

# Some Strands of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism, and Some Strains of his Semantic Nihilism

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## §1. Strands of Normative Pragmatism

**F**IRST READ THE TRIUMVIRATE of classical American pragmatists as an undergraduate, under the tutelage of Bruce Kuklick. He saw them as instituting a vibrant philosophical tradition that was visibly continued not only by C. I. Lewis, but by his students Goodman and Quine. (More controversially, but I believe, also correctly, he further saw the semantic holism Quine shared with Sellars as picking up a central strand of the idealist tradition —represented in the Golden Age by Lewis's teacher Josiah Royce— with which pragmatism had always been in conversation.) My Doktorvater Richard Rorty then made familiar to me an understanding of pragmatism sufficiently capacious to include such disparate and reciprocally unsympathetic philosophers as the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein, as well as Sellars, and Quine's student Davidson. I came to think of pragmatism as a house with many mansions, comprising a number of more or less closely related but distinct and separable commitments, relating various thinkers in the way Wittgenstein made famous under the rubric of "family resemblances." Excavating the conceptual antecedents of those various pragmatist views led me to see some of the most central among them as rooted firmly in the thought of the German Idealists, Kant and Hegel —as Peirce and Dewey had explicitly avowed<sup>1</sup>.

Among the most important of these antecedents is a thought that I take it serves as a fundamental orienting insight for the later Wittgenstein. This is the idea that intentionality is through and through a *normative* phenomenon. He understands that

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Introduction to Brandom (2011).

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being in an intentional state, such as having a belief or an intention, includes having a kind of normative status. For it involves *committing* oneself as to how things are or are to be. In believing or intending one essentially makes oneself liable to normative assessments of the correctness of the belief or the success of the intention. And Wittgenstein is interested in a certain kind of puzzlement we might have about the nature of that normative significance.

Someone says to me: "Show the children a game." I teach them gambling with dice, and the other says "I didn't mean that sort of game." Must the exclusion of the game with dice have come before his mind when he gave me the order? (Wittgenstein 1953, §70)

The thought is that the retrospective claim about what was meant, intended, ordered, or requested is quite correct: she did *not* mean that kind of game. But what, exactly, does that fact consist in? How did her request or the desire it expresses somehow reach out into the space of all the possible things I might have done with the intention of fulfilling it, to determine which would and which would not in fact fulfill it, which would and would not be correct according to the standard of assessment it sets? Whatever complaints one might have about the views that Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein in his book on rule-following, he is surely right in attributing the commitment he invokes to set up his problematic: the claim that someone meant plus by "+" has as an essential consequence that intending to use the symbol in that way *commits* or *obliges* him to applying it ("going on") in certain ways and not others, determines those as *correct* according to what he means. Intentional states are by definition contentful in a way that gives them an essentially *normative* significance. Furthermore, the normativity of intentionality is not limited to the case of *discursive* intentionality: the intentionality of states and expressions with propositional (hence conceptually articulated) contents, such as beliefs and intentions. Sub- or pre-discursive intentionality such as the mere pointing of a sign-post or the directedness of the states of a goal-seeking system also introduces a dimension of correctness and incorrectness of indication. It is important to Wittgenstein that already here we can raise a corresponding puzzlement about the relation of that intentional directedness to "the sign-post considered just as a piece of wood," that is, apart from its normative significance.

Kant was the first to appreciate the normativity of intentionality. He had the idea that what distinguishes the judgments and doings of knowers and intentional agents from the responses of merely natural creatures is that they are things the subjects of those acts and states are in a distinctive way *responsible* for. They are exercises of a

distinctive kind of *authority* on the part of those knowers and agents: the authority to *commit* themselves, as to how things are or shall be. Sapience, awareness in the sense of apperception, consists in the capacity to commit oneself in this way, to make oneself liable to normative assessments as to the correctness of one's judgments, the success of one's actions. The *contents* of the intentional states of believing or intending set the normative standard for such assessments. Those contents accordingly determine how one has normatively *bound* oneself in judging or intending (endorsing the contents). Apperception in the sense Kant cares about is discursive intentionality. We can call the contents "*conceptual* contents." Concepts, accordingly, show up as "functions of judgment" in the sense that they determine what we have made ourselves *responsible for* in judging.

A number of Kant's most characteristic claims are relatively immediate corollaries of this founding insight into the normativity of discursive intentionality. The most pressing philosophical problem becomes understanding the "Verbindlichkeit," the "Gültigkeit," that is the normative binding force of judging and intending. Being a self or subject is possessing a distinctive kind of authority: the authority to bind oneself, to make oneself responsible by taking oneself to be responsible. This is the normative status that is Kantian autonomy. The minimal unit of sapient or apperceptive awareness is the judgment (rather than, as the tradition had it, the concept), for that is the minimal unit one can be responsible *for*. This is the logical primacy of the propositional, understood as the judgeable. The subjective form of the judgment is the "I think" which can accompany all of our judgments and is accordingly the emptiest of all representations. It is the explicit mark of *who* is responsible for judging (and acting). The objective form of the judgment is the "object = X" which marks what the judgment makes one responsible *to* for its correctness, that is, what it represents or is about. Kant accordingly pursues a normative understanding of representational purport in terms of a distinctive kind of responsibility of the representing to what counts thereby as represented, the authority of what is represented over representings of it. The "synthetic unity (characteristic) of apperception" is what results from rationally integrating each new commitment into the constellation of antecedent commitments, finding reasons justifying it, extracting consequences from it, and expelling commitments whose contents are incompatible with it. The contents judgeables must be understood to have are themselves to be made sense of in terms of the demands of this synthetic process: those contents must determine what is a reason for and against what other contents.

For Kant, our normative status as autonomous, our possession of the authority to make ourselves responsible, to bind ourselves by conceptual norms (either

cognitively in judgment or practically in exercises of intentional agency) is simply an ontological fact about us, definitive of creatures like us. Hegel takes a large step to naturalizing this fundamental discursive normativity by treating the possession of this normative status as a social achievement. Indeed, for him, all normative statuses are understood as social statuses. (Slogan: “All transcendental constitution is social institution.”) More specifically, he understands normative *statuses*, including those corresponding to Kantian autonomy, as socially instituted by practical normative *attitudes* of reciprocal recognition. Norms are understood as implicit in social practices. This is his understanding of the Enlightenment insight that there were no normative statuses of authority or responsibility, no commitments or obligations, before or apart from our practices of taking or treating each other *as* authoritative, responsible, committed, and obliged.

These are lessons the classical American pragmatists take over from Kant and Hegel. They, too, see intentionality in all its guises as fundamentally a normative phenomenon. One of their master-ideas is to further naturalize the normativity of intentionality (both discursive and practical) by construing it as arising from the role intentional states play in the generically selectional processes whose paradigms are Darwinian evolution and individual learning (both supervised and unsupervised). These have in common the feedback-loop, Test-Operate-Test-Exit (TOTE) structure. The pragmatists’ model and emblem for the faculty of reason is neither the Enlightenment’s reflectively representational mirror nor Romanticism’s creatively illuminating lamp, but the flywheel governor that is the flexible instrument of control for the engines of the Industrial Revolution. The contemporary heirs of the specific pragmatist construal of the normativity of intentionality in terms of selectional processes epitomized by biological evolution are the teleosemanticists — philosophers of language and mind such as Kim Sterelny, David Papineau, and above all Ruth Millikan, whose development of this line of thought is the most original, sustained, and sophisticated.

Besides this model, both Peirce and Dewey take Hegel’s *social* naturalizing of the normativity of intentionality as an important contribution to understanding the normativity characteristic of intentionality. The *social pragmatism about norms* that consists in understanding norms as implicit in social practices is a core strategy that Wittgenstein develops closer to our own time.

Looking back over this broad tradition, I think we can see that one orienting commitment running through it is to understanding discursive, apperceptive knowing *that* in terms of skillful practical knowing *how* (to use Ryle’s terms). This methodological approach might be called “fundamental pragmatism.” Placed in the

context of Kant's normative insight, it is the methodological strategy of giving explanatory priority to norms *implicit* in *practices* or practical abilities to norms *explicit* in the form of *principles*. The converse explanatory strategy, which looks for something explicit in the form of a rule or principle behind every practical capacity deployed in cognition and agency, is what Dewey called "intellectualism," (or "Platonism")<sup>2</sup>. The stage-setting for pragmatism of this sort is the notion of practical intentionality. This is the sort of skillful practical coping nonlinguistic organisms exhibit —epitomized at the high end by the efficient foraging strategies of orangutans and the stalking exploits of apex predators, but discernible at the low end even in the TOTE—based behavior of radar-guided missiles.

Nonlinguistic animals are already in a distinctive way oriented to or directed at ("onto") the enviroing objects in their world that play significant roles in their lives. In its most basic form, fundamental pragmatism seeks to situate discursive intentionality within the larger field of this sort of practical intentionality. This project can take the form of exhibiting discursive intentionality as a kind of practical intentionality: a species of that genus. Or it can take the form of trying to show how discursively intentional abilities can arise out of more primitive sorts of skillful doing. A particularly strong form of the fundamental pragmatist program aims at exhibiting discursive practices and abilities as the results of recruiting and deploying practical abilities each of which can separately be exhibited by *nondiscursive*, merely practically intentional creatures. At its (implausible) limit, it takes the form of what I have called "pragmatic AI": the attempt to show how discursive abilities can be *algorithmically elaborated* from a set of primitive abilities that are nondiscursive in the sense that each can be exhibited by creatures exhibiting only nondiscursive practical intentionality<sup>3</sup>.

Another way of working out the overarching thesis of fundamental pragmatism concerns how the difference between practical and discursive intentionality is conceived. The classical American pragmatists saw the Enlightenment, including Kant, as having retained a spark of divinity in the form of our discursive capacities as knowers and intentional agents, by drawing a bright line between rational creatures and merely natural ones. Those thinkers accordingly showed up to Dewey, for instance, as having only insufficiently and incompletely succeeded in disenchanting,

<sup>2</sup> Recent examples are to be found in various programs in cognitive science. Hubert Dreyfus's critique of the classical Newell-Simon program of artificial intelligence is a pragmatist assault on its intellectualism. Sophisticated intellectualist pushback against this sort of pragmatism can be found in Stanley (2013).

<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Four of Brandom (2008).

demystifying, and naturalizing us. Their pragmatism was a strategy for erasing the rationalist saltation encouraged by that bright line, by exhibiting the continuity (thought of as guaranteed by evolution) between our discursive abilities and the abilities of our nondiscursive relatives and ancestors. This is a way of putting meat on the bones of fundamental pragmatism, assimilating discursive to practical intentionality not as a species of a genus but as one extreme of a single dimension. Peirce's master idea of habits selected and retained as the genus of which both evolution and learning are species made possible the naturalistic construal of a cognitive continuum that runs from the skillful coping of the competent predator, through the practical intelligence of primitive hominids, to the traditional practices and common sense of civilized humans, all the way to the most sophisticated theorizing of contemporary scientists. A cognate aim and strategy is evidently one of those served by Wittgenstein's employment of the toy social practices he calls "Sprachspiele." Features of sophisticated discursive practices that we find particularly philosophically puzzling are to be illuminated by showing analogous features of extremely simple practices that could plausibly be learned by otherwise non-language-using hominins.

Fundamental pragmatism addresses relations between what one must *do* to count as engaging in or exhibiting discursive intentionality and what one must *do* to count as engaging in or exhibiting practical intentionality. In one sense or another, it claims, the former is to be understood in terms of the latter. It is in a broad sense a methodological commitment regarding the explanatory priority of the *pragmatics* of more basic practical intentionality to the pragmatics of more sophisticated discursive intentionality. Both sorts of intentionality admit an act/content, 'ing'/'ed' distinction (between a doing and what is done, a perceiving and what is perceived...), and fundamental pragmatism stays resolutely on the 'ing' side ("knowing how"/"knowing that"). At least in the case of discursive intentionality, this distinction between what one does in using a linguistic expression, or the functional role played by an intentional state, on the one hand, and its content (what is specified by the "that"-clause expressing what is known, believed, or intended), on the other, takes the form of a Fregean distinction between pragmatic force and semantic content. Another strand of pragmatism concerns the relations between these two dimensions of discursive intentionality.

For it is also a basic pragmatist idea that pragmatics, as the study of the practical *use* of expressions, or the relation of intentional states to what one goes on to do, should have a certain sort of explanatory pride of place over the theory of content: that *semantics* should answer to pragmatics. The pragmatist approach to the

relations between force and content insists that the *point* of talking about meaning or content at all is the help doing so can offer to the principal enterprise of understanding what we do: proprieties normatively governing the use of expressions and the role of intentional states in providing the reasons according to which actions are normatively assessed. The conceptual, paradigmatically propositional, contents expressed by declarative sentences and invoked to specify the contents of discursive intentional states such as judgments, beliefs, and intentions are construed as theoretical auxiliaries, postulated to explain normative features of the use of sentences and the actions made intelligible by appeal to intentional states. Commitment to such an order of explanation is visible already in Kant's story, which starts with his account of what one is committing oneself to doing in judging (integrating the judgment into a larger constellation of commitments that exhibits the rational unity distinctive of apperception), and reads off of that an understanding of what sorts of judgeable contents judgments must be taken to possess in order to play their role in that process: namely contents that stand in relations of material consequence and incompatibility determining what is a reason for and against what. The same sort of envisaged order of explanation evidently animates Peirce's tradition-defining proposal to understand the meaning of a claim as consisting in "the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of" it (Peirce 1992 and 1999; Volume 2, p. 346).

At the methodological metalevel, pragmatism about the relations between semantics and pragmatics seeks to understand sayable, thinkable, judgeable contents (what Frege called "thoughts") in terms of what one is *doing* in asserting, thinking, judging, or treating believings as premises in reasoning, including practical reasoning about what to do. Pragmatism in this sense is a kind of functionalism about meaning or content. Within the properly pragmatist tradition, downstream from Kant's insight into the normativity of intentionality, it must take the form of a normative functionalism rather than a causal or dispositional functionalism. The system that is thought of as instituting roles and conferring meanings or contents can be taken to be an individual agent, whose intentional states are intelligible as contentful in virtue of the role they play in rationalizing (making appropriate) its behavior. Or the functional system can be taken to be a communal constellation of social discursive practices that confers meaning on performances and utterances subject to assessment according to its implicit norms, as Hegel and Dewey do. It seems clear that Wittgenstein, too, has a social practical understanding of the normativity of intentionality. One of his paradigms of practical (not yet discursive) intentionality is the sign-post. "Considered just as a piece of wood," it is devoid of this sort of

practical significance or meaning. It is only when considered in terms of the role it plays in “customs, uses, institutions,” that it is intelligible as having the significance of pointing in a direction, a significance that can be correctly or incorrectly followed. And like the classical pragmatists, he thinks this sort of practical significance is best to be understood in terms of the practical selectional processes of *learning* how to respond correctly to the sign–post: the way novices acquire the know–how to distinguish in practice correct from incorrect responses.

In keeping with fundamental pragmatism, Wittgenstein seems to think that if we can just get clear about how the normativity of this sort of practical intentionality arises naturally in the context of social practices, we will no longer be puzzled by its discursive variety. Discursive intentionality is to be demystified by exhibiting it as a species of practical intentionality. The strategy is first to demystify the normativity of practical intentionality in terms of social practices —the “customs (uses, institutions)” of *PI* §199 referred to above— and then to demystify discursive intentionality by exhibiting it as continuous with, or a species of, this sort of practical intentionality.

## § 2. Strains of Semantic Nihilism

I take it that the two principal metaconceptual axes of pragmatism are those I have introduced so far: fundamental pragmatism about the relations between practical and discursive intentionality at the level of pragmatics and methodological semantic pragmatism concerning the relations between pragmatics and semantics. There is every reason to see Wittgenstein as enlisted in the pragmatist camp as far as the first strand of pragmatist thought is concerned. If we ask further whether, within the scope of his recognition of the normativity of intentionality and his adoption of some sort of fundamental pragmatist strategy for understanding the relations between practical and discursive intentionality, Wittgenstein also endorses pragmatism about the relations between the pragmatics and semantics of discursive intentionality, the response must acknowledge a further complication. He does, I think, take it that all there is to confer semantic content on linguistic performances (and thereby also on the discursive intentional states they express) is their use, in the sense of the proprieties implicit in the discursive practices of producing and assessing such performances. And I take it he also thinks that the point of talking about propositional, conceptual, or other semantic content could only be that postulating such theoretical entities helps us to understand, or at least to codify those proprieties of use. For all that it is common to attribute to the later Wittgenstein a “use theory of meaning,” his actual view seems to be rather that we should give up the notion of meaning in favor of that of use. He does not actually say “Meaning is use.” What he

says is things like “Don’t look to the meaning, look to the use,” and “Let the use of words teach you their meaning.” If, as I have been doing, we use “pragmatics” in a broad sense to indicate the study of the *use* of expressions (Fregean “force” [Kraft]), and “semantics” to indicate the study of the *meaning* of expressions (Fregean “content” [Inhalt]) then it is not clear that Wittgenstein regards semantics as a legitimate enterprise. He seems to think that everything philosophers need or should want in order to understand discursive intentionality is available directly at the level of pragmatics, without the need to drill down theoretically to discern a deeper semantic level of explanation.

Wittgenstein apparently both understands meanings as theoretical entities postulated to explain use and thinks that any explanatory enterprise invoking such theoretical entities is broken-backed. He takes it that pragmatism is methodologically correct about the explanatory task meanings are postulated to perform —namely accounting for proprieties of use— but he does not endorse the semantic explanatory strategy that methodological insight invites. He thinks of the methodological point rather as telling us why we should *not* engage in semantic theorizing<sup>4</sup>. Like Quine, he thinks that we should give up the concept of meaning as something that can be the object of scientific theorizing about the use of linguistic expressions. Unlike Quine, he does not think that a retreat to a replacement semantic theory appealing instead to extensional metaconcepts of reference and truth conditions has any prospects of being more responsive to the underlying difficulty with theories of meaning. His skepticism about the possibility of improving our understanding of discursive practices by engaging in semantic theorizing is both more deep-rooted and more all-encompassing. It amounts to a through-going semantic nihilism.

In the rest of this paper I want to consider what reasons Wittgenstein has to adopt this radical anti-semantic view. I find two quite different lines of thought that Wittgenstein apparently endorses that could be called on to justify this attitude. The more familiar of them seems to me to be wrong-headed, depending on drawing a hasty and ill-considered conclusion from a sensible rejection of scientism in philosophy. The less familiar line of thought depends on a controversial but defensible and suggestive view about a central structural feature that distinguishes discursive practices from other social practices. It offers a much better rationale for

<sup>4</sup> To adapt some Dummettian terminology, the claim is that Wittgenstein accepts a pragmatist general theory of meaning —that is, an account of what meaning consists in— but takes it that when it is properly understood that theory of meaning precludes the formulation of particular pragmatist semantic meaning theories.

in-principle skepticism about the semantic theoretical enterprise. Considerations bearing on the two different sorts of argument often appear side by side in Wittgenstein's text, so it is important to disentangle them so that their merits can be separately assessed.

Doing so is particularly important for me, since I have long been skeptical about Wittgenstein's semantic skepticism. I have been inclined to respond to the sage advice he offers not to assume that all uses of declarative sentences are in the fact-stating line of work (he doesn't think "I am in pain," is, for instance) or that all uses of singular terms should be understood as purporting to refer to particular objects ("the beetle in my box," for instance) by rebuking him for not going on to tell us what distinguishes those uses of declarative sentences that *are* in the fact-stating line of work from the rest, and what distinguishes those uses of singular terms that *do* purport to refer to particular objects. That is, I have been inclined to fault Wittgenstein for not offering a systematic theory of the core work-day practices of using sentences and terms in asserting and referring that he distinguishes from the peripheral and parasitic uses where language has "gone on holiday." One of my principal concerns in *Making It Explicit* and *Between Saying and Doing* has been to offer such accounts, by developing pragmatist semantic theories that fall under the Wittgenstein-inspired rubric of "use theories of meaning."

My way of developing Kant's and Wittgenstein's insight into the normativity of intentionality in the context of fundamental pragmatism about the relations between practical and discursive intentionality and methodological semantic functionalism about the relations between pragmatics and semantics within discursive intentionality has been to articulate a *rationalist* version of pragmatism about discursive intentionality. Rather than the continuity Dewey and Wittgenstein see between discursive and nondiscursive practices and abilities, I take there to be a bright line distinguishing them. What makes something a specifically *linguistic* practice is that some performances are implicitly accorded the significance of *assertings* or *claimings*. These are by definition performances that can both serve as and stand in need of *reasons*, entitling their performers to the commitments they undertake by asserting. Playing this pragmatic role as reasons for and against other claimables means that the contents asserted (judged, believed) are *inferentially* articulated, standing in relations of material consequence (implication) and incompatibility, as premises and conclusions. This is what it is for those claimables *semantically* to take the form of propositional (hence conceptual) contents. And that is what makes the expressions themselves visible *syntactically* as having the form of declarative sentences. Asserting and inferring are accordingly understood as two

sides of one coin, two features that must be displayed by any practice that includes giving and asking for reasons –which is to say, on this rationalistic line, any specifically *discursive* practice.

Practices that include the giving and asking for reasons, practices that consist in the undertaking and attributing of propositionally contentful commitments whose entitlements are always in principle in question, are qualitatively different from the more basic practices from which they arise. Once this line has been crossed, once one can explicitly say and think that things are thus–and–so, a whole new world of practical possibilities opens up. It makes possible, for instance, a distinctive kind of pragmatic and semantic self–consciousness, in which through the use of logical vocabulary such as conditionals and propositional–attitude–ascribing locutions one makes explicit essential features that otherwise remain implicit in the practice of giving and asking for reasons. On this account, by contrast to Wittgenstein's picture, language *does* have a “downtown,” a core around which all of its suburbs grow and on which all of them depend.

From this point of view, one should be wary of Wittgenstein's extremely relaxed use of the term “*Sprachspiel*.” The “slab” practice described in the opening paragraphs of *PI* shows up from the linguistic rationalist version of pragmatism as only a *vocal*, but not a truly *verbal* practice. What Wittgenstein carefully refers to as “calls” ([Ruf]) are not properly understood as imperatives. They are utterances that are appropriately responded to by doing one sort of thing rather than another. But to be *commands*, the claim would be, they must do so by explicitly *saying* what it is one is to do. And one cannot in this sense *say* “Bring a slab,” unless one can *also say* “This is a slab.” (Commanding “Shut the door,” is intelligible only in the context of a practice in which one can also say “The door is shut.”) That requires the iron triangle of the speech act of asserting *that* things are thus–and–so (on the side of pragmatics), the use of declarative sentences (on the side of syntax), and the propositional content asserted (on the side of semantics).

Another feature of Wittgenstein's practice that clashes with a rationalist or inferentialist pragmatism is his use of “rule” [Regel] to talk about the norms that are implicit in various practices. For rules are just what you get when you make such norms *explicit*, in the form of sentences, things one can *say*. And it is clearly one of Wittgenstein's basic lessons (an essential aspect of his fundamental pragmatism) that normativity in this explicit form must be understood to rest on and arise out of a more basic stratum of normativity that is implicit in practices (“customs, uses, institutions”).

Wittgenstein's gradualist version of fundamental pragmatism denies qualitative

differences between the most basic sort of practical intentionality exhibited already by nonlinguistic animals and the most sophisticated kinds of discursive intentionality —what Sellars in the final sentence of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* describes as the subtle and polydimensional discourse of the drawing room, the laboratory, and the study, the language of Henry and William James, of Einstein and of the philosophers who, in their efforts to break out of discourse to an *arché* beyond discourse, have provided the most curious dimension of all.

In this respect Wittgenstein's pragmatism is united with classical pragmatism against the rationalist linguistic pragmatism I espouse. In effect, like Dewey, he does not find any use for the distinction I have been employing between specifically *discursive* intentionality (sapience, apperception, characterized by *propositionally* contentful states and expressions) and *practical* intentionality of the sort exhibited by nondiscursive creatures more generally. His toy "Sprachspiele" typically, and purposefully, occupy an ambiguous middle ground. He does not see a bright line to be drawn here. But insisting on continuities of this sort does not by itself preclude engaging in pursuing a functionalist approach to semantics in a pragmatist spirit. One strain of Wittgenstein's thought that does support this stronger conclusion is his official resistance to offering, or describing what he is doing as offering, any philosophical *theories* at all, whether specifically *semantic* ones or not. That is, besides any doubts one might have about pursuing semantics, rather than being content with pragmatics, there is the fact that methodological pragmatism about semantics address the nature and rationale of semantic *theorizing*. And Wittgenstein seems hostile to the very idea of *theories* in philosophy. This is what Crispin Wright has called LW's "theoretical quietism."

Throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein works with a distinction between *describing* and *explaining*. He is concerned to insist that what philosophers ought to do is describe, not explain.

It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones.... And **we may not advance any kind of theory**. There must not be anything **hypothetical** in our considerations. **We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place**. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, **not empirical** problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known (*PI* §109 —emphasis added).

Here explanation, theorizing, science, and empirical problems are lined up together

and contrasted with description and rearrangement of familiar facts or phenomena as what is proper to philosophical inquiry. A cognate trope diagnoses the urge to misunderstand philosophical issues as rooted in the fact that “We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena,” (*PI* §90) to dig down to “an essence that is hidden from us” (*PI* §92). We tend to think: “But the words, significantly uttered, have after all not only a surface, but also the dimension of depth!” (*PI* §594), where what we are looking for in fact is to be found just in the proper description or arrangement of what already lies on the surface. We need not and should not try to look beyond the way linguistic expressions are used.

Here is one line of thought that might be invoked to justify the rejection of explanation in favor of description, the spurning of the idea of digging below the surface of phenomena to some deeper, underlying essence. One idea that seems to have been a constant throughout Wittgenstein’s philosophical development is the conviction that, as he puts it in the *Tractatus*: “Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences” (4.111). Failure to appreciate this is an objectionable kind of *scientism* about philosophy. Rejecting the idea that philosophical problems are empirical ones, that philosophers should seek to explain things, that they should offer philosophical theories, are all to be understood as consequences of rejecting philosophical scientism. These consequences follow if one identifies science, in the science/philosophy contrast, with the method of postulating unobservable theoretical entities in order to explain observable phenomena. What is observable, what is available to be described, shows up as the surface. Explanation of those phenomena is by appeal to what is deeper, in the sense of not observable, not available to mere description of phenomena—that is, to theoretically hypothesized entities.

The thought is that the project of looking beyond or behind descriptions of the use of language (pragmatics) to explain those implicit practical proprieties by postulating meanings as theoretical entities (semantics) is assimilating philosophy to empirical natural sciences. Meanings are unobservable, theoretically postulated entities that stand to observable linguistic behavior as theoretically postulated molecules stand to the observable temperature, pressure, and volume properties of gases. As such, they are illegitimate for philosophical purposes. Only if one failed to appreciate that philosophy is not one of the natural sciences would one engage in theoretical postulation of this sort of hypothetical, because unobservable, entity.

Sometimes Wittgenstein allows a kind of philosophical explanation, in the sense of reminding us of observable, describable features of use that it is illuminating to be reminded of. It is distinguished from explanation in the objectionable sense precisely

because and insofar as it remains on the surface, appealing only to what is observable in the use of expressions.

In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shews that I can adduce only **exterior facts about language**. Yes, but then how can these explanations satisfy us? —Well, your very questions were framed in this language; they had to be expressed in this language, if there was anything to ask! And your scruples are misunderstandings. Your questions refer to words; so I have to talk about words. You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and **you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word**. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use) (*PI* §120 —emphasis added).

The “exterior facts about language” are “exterior” precisely in being on the observable, describable “surface.” Wittgenstein’s interlocutor here expresses that desire to penetrate to further, unobservable depths that Wittgenstein has elsewhere diagnosed as the source of philosophical misunderstandings. What there is is the use of words. Thinking of meanings as like words is thinking of them as entities. They are different from words in that they are *postulated*, merely *hypothetical* or *theoretical* entities. This is the status Wittgenstein is objecting to. To think of money as something standing behind its use, as a kind of value that is expressed in the use of money is to fetishize it, to reify it. It just is its use. To be sure, there is a difference between a mere piece of paper and money —and the difference is the use. (Compare: the sign-post considered just as a piece of wood.)

"But the words, significantly uttered, have after all not only a surface, but also the dimension of depth!" After all, it just is the case that something different takes place when they are uttered significantly from when they are merely uttered. (*PI* §594)

There is a difference between a noise and the use of a word. The latter is meaningful. But that is to say: it is used. To postulate meanings as entities to be appealed to in explaining those proprieties of use is to address a philosophical question with the postulational explanatory tools of the empirical sciences.

I do think this line of thought is present in Wittgenstein’s text. But I do not think it is what ultimately justifies his semantic nihilism, his principled skepticism about the possibility of semantic theorizing. It is good that that conclusion does not rest principally on this argument, because I take it that the argument from scientism is a bad argument. It overlooks substantial differences between the empirical theories of the natural sciences and philosophical semantic theories. And it mislocates the

difficulties and challenges of the latter. Further, this dubious line of thought is interwoven with another, much weightier set of considerations. Understanding either strand of thought requires disentangling them.

The principal objection to the first line of thought is that a proper rejection of scientism about philosophy—that is, acceptance of the claim that philosophy is not an empirical natural science—does not require or support the methodological prohibition of appealing to hypothesized or postulated theoretical entities in philosophical accounts of discursive practice. Such a prohibition amounts to precluding semantics by enforcing *instrumentalism* in discursive pragmatics. And instrumentalism is no better a doctrine applied to our understanding of linguistic practice than it is for our understanding of other phenomena. Sellars makes this point in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* to begin with by distinguishing between “logical” and “philosophical” behaviorism. The two agree that the point of using mentalistic or psychological vocabulary is ultimately to make sense of the behavior of intelligent creatures: ultimately, knowers and agents. By “logical behaviorism” he has in mind the sort of Wittgenstein-inspired view Ryle develops in *The Concept of Mind*. On such a conception, not only is the target of mentalistic explanations behavior describable in non- or pre-mentalistic vocabulary, but every item appealed to in such explanations must be explicitly definable also in terms of logical constructions from items specifiable in such non- or pre-mentalistic vocabularies. The principal tool Ryle appeals to in such definitions or constructions is, of course, dispositions to behavior, codified in subjunctively robust conditionals and other alethic modal constructions.

“Philosophical behaviorism,” by contrast, exploits the analogy: Behavioral vocabulary stands to mentalistic or psychological vocabulary as observational vocabulary stands to theoretical vocabulary. One should no more insist on being able to define, reduce, or construct mentalistic or psychological vocabulary in behaviorist terms than one should insist in general on being able to define, reduce, or construct theoretical vocabulary in purely observational terms—and for the same reason. Sellars’s “Myth of Jones” (the constructive myth of the second half of *EPM*, paralleling the diagnostic “Myth of the Given” of the first half) offers an account of the “grammar” of thought—and sensation-talk as intelligible as introduced initially to explain discursive abilities. Although Wittgenstein is never explicitly mentioned, it seems clear that at least some of his remarks—the ones that gave aid and comfort to Ryle—are in the target area of the claim that philosophical behaviorism, with its invocation of theoretical entities not definable in behavioristic terms, is all the behaviorism philosophers need or should want.

Sellars buttresses this diagnosis with an account of the mistake he takes to be the

basis for imposing the methodological strictures of logical behaviorism rather than indulging in the latitudinarian postulational method of philosophical behaviorism. It is the mistake made by instrumentalists, as opposed to realists about theoretical entities. That mistake is to think of the difference between observable and theoretically postulated entities as an *ontological* difference: a difference between two different kinds of things. On this view, what is observable is solid, substantial, and real, while what is merely hypothesized or postulated is abstract, the product of conjecture, imagination, or whimsy. The difference in question is that between a castle whose walls will actually shield one from one's enemies and a castle in the air one merely dreams about. For the instrumentalist there is at least a genuine general question as to whether one should believe in the existence or reality of such things at all. In fact, Sellars argues, the distinction between observable and theoretical entities is not an ontological one at all. It is a methodological or epistemological difference. Theoretical entities are not a kind of thing. They are things that are known in a certain way. One way of knowing about things is inferential: drawing conclusions about them from other premises. Another is noninferential: by immediate observation. Observable things can be known about both ways. (It is part of the dismantling of the Myth of the Given to argue that the idea of something that can in principle *only* be known about *non*-inferentially, through observation, is a radical mistake.) We can draw conclusions about the (paradigmatically observable) shapes and colors of things—for instance from other, directly observed states of affairs. Purely theoretical objects and properties, by contrast, are those that are *only* knowable inferentially. Theoretical expressions do not have noninferential, observational uses.

One argument for the conclusion that this difference is methodological and not ontological is that the line between what can be observed and what we only have inferential access to is relative to a given stage in the development of our practices, and can change as those practices evolve. When the dwarf planet Pluto in the Kuiper belt was first thought about, our only epistemic access to it was inferential, by drawing conclusions from perturbations in the orbit of Neptune. It was at that point a purely theoretical object. When in 1930 Clyde Tombaugh first accurately aimed a sufficiently powerful telescope at the region of space the dwarf planet was hypothesized to occupy, it changed status from purely theoretically to observable. This was the “discovery” of Pluto. But the object didn't change. Only its relation to us did. What we could only find out about by one means became something we could also find out about in another way. Just so, in Sellars's Myth of Jones, thoughts and sensations, first postulated theoretically to explain regularities of behavior, become something those who have them can report noninferentially. Rorty then completes

this just-so story about the origin of the Cartesian mind (in a way Wittgenstein would surely have applauded) by describing how a shift in social practices of attributing authority to the reporting performances of the subjects of thoughts could engender the incorrigibility of such reports —not because of their privileged ontological status, but because of a change in the social practices that institute their normative status as authoritative in the face of various sorts of challenge. His “eliminative materialism” thought experiment considers the possibility that, having gained Cartesian minds as regions of incorrigibility by one shift in social practice, we should lose those minds by another such shift.

For many years Michael Dummett championed specifically semantic instrumentalism, under the banner of “anti-realism.” He started from the idea that meaning and understanding are co-ordinate concepts. Meanings are, in the first instance, what one understands. Grasp of meaning is a kind of understanding. Conjoining this with the Wittgensteinian thought that understanding must be practically manifestable as some sort of ability, he concludes that it is illegitimate for a theory of meaning to appeal to any items that cannot be defined in terms of their behavioral manifestations. The good thought is the idea, cognate to that common to logical and philosophical behaviorism, that the point of invoking meanings is to explain (proprieties of) the use of linguistic expressions. But that good thought does not, as Dummett thought, preclude explanations that appeal to items not definable in terms of the linguistic behavior they are invoked to explain. That is, it does not preclude the invocation of meanings as only inferable from specifications of linguistic behavior in a nonsemantic vocabulary, rather than definable without remainder in such a vocabulary. It does not require jettisoning the idea of truth-conditions in favor of assertibility conditions, or reference in favor of recognition conditions. There are constraints imposed by understanding truth-conditions and reference as theoretical postulates invoked to explain, for instance, the norms that practically govern fact-stating assertions of sentences and object-recognizing uses of singular terms. But those methodological norms are not so restrictive as to forbid the semantic notions appealed to inferentially outrunning what is observable at the level of non-semantically described linguistic behavior.

Quick as this rehearsal of considerations is, I hope it is clear that it sketches a colorable argument against semantic instrumentalism. But does it just amount to a flat-out denial of Wittgenstein’s claim that philosophy —at least insofar as philosophizing might include semantic theorizing (or, in Sellars’s case, theorizing in the philosophy of mind)— is not a natural or empirical science? Doesn’t it just identify philosophical explanation with scientific explanation? No. For Wittgenstein’s

problematic (and Sellars's, too) is framed by the Kant's insight into the fundamentally *normative* character of intentionality. What is to be explained (or illuminated theoretically) is *proprieties* of discursive practice —not in the first instance empirical regularities or dispositions to linguistic behavior, but how it would be *correct* to use expressions, how they *ought* to be used. Regularities and dispositions come into the story only insofar as they affect or are affected by the semantogenic norms implicit in discursive practice. The fact that the discursive practice addressed by philosophical explanations, including those that postulate purely theoretical entities such as meanings or propositional contents, are to be described in an essentially *normative* vocabulary enforces a major, principled distinction between this sort of theoretical explanation and those pursued by natural sciences. Indeed, in this connection, the Kantian distinction between the normative and the natural is the one most relevant to demarcating the natural sciences by their objects. It is because Wittgensteinian “grammar,” in its widest and most elastic sense, is an inquiry aimed at explaining normative phenomena that it is not a natural science. (Think in this connection of Wittgenstein's remarks in *PI* §81 about Ramsey's characterization of logic as a “normative science.”)

The upshot of this argument is that rejecting scientism about philosophy — resisting the assimilation of philosophical theorizing to empirical theorizing in the natural sciences— does not provide good reasons for counting theoretical postulation of merely inferentially accessible episodes and processes as illegitimate in engendering specifically philosophical understanding. Philosophical explanation and theorizing should not be ruled out on these grounds. Is there then no point to Wittgenstein's privileging of description over explanation, his advice to stay at the observable surface rather than trying to delve theoretically into what lies hidden below that surface, in addressing potentially puzzling features of discursive practices? Is this line of thought simply mistaken? I do not think it is. For there is another set of considerations that supports a version of this methodological stricture.

### § 3. A Better Argument: Linguistic Practice as Dynamic and Self-Transforming

I take it that Wittgenstein also takes the home language game of the concept of meaning to be explanation of how expressions are correctly *used*. And he is profoundly skeptical about the utility or applicability of the model of postulation, explanation, and theoretical systematization in the case of discursive practices — about the possibility of systematically *deriving* aspects of correct use from assigned meanings. Seen from this perspective, the idea of the classical project of analysis is to

codify, using logical vocabulary, the meanings expressed by one vocabulary —from which we are to derive proprieties of its use— from the meanings expressed by some *other* vocabulary —from which we can derive proprieties of *its* use. One idea, I think, is that this enterprise makes sense only if we think of the uses as species of a genus —of them all being the same general *kind* of use, say describing, stating facts, or representing states of affairs. This may seem plausible if we focus on a very restricted set of uses —just as, in the case of tools, we might be impressed to notice that nails and hammer, screws and screwdriver, glue and brush all have the function of attaching more—or—less flat things to one another. So we can think of declarative sentences as stating empirical, physical, normative, modal, and intentional facts, making *claims* about such states of affairs (even if we then find ourselves metaphysically puzzled about the nature of the fact—kinds to which we have thereby committed ourselves). But if we think of the uses as *very* different, if we think also about the carpenter's level, pencil, and tool—belt, if we think of linguistic practice as a *motley*, of uses as not coming in a simple, or systematic, or even determinate variety, then the very idea that there is such a thing as *meanings* that permit the *systematic* codification of proprieties of quite disparate kinds of use —even with liberal use of logical elaboration of the meanings— becomes contentious and in need of justification both in general and in each particular case.

More specifically, Wittgenstein uses the image of “family resemblances” to urge that the *kinds* into which linguistic practices and the vocabularies caught up in them are functionally sorted —what belong together in boxes labeled ‘game’, ‘name’, ‘description’, ‘assertion’, ‘observation’ and so on— do not typically admit of specification in terms of underlying principles specifiable in other vocabularies, whether by genus and differentia(e) or any other kind of explicit rule or definition. Here is one passage in which Wittgenstein asserts the connection between the image of family resemblances and the demand to stay on the descriptive surface rather than seeking to penetrate to further explanatory:

In case (162) the meaning of the word "to derive" stood out clearly. But we told ourselves that this was only a quite special case of deriving; deriving in a quite special garb, which had to be stripped from it if we wanted to see the essence of deriving. So we stripped those particular coverings off; but then deriving itself disappeared. —In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of its leaves. For certainly (162) was a special case of deriving; what is essential to deriving, however, was not hidden beneath the surface of this case, but this 'surface' was one case out of the family of cases of deriving.

And in the same way we also use the word "to read" for a family of cases. And in different circumstances we apply different criteria for a person's reading (*PI* §164).

The attempt to strip off contingent, adventitious details of one particular sort of case to penetrate to a general essence common to all yields nothing recognizable as determinately contentful. All we can do is observe the relations among a variety of cases, related like the overlapping strands making up a rope. It is easy to understand this line of thought as entailing a straightforward denial of the possibility of semantic analysis in the classical sense. But we might notice that this consideration, at least, does not speak against treating some subset of the familiarly related cases as paradigmatic, as defining a model to which other cases can then be related by a commentary pointing out respects of similarity and difference.

I think that one thought underlying these observations about the unsystematic, unsurveyable variety of kinds of uses of expressions and about the uncodifiable character of those kinds concerns the essentially *dynamic* character of linguistic practice. I take it that Wittgenstein thinks that an absolutely fundamental discursive phenomenon is the way in which the abilities required to deploy one vocabulary can be practically *extended*, elaborated, or developed so as to constitute the ability to deploy some further vocabulary, or to deploy the old vocabulary in quite different ways. Many of his thought-experiments concern this sort of process of *pragmatic projection* of one practice into another. We are asked to imagine a community that uses proper names only for people, but then extends the practice to include rivers. There is no guarantee that interlocutors can master the extended practice, building on what they can already do. But if they can, then they will have changed the only ‘essence’ proper-name usage could be taken to have had<sup>5</sup>. In the old practice it always made sense to ask for the identity of the *mother* and *father* of the named item; in the new practice, that question is often senseless. Again, we are asked to imagine a community that talked about having gold or silver in one’s teeth, and extends that practice to talk about having pain in one’s teeth. If as a matter of contingent fact the practitioners can learn to use the expression ‘in’ in the new way, building on but adapting the old, they will have fundamentally changed the “meaning” of “in”. In the old practice it made sense to ask where the gold was *before* it was in one’s tooth; in the new practice asking where the pain was before it was in the tooth can lead only to a distinctively *philosophical* kind of puzzlement<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Quine’s remark (in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”): “Meaning is what essence becomes when it is detached from the thing and attached to the word.”

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted for this way of thinking of Wittgenstein’s point to Hans Julius Schneider’s penetrating discussion in *Wittgenstein’s Later Theory of Meaning: Imagination and Calculation* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

At every stage, what practical extensions of a given practice are possible for the practitioners can turn on features of their embodiment, lives, environment, and history that are contingent and wholly particular to them. And which of those developments actually took place, and in what order can turn on any obscure fact. The reason vocabulary—kinds resist specification by rules, principles, definitions, or meanings expressed in other vocabularies is that they are the current time—slices of processes of development of practices that have this dynamic character—and that is why the collection of uses that is the current cumulative and collective result of such developments—by—practical—projection is a motley<sup>7</sup>. If that is right, then any codification or theoretical systematization of the uses of those vocabulary—kinds by associating with them meanings that determine which uses are correct will, if at all successful, be successful only contingently, locally, and temporarily. Semantics on this view is an inherently Procrustean enterprise, which can proceed only by *theoretically* privileging some aspects of the use of a vocabulary that are not at all *practically* privileged, and spawning philosophical puzzlement about the intelligibility of the rest. On this conception, the classical project of semantic theory is a disease that rests on a fundamental, if perennial, misunderstanding—one that can be removed or ameliorated only by heeding the advice to replace concern with *meaning* by concern with *use*. The recommended philosophical attitude to discursive practice is accordingly *descriptive particularism*, *theoretical quietism*, and *semantic pessimism*.

I think there is real force to this diagnosis. I suggested above that Kant's and Wittgenstein's insight into the essentially normative character of intentionality and discursive practice already makes room for a substantial distinction between natural scientific theories and explanations, on the one hand, and philosophical semantic theories and explanations on the other. Now we see Wittgenstein emphasizing another feature that distinguishes the discursive phenomena that are the object of such philosophical theorizing and explaining. A characteristic distinguishing feature of linguistic practices is their protean character, their plasticity and malleability, the way in which language constantly overflows itself, so that any established pattern of usage is immediately built on, developed, and transformed. The very act of using linguistic expressions or applying concepts transforms the content of those expressions or concepts. The way in which discursive norms incorporate and are transformed by novel contingencies arising from their usage is not itself a contingent, but a necessary feature of the practices in which they are implicit.

<sup>7</sup> A patient and detailed investigation of the mechanisms of this phenomenon in basic descriptive and scientific concepts, and an extended argument for its ubiquity can be found in Mark Wilson's exciting and original *Wandering Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

It is easy to see why one would see the whole enterprise of semantic theorizing as wrong-headed if one thinks that, insofar as language has an essence, that essence consists in its restless self-transformation (not coincidentally reminiscent of Nietzsche's "self-overcoming"). Any theoretical postulation of common meanings associated with expression types that has the goal of systematically deriving all the various proprieties of the use of those expressions according to uniform principles will be seen as itself inevitably doomed to immediate obsolescence as the elusive target practices overflow and evolve beyond those captured by what can only be a still, dead snapshot of a living, growing, moving process. It is an appreciation of this distinctive feature of discursive practice that should be seen as standing behind Wittgenstein's pessimism about the feasibility and advisability of philosophers engaging in semantic theorizing —not a bad instrumentalist conclusion drawn from commitment to a well-taken anti-scientism about philosophy.

And the idea that the most basic linguistic know-how is not mastery of proprieties of use that can be expressed once and for all in a fixed set of rules, but the capacity to stay afloat and find and make one's way on the surface of the raging white-water river of discursive communal practice that we always find ourselves having been thrown into (Wittgensteinian *Geworfenheit*) is itself a pragmatist insight. It is one that Dewey endorses and applauds. And it is a pragmatist thought that owes more to Hegel than it does to Kant. For Hegel builds his metaphysics and logic around the notion of determinate negation because he takes the normative obligation to *do* something to resolve the conflict that occurs when the result of our properly applying the concepts we have to new situations is that we (he thinks, inevitably) find ourselves with materially incompatible commitments to be the motor that drives the unceasing further determination and evolution of our concepts and their contents. The process of applying conceptual norms in judgment and intentional action is the very same process that institutes, determines, and transforms those conceptual norms.

#### § 4. Conclusion

At this point, having sketched what I take to be a fundamental Wittgensteinian pragmatist insight, I want to close by registering a *caveat* —anticlimactic and even churlish though the gesture might be. It seems to me that one can and should both take on board that insight into the protean character of discursive practice and still engage in the enterprise of trying to give systematic theoretical shape to at least such broad categories of the use of linguistic expressions as asserting, inferring, describing, and referring. Because they are so broad and general, the perennial possibility of the

eruption of new species need not disrupt the understanding we get of these activities by looking to core cases and providing local commentaries on those general models.

A significant impetus for Wittgenstein's later philosophy is recoil from the stresses on the Tractarian representationalist picture of facts as arrangements of objects that occurs when one is obliged to contort that model by postulating new, ever more outré sorts of facts to be expressed by declarative sentences whose principal uses are not easily assimilated to ordinary empirical description. One axial achievement of the *Tractatus* is its provision of a quite different, nondescriptive model of the function of specifically *logical* vocabulary. This avoided the embarrassment of Russellian logical atomism's attempt to understand negative and conditional facts on the model of arrangements of objects. But Wittgenstein came to see that the representational understanding of the assertion of declarative sentence use in terms of the description of facts about objects requires not only distinctive kinds of color facts, but legal facts, culinary facts, nautical facts, and so on — metaphysically different kinds of fact corresponding to every distinct sort of vocabulary capable of framing declarative sentences. More metaphysically puzzling are general facts, dispositional facts, probabilistic facts, semantic facts, intentional facts, normative facts, and fictional facts. Construing them on the representationalist model of arrangements of objects requires not only contortions of the notion of arrangement, but perhaps more fundamentally that of object. Hewing to this picture requires postulating exotic kinds of objects to go with singular terms that have quite different uses: universals, merely possible objects, probabilities, propositions, norms or values, and fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes's maternal grandmother. Small wonder Wittgenstein urges us to jettison the restrictive representational model that obliges us to engage in such extravagant metaphysical extrapolations. We should reject assimilating all uses of declarative sentences to descriptive fact-stating, and reject assimilating all uses of singular terms to purporting to refer to objects.

Fair enough. But it is a long way from rejecting *this* general model and *its* postulations —now that we have seen the strains involved in applying it in discursive regions well removed from the ordinary empirical descriptions ("The frog is on the log,") that motivated the representationalist picture— to rejecting theoretical postulation in the service of generalization about discursive practice *tout court*. We can still try to say something illuminating about what is distinctive of the core cases where declarative sentences *do* have the job of description or fact-stating, and singular terms *do* purport to pick out unique objects. It is a legitimate response to Wittgenstein's considerations to develop an alternative model to the representationalist one whose expressive limits he has led us to appreciate. We may

do so in full understanding and expectation that the second model, like the first, will work reasonably well only for some regions of our practice, and will turn out to be of less and less help as we move farther away from the practices that provide its paradigm. But understanding can advance also by stitching together patchworks out of such locally helpful theories. (Mark Wilson’s *Wandering Significance*, mentioned above, argues that such patchworks are an absolutely crucial form of conceptual understanding.) We understand discursive practice best by seeing which bits are best understood on one model and which on another. The aim of producing further frameworks should not be thought of as finding one that will do once and for all, everywhere. Illumination proceeds from taking many theoretical paths through the woods, and coming to appreciate which features of which phenomena stand out most clearly from which vantage-points. The counsel of wisdom here is experimental, irenic, and pluralistic: let a hundred theories blossom, let a thousand postulated entities contend. Most of what is wrong with systematic philosophical theorizing is a function of its being pursued in a Procrustean manner<sup>8</sup>. We blind ourselves if we take what is not smoothly reconstructable in our favored theoretical terms to be for that reason somehow illegitimate, rather than just learning a useful fact about what is and is not helpfully addressed in those terms<sup>9</sup>.

More specifically, the theoretical path forward that I have been recommending we try next in response to Wittgenstein’s insights, both early and late, includes the following leading ideas. First, in keeping with the underlying Kant–Wittgenstein insight into the normativity of intentionality, to try to regiment a normative theoretical vocabulary for characterizing the use of linguistic expressions. I have proposed thinking of pragmatics in terms of the *commitments* interlocutors undertake, paradigmatically by making claims or assertions, and how *entitlements* to those commitments can be secured, paradigmatically by giving reasons for them. The goal is to understand the practical discursive know-how that is mastery of the use of an expression in terms of the ability practically to distinguish what someone (perhaps

<sup>8</sup> In the *Afterword to Between Saying and Doing* I discuss further the sort of illumination one can gather from constructing alternative metaphysical idioms that aim at theoretically regimented sayings of everything that can be said.

<sup>9</sup> In a classic paper, Sellars sets the goal of clearing room for a view that goes beyond what he refers to as “descriptivism” or “factualism”, a view that sees all claims as “empirical” in a narrow sense. He says: “[O]nce the tautology ‘The world is described by descriptive concepts’ is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*.” (Sellars, 1958).

oneself) would be committing herself to by asserting it and what would entitle one (or preclude entitlement) to those commitments. The second idea is to use inference rather than representation as the principal semantic metaconcept, when theoretically postulating contents whose practical grasp manifests itself in the normative scorekeeping abilities specified in the pragmatics. Conceptual contents are to be understood in terms of consequential and incompatibility relations among commitments and entitlements. The inferential practices (and the implication relations governing them) are understood to be what Sellars calls “material” inferences and implications. These articulate the nonlogical contents expressed by the use of various substantive vocabularies: color vocabularies, legal vocabularies, culinary vocabularies, nautical vocabularies, and so on. (The distinctive conceptual roles played by subsentential expression–kinds such as singular terms and predicates is then adumbrated in terms of their role in material *substitution* inferences.)

A final metatheoretical idea develops what Sellars made of what Carnap made of Wittgenstein’s pathbreaking treatment of logical vocabulary in the *Tractatus*<sup>10</sup>. It is an approach to understanding a wide variety of vocabularies that, because of their distance along many dimensions from ordinary empirical descriptive discourse, have been thought to be particularly philosophically puzzling. These include logical vocabulary, dispositional and other alethic modal vocabulary, probabilistic vocabulary, fictional vocabulary, semantic and intentional vocabulary, and normative vocabulary (such as “commitment” and “entitlement”). The idea is that all these otherwise quite disparate kinds of vocabulary are alike in that they should be understood as in a very broad sense *metalinguistic* vocabularies. Their use is to be understood in terms of its essential expressive relations to some *other* kind of vocabulary —often, ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary. Paradigmatically, these broadly metalinguistic relations, involving both pragmatic and semantic dimensions, include having their use be both *elaborated from* and *explicative of* features of the use of other vocabularies. That is, proprieties of the use of the metavocabulary are systematically determined by proprieties of the use of the more basic target vocabulary, and using the metavocabulary lets one *say* explicitly something significant about what one is *doing* in using the target vocabulary. In *Between Saying and Doing* I offer a botanization of such broadly metalinguistic roles vocabularies can play, showing how to recursively characterize an open-ended hierarchy of distinct expressive roles vocabularies can play with respect to other vocabularies<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> I develop this thought in Brandom (2015), Chapter One.

<sup>11</sup> Brandom (2008).

The motivating hope and eventual goal of taking this different theoretical path is that the combination of a systematic deontic normative pragmatic theory, an inferentialist semantic theory, and an expressivist account of logical, semantic and intentional, modal, and normative vocabularies provides a much more flexible and capacious tool for making sense of the norms that implicitly govern our multifarious linguistic practices than its pioneering representationalist forebears did, focused as they were on ordinary empirical descriptive discourse. At the least, the hope is that because this alternative approach explicitly focuses on and works best for the sorts of vocabularies least amenable to representationalist–descriptivist construal, a clearer picture will be provided by the stereoscopic vision they provide when the two approaches are laid alongside one another. Accordingly, the conclusion I think we should draw from the well–taken considerations and reminders Wittgenstein has assembled for us is not that we need *no* philosophical theories about our discursive practice, but that we need *more* of them.

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### Some Strands of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism, and Some Strains of his Semantic Nihilism

In this reflection I address one of the critical questions this monograph is about: How to justify proposing yet another semantic theory in the light of Wittgenstein's strong warnings against it. I see two clear motives

for Wittgenstein's semantic nihilism. The first one is the view that philosophical problems arise from postulating hypothetical entities such as "meanings". To dissolve the philosophical problems rather than create new ones, Wittgenstein suggests substituting "meaning" with "use" and avoiding scientism in philosophy together with the urge to penetrate in one's investigation to unobservable depths. I believe this first motive constitutes only a weak motive for Wittgenstein's quietism, because there are substantial differences between empirical theories in natural sciences and semantic theories in philosophy that leave Wittgenstein's assimilation of both open to criticism. But Wittgenstein is right, on the second motive, that given the dynamic character of linguistic practice, the classical project of semantic theory is a disease that can be removed or ameliorated only by heeding the advice to replace concern with meaning by concern with use. On my view, this does not preclude, however, a different kind of theoretical approach to meaning that avoids the pitfalls of the Procrustean enterprise Wittgenstein complained about.

**Keywords:** Meaning and Use · Hypothetical Entities · Antiscientism · Semantic Nihilism · Linguistic Dynamism.

### **Algunas vertientes del pragmatismo normativo de Wittgenstein y algunas tensiones de su nihilismo semántico**

En esta reflexión me ocupo de una de las preguntas claves que son el tema de esta investigación sobre Wittgenstein y Brandom: ¿cómo justificar proponer aún otra teoría semántica a la luz de las fuertes advertencias contrarias de Wittgenstein? Veo dos motivos claros para el nihilismo semántico de Wittgenstein. El primero es el punto de vista de que los problemas filosóficos surgen al postular entidades hipotéticas como 'significados'. Para disolver los problemas filosóficos en lugar de crear nuevos, Wittgenstein sugiere reemplazar 'significado' con 'uso' y evitar el cientifismo en la filosofía junto con el impulso de penetrar en las investigaciones de uno a las profundidades no observables. Yo pienso que este motivo para el quietismo de Wittgenstein es débil, porque hay diferencias sustanciales entre las teorías empíricas en las ciencias naturales y teorías semánticas en la filosofía que dejan que la asimilación wittgensteiniana de unas a otras sea vulnerable a objeciones. Wittgenstein tiene razón, sin embargo, en cuanto al segundo motivo, que ante el carácter dinámico de la praxis lingüística "el proyecto clásico de una teoría semántica es una enfermedad que... se puede superar o aliviar haciendo caso al consejo de reemplazar la preocupación con el significado por la preocupación con el uso." Esto no impide en mi opinión, sin embargo, un planteamiento al significado que evita las trampas de la procústea empresa de la que se quejaba Wittgenstein.

**Palabras Clave:** Significado y uso · Entidades hipotéticas · Anticienticismo · Nihilismo semántico · Dinamismo lingüístico.

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