has. On this construal, if the meaning ground of a sentence is given by its assertibility conditions, what makes the sentence have the meaning it has is the fact that it is asserted in these conditions, or that its assertion is regulated according to a certain procedure.

I think that advocates of assertibility-conditional meaning grounds typically have the epistemic construal in mind. This is of crucial importance for the anti-sceptical uses to which the proposal has been put by some of its advocates.<sup>2</sup> But here I'm going to concentrate on the semantic construal—on accounts of the meaning grounds of declarative sentences according to which they have the meaning they have by virtue of the fact that their assertion is regulated in a specific way. Notice that endorsing a meaning ground of this kind doesn't carry a commitment to the view that the target sentence is true whenever it is correctly asserted. The goal of the approach is to specify what makes it the case that a sentence has the meaning it has, without specifying, in addition, what would have to be the case in order for the sentence to be true. Typically, conditions of correct assertion will be unsuitable for the second task, as they are relative to specific contexts. If you and I are regulating assertion of the sentence in the same way, it might be correct for you to assert the sentence and for me not to assert it. And yet, for the compatibilist, the sentence will have the same meaning and truth conditions as understood by each of us.

## 5. An idea of Quine's

I'm going to present a strategy for identifying the state of affairs represented by a sentence that has the resources for overcoming these challenges to compatibilism. The strategy I have in mind can be introduced in terms of the account of the meaning of an expression that W.V.O. Quine outlines in the following passage:

Just what the meaning of an expression is—what kind of object—is not yet clear; but it is clear that, given a notion of meaning, we can explain the notion of synonymy easily as the relation between expressions that have the same meaning. Conversely also, given the relation of synonymy, it would be easy to derive the notion of meaning in the following way: the meaning of an expression is

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<sup>2</sup> See (Pollock 1967; Wright 1982).

the class of all the expressions synonymous with it. No doubt this second direction of construction is the more promising one. (Quine 1943: 120)<sup>3</sup>

I want to focus on Quine's favoured option—to define the meaning of an expression as the class of all the expressions that are synonymous with it.

My goal will be to explore a method for specifying the state of affairs represented by a sentence that follows the same general approach as the account of the meaning of an expression that Quine proposes in this passage. My proposal will differ in substantial respects from Quine's version, but before I go into these differences, I want to display the appeal that the approach might hold for the compatibilist, by pretending provisionally that equivalence classes of synonymous sentences can be regarded as states of affairs.

Notice that the meaning ground of a sentence generates synonymy conditions for it—conditions under which an arbitrary sentence would have the same meaning as the target sentence. In particular, if we identify the meaning ground of a sentence with the procedure that regulates its assertion, we are claiming that every sentence whose assertion is regulated in this way will have the same meaning as the target sentence. It will be useful for us to think of this sufficient condition for synonymy as also necessary—a sentence will have the same meaning as the target sentence only if its assertion is regulated in this way. If we want to make room for the possibility of several regulation procedures bestowing the same meaning on a sentence, we just need to treat as the meaning ground the disjunction of these.

If the state of affairs represented by a sentence A were the class of sentences synonymous with it, all we would need to do in order to identify the state of affairs playing this role would be to specify synonymy conditions for A. But, as we've just seen, if A has an assertibility-conditional meaning ground, its meaning-grounding assertion procedure will generate synonymy conditions for A. Hence, by specifying the meaning ground of A we will have identified the state of affairs it represents.

Crucially, this identification will not be vulnerable to the problem of harmony, since now the assertibility-conditional meaning ground of A is a sufficient condition for A to represent the state of affairs it represents. So long as assertion of A is regulated in this way, A will refer to the same state of affairs.

The threat of redundancy for the compatibilist also disappears on this proposal. If the state of affairs represented by A is the equivalence class of sentences synonymous with A, with synonymy conditions fixed by the assertibility-conditional meaning ground of the sentence, then saying that A has the meaning it has as a result to its relation to the state of affairs it represents doesn't provide a genuine alternative to the assertibility-conditional meaning ground, but a misleading reformulation of the same meaning ground. If A has the meaning it has by virtue of its connection to the state of affairs it represents, and this state of affairs is the class of sentences whose assertion is regulated by the same procedure as A, then A

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<sup>3</sup> Similar views are defended in (Ayer 1936: 88) and (Carnap 1956: 152).

ultimately has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that assertion of A is regulated by that procedure.

Clearly, this vindication of compatibilism is based on the assumption that we can treat a class of synonymous sentences as a state of affairs, and this assumption is utterly implausible. My next goal is to articulate a version of Quine's thought that doesn't depend on this assumption but still holds the same promise for the compatibilist.

## 6. Abstraction

What Quine is proposing for meaning is a definition by abstraction. The method of definition by abstraction was widely used in mathematics since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's a method for defining a function from a domain of objects taken as given. The sentences in which definitions by abstraction are formulated are known as *abstraction principles*. If D is a given domain of objects, and f is a function with D as its domain (the *abstraction operator*), an abstraction principle has the form:

A For all x, y in D,  $f(x) = f(y)$  iff  $xRy$

Notice that an instance of A is logically false unless R is an equivalence relation.<sup>4</sup> In effect, an abstraction principle specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for two elements of D to have the same image under f.

Definitions by abstraction were discussed by Frege in the *Grundlagen* (Frege 1980). In one of his famous examples, D is the set of lines and f is the function pairing each line with its direction. The proposed abstraction principle can be formulated as follows (Frege 1980: 74-75):

For all lines x, y, the direction of x = the direction of y iff x is parallel to y.

In the application that Frege focuses on, D is the set of concepts and f is the function pairing a concept F with the number of Fs. The proposed abstraction principle here is based on Hume's principle (Frege 1980: 73-74):

For all concepts F, G the number of Fs = the number of Gs iff there is a bijection between the extensions of F and G.

If we take a function to be defined by an abstraction principle, one question that arises immediately is what the values of the function are. An abstraction principle tells us when two elements of the domain of the abstraction operator receive the same image, but it doesn't seem to tell us anything else about the identity of the objects playing the role of images under the function.

Paolo Mancosu has introduced a useful distinction between two options one might take regarding the range of an abstraction operator. The contrast concerns whether its elements

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<sup>4</sup> An instance of A is logically false also if R is inflationary. See (Fine 2002: 4). This is an important fact in other contexts, but it won't play a role in our discussion.

can receive an explicit definition independently of the abstraction principle. Mancosu refers to definitions by abstraction for which this question receives an affirmative answer as *thin*, and to those for which the question is answered in the negative as *thick* (Mancosu 2016: 24). As Mancosu points out, it is often unclear whether a definition by abstraction is meant to be understood as thin or thick, but there are some clear cases on both sides.

Among those who proposed thin definitions by abstraction, there are two main traditions concerning the identity of the elements of the range of the abstraction operator. As Mancosu explains, in number theory the dominant approach was to treat as the image under  $f$  of an element  $a$  of  $D$  a specific representative of the equivalence class generated by  $R$  to which  $a$  belongs. However, in synthetic geometry and the theory of cardinals and ordinals, where it's often not possible to pick a representative non-arbitrarily, the standard approach is to take the equivalence class itself as the image.<sup>5</sup> The latter is what Quine is proposing for the function pairing each expression with its meaning—a thin definition by abstraction in which the image of an expression is the equivalence class generated by the synonymy relation to which the expression belongs.

Other mathematicians clearly embraced thick definitions by abstraction. Thus, for example, Giuseppe Peano writes:

Let  $u$  be an object; by abstraction one obtains a new object  $\phi u$ ; one cannot form an equality

$\phi u = \text{known expression}$

since  $\phi u$  is an object whose nature is completely different from all those that have hitherto been considered. (Peano 1894: 45)<sup>6</sup>

And again, on the definition by abstraction of direction:

The relation between two unbounded straight lines “ $a$  is parallel to  $b$ ” has the properties of equality. It has been transformed into “direction of  $a =$  direction of  $b$ ”, or “point at infinity of  $a =$  point at infinity of  $b$ ”. One cannot define an equality of the form: “point at infinity of  $a =$  “expression formed with the words of Euclid’s Elements.” (Peano 1894: 47)<sup>7</sup>

Notice that treating an abstraction principle as a thick definition by abstraction involves accepting that what the abstraction principle tells us about the identity of the values of the abstraction operator—i.e. which arguments they are paired with—can be regarded as a satisfactory specification of the identity of these items.

The legitimacy of thick definitions by abstraction is hugely controversial. It is strongly rejected by Frege in the *Grundlagen*, and Russell’s verdict in *The Principles of Mathematics* is equally negative (Russell 1903: 113-16). The debate on their legitimacy regained momentum

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<sup>5</sup> For the theory of cardinals and ordinals the approach was later abandoned, due to the discovery of its paradoxical consequences.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in (Mancosu 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Cited in (Mancosu 2016).



in philosophy in connection with the proposals advanced by neo-Fregean philosophers of mathematics.<sup>8</sup> Here I don't intend to take part in this debate. I propose instead to treat as an assumption that the debate has been settled in favour of the legitimacy of thick definitions by abstraction. I'm going to assume, specifically, that if an instance of A satisfies the conditions under which it can be used as a definition by abstraction of f in terms of R, then it can be legitimately used as a *thick* definition of f in terms of R, i.e. f will have been successfully defined even if the items in its range cannot be defined independently of A. I'm going to refer to this as the *Peano assumption*.

Accepting thick definitions by abstraction enables us to formulate a variant of Quine's proposal. On this position, the meaning of an expression will be defined by abstraction in terms of synonymy, as Quine proposes, but, *contra* Quine, it won't be identified with an equivalence class of synonymous expressions. Meanings will be treated instead as sui generis entities whose identity is fully specified by the abstractionist link with synonymy. It follows from the Peano assumption that if Quine's original proposal is legitimate, then the same goes for this thick version.

## 7. Abstraction and representation

My goal is to explore how this general approach can be used to overcome the challenges faced by compatibilism. On this proposal, if a sentence A has an assertibility-conditional meaning ground, the item it represents will be identified by a thick definition by abstraction, as the item represented precisely by those sentences whose assertion is regulated by the same procedure as A. This definition will single out the item represented by A by specifying which other sentences represent it, but the item playing this role will not be identified with the equivalence class of these sentences, or with any other item in our ontology. Our only method for singling it out will be as the item represented by those sentences whose assertion is regulated in this way. But since it is the kind of item represented by a declarative sentence, it seems perfectly appropriate to describe it as a possible state of affairs.

The abstraction principle that we would need to use to implement this strategy would be:

- R For all representational sentences x, y, the state of affairs represented by x = the state of affairs represented by y iff x and y are synonymous

On an intuitive construal of the notion of synonymy, the left-to-right direction of R has counterexamples, as, e.g., with "Superman flies" and "Clark Kent flies", or with "there's water in this cup" and "there's H<sub>2</sub>O in this cup". But if we make adjustments to deal with these cases, we are still left with a recognisable notion of synonymy, and on this construal of the notion, R is a true principle.

However, from the truth of R it doesn't follow that we can provide a definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by each representational sentence. This

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<sup>8</sup> See (Wright 1983; Hale 1987; Hale and Wright 2001), and (MacBride 2003) for an excellent survey.

would require, in addition, that the synonymy relation can receive an independent definition—one that's not built on when two sentences represent the same state of affairs. This is the point Quine makes in the continuation of the passage we quoted earlier:

The relation of synonymy, in turn, calls for a definition or a criterion in psychological and linguistic terms. Such a definition, which up to the present has perhaps never even been sketched, would be a fundamental contribution at once to philology and philosophy. (Quine 1943: 120)

Now, Quine's subsequent work contains a multipronged attack on the availability of the independent definition of synonymy the passage calls for. His arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction (Quine 1980) and in support of the indeterminacy of translation (Quine 1960: chapter 2) would show, if successful, that it's not possible to provide an independent definition of synonymy on which it comes out as an equivalence relation, and hence as fit for sustaining a definition by abstraction of the meaning of an expression, or of the state of affairs represented by a sentence, in terms of synonymy.

This is not the place to assess Quine's arguments, but I'm going to work on the assumption that they don't succeed—that for at least some of our terms and sentences it is possible in principle to specify synonymy conditions. Notice that a specification of the meaning ground of a sentence in terms of the procedure that regulates its assertion entails that it's possible to define independently of R the equivalence class of sentences that are synonymous with it. In what follows, I'm going to assume that there are no general reasons for thinking that individual sentences can't receive this treatment.

However, even if this is possible for some sentences, it's still the case that there are sentences that can't be treated in this way. There are sentences for which synonymy conditions cannot be provided in terms of assertibility conditions or, more generally, without invoking the states of affairs they represent. I take this to be a direct corollary of work on natural-kind terms by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke (Putnam 1975; Kripke 1980). The problem is that any characterisation of the procedure that regulated our assertion of "there's water in this cup" in pre-Lavoisier times would also be satisfied by our twins' sentence "there's twater in this cup". However, our sentence is not synonymous with our twins'. For sentences that exhibit this kind of behaviour, an account of their meaning grounds in terms of assertibility conditions is not an option.

But although we can't use R to provide a general definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by each sentence, we can still aim for the more modest goal of treating specific sentences in this way. Thus, for a sentence A with an assertibility-conditional meaning ground, we could provide a definition by abstraction of the state of affairs it represents by means of the following principle:

- R\* For every sentence x, the state of affairs represented by x = the state of affairs represented by A iff assertion of x is regulated by the same procedure as assertion of A.

Let's see how this would work in a specific example. Consider the feelings of moral approval on which emotivists build their account of moral language (Ayer 1936), but instead of using them to define the function of moral sentences, take them simply as the basis for the procedure that we employ for regulating our assertion of moral statements: we assert "killing one to save five is morally right" just in case we feel moral approval towards the killing of one to save five. The proposal I want to consider would treat this procedure for regulating assertion of the sentence as its meaning ground—the sentence has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its assertion is regulated by the speaker's feelings of moral approval towards the killing of one to save five. We can now use this procedure to formulate an instance of R\*

MR For every sentence x, the state of affairs represented by x = the state of affairs represented by "killing one to save five is morally right" iff assertion of x is regulated by the speaker's sense of moral approval towards the killing of one to save five.

The compatibilist, unlike the emotivist, will go on to claim that the function of the sentence is to represent the world, and she will treat MR as a thick definition by abstraction of the state of affairs that the sentence represents as obtaining. It's the state of affairs represented by those sentences whose assertion is regulated in this way.

We can easily see how the challenges faced by compatibilism would be handled by this proposal. First, harmony won't be a problem, since now the assertibility-conditional meaning ground of the sentence is a sufficient condition for the relation between the sentence and the state of affairs it represents. So long as assertion of the sentence is regulated by the speaker's feeling of moral approval towards the killing of one to save five, the sentence will represent the same state of affairs. The threat of redundancy also disappears. We might want to say that "killing one to save five is morally right" has the meaning it has as a result of its connection with the state of affairs represented by those sentences whose assertion is regulated by the speaker's feeling of moral approval towards the killing of one to save five, but this is not a truth-conditional alternative to the assertibility-conditional proposal, but a misleading reformulation of the assertibility-conditional account.

## 8. Abstraction and meaning ascriptions

Let's consider now how the approach could work for meaning ascriptions. Take the sentence in Kripke's example, "Jones means addition by 'plus'". The compatibilist would specify the meaning ground of this sentence in terms of its assertibility conditions. She could use for this purpose the first component of Kripke's sceptical solution. We'll focus for the sake of simplicity on the third-personal assertibility conditions proposed by Kripke.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> This simplification may give the impression that third-person and first person meaning ascriptions don't have the same meaning. The impression would disappear if we removed the simplification, treating as the meaning ground of the sentence a disjunctive procedure for regulating its assertion, with one disjunct for Jones and another for everyone else.

proposal would be that what makes “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”, as meant by Smith, have the meaning it has, is the fact that Smith’s assertion of the sentence is regulated by whether ‘he judges that Jones’s answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure’.

As we’ve seen, meaning grounds generate synonymy conditions, and with assertibility-conditional meaning grounds the resulting synonymy conditions can be used in a definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by the sentence. In this case, the definition would be based on the following abstraction principle:

MA For every sentence *x*, the state of affairs represented by *x* = the state of affairs represented by “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” iff assertion of *x* is regulated by whether the speaker ‘judges that Jones’s answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure’.

The compatibilist would treat MA as a thick definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by the sentence “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” (as understood by Smith). It would not be possible to provide an explicit definition of the state of affairs playing this role. It could be singled out only as the state of affairs represented by the sentences whose assertion is regulated in this way, but this would be regarded as an adequate specification of its identity.

It is important to understand the conditions under which MA dictates that a sentence, as understood by a speaker, represents the same state of affairs as “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”, as understood by Smith. Suppose that Miller regulates her assertion of “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” by whether she judges that Jones’s answers to particular “plus” problems agree with those she is inclined to give or she can interpret Jones as following the procedure she follows for answering “plus” questions. It will follow from this that Miller regulates her assertion of “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” with the procedure required by MA *only if* the answers Miller is inclined to give to “plus” questions are the answers she is inclined to give to addition questions and the procedure she follows for answering “plus” questions is her procedure for answering addition questions. In other words, Miller will count as using the same procedure as Smith for regulating her assertion of “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” only if she means by “plus” what Smith means by addition—i.e. only if the state of affairs represented by “Miller means addition by ‘plus’”, as understood by Smith, obtains. Smith will form his view on this on the basis of the procedure he uses to regulate his assertion of sentences of the form “*S* means addition by ‘ $\phi$ ’”—i.e. by whether he judges that Miller’s answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Miller as at least following the proper procedure. If he decides on this basis that Miller means addition by “plus”, he will conclude that she regulates her assertion of “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” with the same procedure that he himself uses, and that the sentence, as understood by Miller, represents the same state of affairs it represents as understood by him.

Notice that the compatibilist's proposal is fundamentally different from a view that tries to provide an explicit definition of the state of affairs represented by "Jones means addition by 'plus'" in terms of the assertibility conditions that figure in Kripke's proposal. On this approach, we would specify the truth conditions of "Jones means addition by 'plus'" along the following lines:

"Jones means addition by 'plus'" is true if and only if Jones's answers to particular addition problems agree with those we are inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, we can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure.

This is a crude version of the so-called communitarian account. I think this proposal faces very serious problems,<sup>10</sup> but my goal here is not to assess it, but to highlight the fact that the compatibilist doesn't endorse a specification of this kind of the truth conditions of "Jones means addition by 'plus'". The compatibilist is not proposing to use the procedure that regulates our ascription of the sentence to specify its truth conditions. Her proposal is to use this procedure to specify synonymy conditions for the sentence, and to use these synonymy conditions in a definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by the sentence. Her position doesn't entail that we can use the procedure that regulates assertion of the sentence to specify necessary or sufficient conditions for the truth of the sentence. More generally, her position doesn't entail any informative specification of necessary or sufficient conditions for the truth of the sentence.

As before, the proposal has the resources for dealing with the threats of harmony and redundancy. The fact that assertion of the sentence is regulated in this way is treated as a sufficient condition for the sentence to have the meaning it has, and the fact that it represents the state of affairs it represents is a necessary condition for the sentence having this meaning. However, there is no tension between these two requirements, since having its assertion regulated in this way is a sufficient condition for the sentence to represent the state of affairs it represents. So long as assertion of the sentence is regulated in this way, the sentence can't fail to represent this state of affairs. Redundancy is also not a problem, as our specification of the state of affairs represented by the sentence wouldn't sustain a truth-conditional alternative to the assertibility conditional account of its meaning ground. We might want to say that what makes the sentence have the meaning it has is the fact that it represents this state of affairs, but what makes the sentence represent this state of affairs is the fact that its assertion is regulated by the procedure specified in its assertibility-conditional meaning ground.

## 9. Compatibilism and the sceptical paradox

We've seen, however, that this application of the compatibilist approach faces an additional hurdle. Kripke claims to have shown that there is no fact of the matter as to whether Jones means one function rather than another by "plus". The compatibilist proposal is directly opposed to this. For the compatibilist, there is a fact of the matter as to whether the state

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<sup>10</sup> Problems with this approach are highlighted in (Blackburn 1984).

of affairs singled out by MA obtains. If it does, then “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” is true, and Jones means the addition function by “plus”. If it doesn’t, then “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” is false, and Jones doesn’t mean the addition function by “plus”. It follows that the compatibilist has to reject the sceptical conclusion, which requires, in turn, finding a gap in the argument that Kripke deploys in its support.

I think this can be done. Kripke’s argument is based on the implicit assumption that if “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” represents a state of affairs, it has to be possible to provide an explicit definition of this state of affairs—an informative specification of what has to be the case in order for this state of affairs to obtain.<sup>11</sup> Kripke’s argument takes the form of considering a list of plausible attempts to provide this explicit definition, and concluding in each case that they face insurmountable obstacles. In this way, he concludes that it’s not possible to provide an adequate explicit definition of the state of affairs represented by “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”, and he then derives from this his ultimate conclusion—that there isn’t a state of affairs that “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” represents as obtaining.

However, as we have seen, the compatibilist rejects the assumption that underwrites the last step in Kripke’s reasoning. She explicitly accepts that it won’t be possible to provide an explicit definition of the state of affairs represented by “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”. On this point she is in agreement with Kripke. However, unlike Kripke, the compatibilist doesn’t think that it follows from this that “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” doesn’t represent a state of affairs. On her view, the sentence represents the state of affairs singled out by MA, treated as a thick definition by abstraction. For her, the assumption that a sentence can’t represent a state of affairs unless we can provide an explicit definition of the state of affairs playing this role begs the question against her claim that the state of affairs represented by a sentence can be fully identified by an instance of  $R^*$ , as MA does for “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”.<sup>12</sup>

It might seem, however, that the state of affairs singled out by MA violates a major requirement that Kripke wields against other accounts of meaning facts:

A candidate for what constitutes the state of my meaning one function, rather than another, by a given function sign, ought to be such that, whatever in fact I (am disposed to) do, there is a unique thing that I *should* do. (Kripke 1982: 24)

Specifically, for every question of the form “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?”, the state of Jones’ meaning one function, rather than another, by “plus” ought to be such that it singles out a unique answer to the question as correct. Jones will be disposed to give answers to some of these questions, and it has to be possible to say of these answers that they are either correct or incorrect. The state of Jones meaning one function rather than another has to generate the

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<sup>11</sup> The reliance of the argument on this assumption has been highlighted by Paul Boghossian (Boghossian 1989: 540-41).

<sup>12</sup> If we reject, as I’m proposing, the reductionist assumption of Kripke’s argument, we open the door to a range of non-reductionist accounts of meaning facts (Stroud 2000; Ginsborg 2011; Hattiangadi forthcoming). A full defence of the compatibilist approach would require arguing that it is preferable to these alternatives.

standard of correctness with respect to which talk of correct and incorrect answers can be made sense of.

Suppose we accept for the sake of the argument that an instance of  $R^*$  can in principle succeed in identifying the state of affairs represented by a sentence. The question now is whether MA specifically achieves this. Suppose it does and suppose the state of affairs specified by MA obtains. Then this fact will have to single out a unique answer to each question of the form “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” as correct. Is this condition satisfied? I think the compatibilist can successfully argue that it is. If the state of affairs singled out by MA obtains, then each question of the form “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” is correctly answered by “ $p$ ” if and only if “ $p$ ” refers to the image of the referents of “ $m$ ” and “ $n$ ” under the addition function. Jones’s answers will be correct or incorrect depending on whether they meet this standard.

The compatibilist’s opponent might protest that this response is unsatisfactory. It amounts to specifying the correct answers to “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” questions, as meant by Jones, in terms of the conditions of correct use for our own terms. The compatibilist is saying, in effect, that “ $p$ ” is the correct answer to “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” just in case “ $p$ ” refers to the image of the referents of “ $m$ ” and “ $n$ ” under the function that “addition”, as we understand it, refers to. And this, it can be argued, doesn’t solve the problem, for what goes for Jones goes for us too. We have inclinations as to how to answer “addition” questions, but they are in principle no more likely to be correct than Jones’s own inclinations. The compatibilist’s line, the complaint goes, doesn’t provide an effective identification of the conditions of correct use for Jones’s responses.

I think this complaint is right in claiming that there’s something that the compatibilist position doesn’t provide, but I’m going to call into question the legitimacy of the demand for what the compatibilist fails to provide. What the compatibilist doesn’t provide is an explanation of how we can access the conditions of correct use of “plus”, as meant by Jones, without relying on his or our inclinations concerning how to use the expression or its synonyms. If Jones is inclined to answer the question “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” with “ $p$ ”, and we want to check whether his answer is correct, we need to draw on the procedures that regulate our assertion of the sentence “ $p$  is the sum of  $m$  and  $n$ ”. These are based on the same kind of inclinations that generate Jones’s answer, and the answer we are inclined to give may or may not coincide with the correct answer. In the end, all we can do is check his inclinations against our own, without ever gaining direct access to the standard that determines whether Jones’s answers, and our own answers, are correct or incorrect.

I think the compatibilist needs to concede this point, but she can protest that what she is being accused of not providing is something that cannot be reasonably demanded. What the complaint calls for is a way of determining which answers to “plus” questions are correct that bypasses the procedures that we employ to regulate our assertion of sentences in which “plus” figures.<sup>13</sup> The compatibilist should maintain that this is an illegitimate demand. The state of Jones meaning one function rather than another by “plus” cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> I think this unmediated access to conditions of correct use is what Kripke refers to when he speaks of these conditions being ‘read off’ from the meaning-constituting fact (Kripke 1982: 26, 29).

reasonably expected to determine conditions of correct use for the symbol that are directly accessible in this way.

The demand that meaning facts determine conditions of correct use is legitimate only if divested of this direct-access component. Now the claim is that the state of Jones meaning one function rather than another by “plus” has to determine the correct answer to each question of the form “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?”, without having to make these answers available to us in the unmediated sense we’ve discussed. But when the constraint is understood in this way, the state of affairs singled out by MA does determine conditions of correct use: “ $p$ ” is a correct answer to “ $m$  plus  $n$ ?” just in case “ $p$ ” refers to the image of the referents of “ $m$ ” and “ $n$ ” under the function that “addition”, as we understand it, refers to. So long as this function exists—so long as “addition” as we understand it, has a referent—the state of affairs singled out by MA will determine conditions of correct use for “plus”, as understood by Jones.<sup>14</sup>

#### 10. Meaning ascriptions in general

So far we’ve discussed how to provide assertibility-conditional meaning grounds for individual sentences—in our examples “killing one to save five is morally right” and “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”. The same approach can be applied to other discourses besides ethics and meaning ascriptions.<sup>15</sup> It can also be used to provide general specifications of assertibility conditions for every sentence of a given discourse. We could take this approach for meaning ascriptions, seeking to specify meaning-grounding assertibility conditions for every sentence of the form “ $S$  means  $A$  by ‘ $B$ ’”. This would require identifying a single procedure-type for regulating assertion of a sentence such that every meaning ascription has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its assertion is regulated with an instance of this procedure-type. The assertibility-conditional meaning ground of “Jones means addition by ‘plus’” would then follow from this as a special case.

A general procedure for regulating assertion that could play this role would be a procedure for ascribing meanings to expressions such that a sentence would count as ascribing a meaning  $A$  to an expression “ $B$ ” by virtue of the fact that the pairing of  $A$  with “ $B$ ” resulted from the application of this procedure. I want to illustrate how this approach would work in terms of the procedure to which Donald Davidson refers as Radical Interpretation.<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this illustration we only need a rough and ready characterisation of what the procedure involves—something along the lines of:

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<sup>14</sup> See in this connection the contrast that Paul Horwich draws between two senses in which the use of a predicate can be said to determine its extension (Horwich 1995: 361-63).

<sup>15</sup> I apply the approach to propositional-attitude ascriptions in (Zalabardo 2019; forthcoming-a: Chapter 5).

<sup>16</sup> See the essays in (Davidson 1984). The notion is of course derived from W.V.O. Quine’s notion of Radical Translation (Quine 1960: Chapter 2).



Pair expressions with meanings in such a way as to maximize the truth of the sentences accepted by the speaker in which the expressions figure.<sup>17</sup>

We can use Radical Interpretation to provide an assertibility-conditional account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions:

RIA “S means A by ‘B’” has the meaning it has by virtue of the fact that its assertion is regulated by Radical Interpretation.

The proposal shouldn’t be confused with a truth-conditional account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions that uses Radical Interpretation in a different way. On this account, Radical interpretation is used to define the state of affairs represented by a meaning ascription:

RIT “S means A by ‘B’” is true if and only if Radical Interpretation recommends interpreting S as meaning A by “B”.

The assertibility conditional account expressed by RIA doesn’t carry a commitment to RIT, or to any other specification of the state of affairs on whose obtaining the truth value of “S means A by ‘B’” depends. And some major obstacles faced by RIT do not apply to RIA. One is the context-dependence of Radical Interpretation—the fact that it can issue different recommendations to different interpreters in different contexts. It follows from this that RIT doesn’t provide a coherent specification of truth conditions for “S means A by ‘B’”, but the point poses no obstacle to RIA. RIA dictates that “S means A by ‘B’” obtains its meaning from the fact that its assertion is regulated by Radical Interpretation. The fact that the verdict on this sentence recommended by Radical Interpretation depends on the interpreter’s context doesn’t in any way undermine the proposal.

As with the assertibility-conditional meaning grounds considered earlier, RIA doesn’t force us to abandon the idea that meaning ascriptions are representations. This requires, as we have seen, that there is a state of affairs that each meaning ascription represents, but here the compatibilist can deploy the same strategy that we considered in previous cases. The meaning grounds postulated by RIA generate synonymy conditions for “S means A by ‘B’”, and these can be used in a definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by this sentence:

MF For every sentence x, the state of affairs represented by x = the state of affairs represented by “S means A by ‘B’” iff assertion of x is regulated by whether Radical Interpretation recommends interpreting “B”, as understood by S, as meaning A.

The compatibilist would take this as a thick definition by abstraction of the state of affairs represented by “S means A by ‘B’”. She would take the identity of this state of affairs to be

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<sup>17</sup> Notice that the reliance of this procedure on the principle of charity can also be discerned in the assertibility conditions that Kripke proposes for “Jones means addition by ‘plus’”. His proposal is that Jones should be interpreted as meaning addition by “plus” only if this makes most of the “plus”-involving sentences Jones accepts come out true.

completely specified by MF, as the state of affairs represented by every sentence whose assertion is regulated in this way. She would see no need for the definition by abstraction to be supplemented by an explicit definition—for the state of affairs defined by MF to be identified with some item in our pre-existing ontological catalogue. As we have seen, the proposal would have the resources to overcome the challenges posed by harmony, redundancy and Kripke's argument against the existence of meaning facts.

I want to emphasize that my endorsement of this account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions is only partial. We can see the proposal as involving two components. On the one hand, it provides an assertibility-conditional account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions, using for this purpose the procedures for regulating their assertion generated by our general method of interpretation. On the other hand, it endorses a characterisation of our method of interpretation along the lines of Davidson's Radical Interpretation. I am endorsing the first component, but not the second. I'm proposing that our general method of interpretation can form the basis for a plausible assertibility-conditional account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions, but I don't think that Davidson's characterisation of our method of interpretation can be accepted without revisions. I think, however, that Davidson's characterisation can be easily modified to produce a satisfactory account of our method of interpretation, which would sustain a promising assertibility-conditional account of the meaning grounds of meaning ascriptions.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> I develop this point in (Zalabardo forthcoming-b; forthcoming-a: Chapter 6)

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