WORDS AND THE WORLD: A CRITIQUE OF STRAIGHT SOLUTIONS TO KRIPKE’S MEANING SCEPTICISM

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2014
Statement of Originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository**, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr John Wright for the many careful and considered philosophical observations regarding my work that he has offered over the years. There were times when he asked difficult questions, but they were questions worth answering. I must also thank John for his belief that I deserved this opportunity in the first place. Dr Joe Mintoff was an organised, efficient co-supervisor who worked hard to ensure that this project moved forward in a steady manner. I am convinced that this thesis would never have been completed without his support. Dr Chris Falzon has been of immense assistance in the latter stages of this thesis, contributing a wealth of organisation, editing skill, reassurance and care. Chris has a rare knack for motivation and I am very grateful for his encouragement.

I would like to thank the staff of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences for their assistance in negotiating the administrative tasks that are the reality of university life. I would also like to thank the Library staff for their help in acquiring hard-to-get sources, and the Office of Graduate Studies for offering timely and helpful advice. Special thanks must go to the Student and Academic Services team, particularly my friends and colleagues in the Hunter Hub—I relied on their personal support more than they may have known.

I also want to acknowledge the various interlocutors that I have inflicted myself upon over the years—most notably Mr Martin R. Hill and Mr James Willoughby. Both of these people, usually in combination with a coffee or two, spent a great deal of time listening to, and arguing against, my varied and sometimes wildly implausible ideas. I must also thank Martin for his comprehensive feedback on various drafts and hope that I can offer him the same assistance in the future.

My family have been steadfast in their support, love and patience. I feel that I owe my parents a particular debt for the drive to explore, understand and explain, which they instilled in me from an early age. Finally, I must thank my dear wife, Alexandra, for her love, sheer endurance, support, for listening to hundreds of hours of me rambling on (and on) about this work, for her precise editing and her understanding of APA referencing. And most of all, I have to thank Alex for always believing that I could achieve this, even when my own belief was wavering.
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Abstract

Saul Kripke has argued in favour of constitutive scepticism regarding the existence of meaning. This scepticism is paradoxical in that the more successful it is, the more it undermines its own conclusion. This thesis investigates whether it is possible to produce a satisfactory ‘straight’ solution to this paradox. In this context, a straight solution is one that refutes or disproves the basis of the scepticism by providing the fact, or facts, in virtue of which our words have determinate meaning.

The problem of meaning scepticism produces numerous difficulties. It undermines non-theoretic conceptions of language and communication. An example of this is the idea that there is such a thing as meaning something by a particular word. Meaning scepticism also presents serious difficulties for any philosophical theory that relies upon either semantic realism or determinate meaning. Kripke’s own ‘sceptical’ solution does not refute his scepticism. This thesis examines Kripke’s solution to determine whether it alleviates the negative effects of the paradox, and whether it entails further problematic implications of its own. Based on existing accounts of meaning, existing responses to the sceptical challenge are subject to critical examination to test whether they can solve the problem in a satisfactory manner. Based on adaptations of existing theories, three novel solutions are presented and critically examined.

It is argued that the sceptical solution that Kripke proposed does not alleviate all of the concerns produced by meaning scepticism. Further, this solution entails a particularly problematic form of anti-realism. All existing accounts of meaning fail to address the sceptical problem. Of the three novel solutions presented, two are argued to be problematic, one particularly so. The last solution presented, based on a causal theoretic approach, is argued to be the best option for addressing the problem of meaning scepticism. This conclusion not only refutes Kripke’s scepticism, but also supports the connection between language and the world that speakers describe when using it.
Chapter 1: Introduction

*There is no such thing as meaning anything by any word.* Such a statement, were it true, could call into question many assumptions surrounding the nature of language, communications and their uses in everyday life. An argument that successfully concludes that there is no such thing as meaning can produce a paradox. If the words that constitute an argument against meaning have no meaning themselves, it could seem that the premises cannot be true. This in turn would undermine the soundness of the argument, leading to a situation where the more successful such an argument is, the less we can trust the conclusion.

That communication might, counter-intuitively, occur without meaning, and that a successful argument against meaning appears to undermine itself, are a large part of what makes Kripke’s (1982) arguments against meaning so compelling for philosophers arguing for and against his position. Kripke considered his argument—the inspiration for which he attributes to Wittgenstein (1967)—the basis for a new and radical form of scepticism.

Many philosophers have argued against Kripke’s (1982) conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning. In this thesis, I examine a number of these arguments and find that, for the most part, they do not overturn his conclusion. Kripke put forward his own ‘sceptical’ solution to the problem he so effectively articulated, but I will argue that it is not without serious flaws. Having to accept Kripke’s conclusion because there is no satisfactory way to refute it, leaving no alternative to his own somewhat problematic solution, is an untenable position. To this end, I repurpose some existing arguments with the aim of finding a satisfactory solution. Two of these are not successful, but one, I argue, is a satisfactory account of meaning that refutes Kripke’s conclusion.

1.1 THESIS OUTLINE

In Chapter 2, I present an exegesis of Kripke’s arguments from *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* in favour of the sceptical position that there is no such thing as
meaning anything by any word. This includes Kripke’s considerations of why many different types of solutions—most notably dispositional accounts of meaning—cannot answer his challenge. In addition, I suggest some potential reasons why this issue might be of interest to a broader constituency than only philosophers.

Chapter 3 contains my exegesis of Kripke’s proposed ‘sceptical’ solution and a clarification of some of its features. It also contains a brief exploration of the concerns that have been raised regarding the implications of this solution. The most notable of these is that Kripke’s solution entails a kind of global anti-realism where even consistent language use is profoundly disconnected from reality.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the failures of dispositional solutions in both general and specific terms. This will include sophisticated dispositional accounts as argued by Soames (1998), Fodor (1990), Kowalenko (2009), Coates (1997), Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990). I will argue that all of these variations on a dispositional solution fail as adequate responses to the problem of ‘meaning scepticism’. Further, I contend that there is a generalisable knockdown argument against any dispositional account ever being a satisfactory solution.

While dispositional accounts feature heavily as opposition to Kripke (1982), a range of other approaches have been tried. In Chapter 5, I discuss the solutions proposed by Lewis (1983), Feldman (1985), Millikan (1990) and Searle (2002). As with the dispositional accounts, I conclude that all of these arguments fail to provide a coherent account of meaning that can withstand Kripke’s argument.

In light of the discussions in Chapters 3–5, Chapter 6 contains my arguments for two novel solutions and discussions of their effectiveness. The first of these is based on Hattiangadi (2006). While I agree that Hattiangadi has made an important contribution to this debate, I conclude that her argument, as presented here, does nothing more than shift the problem. The second novel solution that I propose is based on Young’s (1987, 1995) account of coherence truth. Based largely on Boghossian (1989), my assessment is that this solution is also unsatisfactory, even within its own parameters. Even if such difficulties could be
overcome, it would require the acceptance of consequences that some philosophers may find unpalatable.

The last novel solution that I consider is largely based on the work of Devitt (1997) and McGinn (1984). In his original argument, Kripke (1982) did not consider a causal theory of reference a potential solution to the problem of meaning scepticism. McGinn suggests, albeit briefly, that Kripke should have considered such a theory a possible response. However, in Chapter 7, I argue that a causal-hybrid theory, such as that put forward by Devitt, can meet the challenge that Kripke set. I conclude that it is the best solution of any considered in this thesis, but only on the basis of a solution to the qua-problem that is likely to be considered controversial.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I discuss the factors that are common to the failed solutions and where success seems closest. In discussing the possible implications of adopting a causal-theory-based account of meaning, I return to the examples put forward in Chapter 2 and examine how they might be dealt with if such an account was accepted. I also suggest areas where further research may be fruitful.
There is no such thing as meaning anything by any word.

This is the somewhat counter-intuitive conclusion that Kripke (1982) argues for and pre-emptively defends. The implications of such a conclusion and how broadly it may apply should not be underestimated. How we think about everyday communication, private propositional attitudes and even applied areas such as ethics and jurisprudence are potentially altered if such an argument is sound. In Section 2.1, I will put forward Kripke’s arguments that support this conclusion. Section 2.2 contains the potential straight solutions that Kripke considers and rejects. In Section 2.3, I put forward Kripke’s conclusion before briefly discussing its scope and nature. I suggest some possible implications that flow from this conclusion in Section 2.4.

2.1 THE SCEPTICAL PROBLEM

The problem is developed with respect to a simple mathematical function, but Kripke asserts, ‘The relevant sceptical problem applies to all meaningful uses of language’ (1982, p. 7). Whether or not this is true is something that will become relevant in later chapters. The function chosen as the example is addition, denoted by the word ‘plus’ and the symbol that represents it, ‘+’. Kripke states that he can ‘grasp’ the rule for addition. Although, as he points out, he has only computed a finite number of sums, the rule determines his answer for an infinite number of sums he has never considered: ‘This is the whole point of the notion of learning to add I grasp a rule: my past intentions regarding addition determine a unique answer for indefinitely many new cases in the future’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 8). Kripke then asks the reader to suppose that ‘68 + 57’ is a calculation that he or she has never performed before. Given that he or she can only have performed a finite
number of calculations in the past, an example of this kind exists, and the above is assumed by Kripke to serve the intended purpose well enough. When the computation is performed, the answer arrived at, with some degree of confidence, is ‘125’. The answer is correct in both the arithmetic sense and the metalinguistic sense—that “plus” as I intended to use the word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers I called “68” and “57”, yields the value 125’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 8). None of this seems to be controversial so far.

But suppose a ‘bizarre’ Sceptic is encountered. This Sceptic questions Kripke’s certainty about his answer in the metalinguistic sense: ‘Perhaps, he suggests, as I used the term “plus” in the past, the answer I intended for “68 + 57” should have been “5”!’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 8). The understandable response to this is to question the Sceptic’s sanity and schooling. However, the Sceptic’s response is that the answer could not have been attained through explicit instructions, as Kripke had never completed that addition before. The answer was attained by applying a rule or function that had been applied in the past. But, the Sceptic asks, what was this function? Kripke indicates that only a finite number of examples instantiating this function had ever been performed by him, and in this example, it is supposed that they were all using numbers smaller than 57. He then considers the possibility that in the past he used ‘plus’ and ‘+’ to denote a function called ‘quus’, symbolised by ‘⊕’.

Quus is defined by Kripke as follows:

$$x \oplus y = x + y, \text{ if } x, y < 57$$

$$= 5 \text{ otherwise.}$$

The Sceptic claims that Kripke is misinterpreting his previous use of ‘plus’ and ‘+’, and that he always meant ‘quus’, making a linguistic rather than arithmetic mistake (1982, p. 9). The Sceptic’s hypothesis does not appear to be logically impossible, so it could be true. The challenge that Kripke sets is to somehow present some fact or facts in virtue of which the Sceptic’s claim is false, keeping in mind the following: ‘Ordinarily, I suppose that, in computing “68 + 57” as I do, I do not simply make an unjustified leap in the dark’ (1982, p. 8).

1 For example, as far as I can remember, I have never added 7832 to 3637.
10). What would make this supposition true? Not an explicit instruction to say ‘125’. Nor can one appeal to the idea of computing in the same way as shown by previous examples. This would be as applicable for quaddition as for addition. The Sceptic’s challenge is this: Is there any fact in virtue of which a speaker meant plus but not quus, which will answer the sceptical challenge? Can the speaker be justifiably confident that they should answer ‘125’ instead of ‘5’?

According to Kripke (1982), an answer to the Sceptic must satisfy particular conditions. ‘First, it must give an account of what fact it is (about my mental state) that constitutes my meaning plus, not quus’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 11). Second, ‘It must in some sense show how I am justified in giving the answer “125” to “68 +57”’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 11).

2.2 Kripke’s Rejected Solutions

To clarify exactly what this position entails, Kripke (1982) considers and rejects some possible straight solutions. By ‘straight solutions’, Kripke means solutions that in some way reject or refute the Sceptic’s thesis. These are solutions that either deny one or more of the Sceptic’s premises or make use of a fact that fills the role of a superlative fact or collection of facts in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain word.

While it is probably obvious that the following is not an exhaustive treatment of ‘straight’ solutions, it is worth noting that after Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language was published, many of these were subsequently defended. Thus, they warrant and will receive a more detailed exploration in later chapters. Potential straight solutions are included at this stage to give an overview of the unsuccessful solutions that Kripke (1982) discusses, presumably because he saw them as the most likely to be raised by the proponents of competing theories of meaning.

2.2.1 Rule Following

Kripke (1982) considers that the problem could be solved by saying that a rule is learned, which determines how addition is to continue. The rule would be something along the lines of this: If we want to add $x$ to $y$, take a large number of countable tokens (Kripke
uses marbles) and count \( x \) number of tokens into one heap and \( y \) into another. Put the two piles of tokens together and count the result, which is of course \( x + y \). This could constitute a set of directions that is used to perform the task of adding two numbers. The idea of proceeding according to an algorithm such as this is incompatible with the sceptical hypothesis that Kripke meant \textit{quus} (1982, p. 15). However, there is a problem. Kripke’s applications of the word ‘count’, like ‘plus’, have been finite. Thus, the Sceptic can question the past usage of ‘count’ and ask whether ‘quount’ was really meant, ‘where to “quount” a heap is to count it in the ordinary sense, unless the heap was formed as the union of two heaps, one of which has 57 or more items in which case one must automatically give the answer “5”’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 16). Similarly, if one appeals to the idea of counting a heap \textit{independent} of its constituent sub-heaps, the Sceptic can simply ask whether we mean \textit{independent} or \textit{quindiendent}. Kripke’s argument is based on the idea, which he attributes to Wittgenstein (1967), that one cannot use a rule to interpret another rule (1982, p. 17).

This is problematic because the sceptical move can be made every time a rule is used to interpret another rule—that is, at every ‘level’, the same sceptical move can be made. Kripke (1982) does not explicitly entertain the possibility that this chain of interpretation is infinite. Rather, he holds that the process must stop at some point with a rule that is not reduced to any other rule (Kripke, 1982, p. 17). Thus, the sceptical move can be made until a ‘basic’ rule is arrived at. Kripke leaves the exact nature of the basic rule un-examined. Since it cannot be reduced to any other rule, it must be somehow impossible to interpret in terms of anything else. It is difficult to say exactly what such a rule would be like, and Kripke was undoubtedly aware of this when he made the argument. If all rules can be reduced to this rule, this would include the rule for quus as well as plus. Kripke acknowledges that the ‘basic’ rule provides no assistance in answering the Sceptic: ‘How can I justify my present application of such a rule, when the Sceptic could easily interpret it so as to yield any of an indefinite number of results? It seems my application is a stab in the dark’ (1982, p. 17). What is implicit here is Wittgenstein’s conclusion to §201, that the term ‘interpretation’
really entails nothing more than the substitution of one expression of a rule for another (1967, p. 81).

The situation is not improved by appealing to the idea of being guided by past applications of a rule. Kripke (1982) uses an example of a situation in which an intelligence tester asks for the one unique, possible continuation in a finite sequence of numbers. Appealing to the idea that a finite initial sequence can be compatible with an indeterminately large number of rules, Kripke points out that there is no uniquely appropriate way to continue a finite sequence, as any response is as arbitrary as the next. This is the case even if the rule for addition is reduced to other rules because, as Kripke argued in the previous paragraph, even ‘ultimate’ rules can only have been used a finite number of times (1982, p. 18). Similarly, the use of ‘+’ when it is only supported by a finite number of examples is also arbitrary. The disastrous nature of this arbitrariness is not expanded upon by Kripke, leaving readers to make their own inferences.

2.2.2 Dispositional Accounts

Kripke (1982) then considers the objection that the sceptical argument is fallacious because it does not consider a certain kind of fact about speakers. He suggests that this objection is made on the following grounds: ‘the fallacy in the argument that no fact about me constitutes my meaning plus lies in the assumption that such a fact must consist in an occurrent mental state’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 22). Considering that the entire occurrent mental history of a speaker such as himself would be the same whether he meant plus or quus, Kripke indicates that the problem cannot be addressed in terms of occurrent mental states (1982, p. 22).

Thus, the problem could be analysed dispositionally. This answer to the Sceptic states that ‘To mean addition by “+” is to be disposed, when asked for any sum “x + y” to give the sum of x and y as the answer (in particular, to say “125” when queried about “68 + 57”’) (Kripke, 1982, p. 22). Any intentional or occurrent mental states in the speaker here are of little consequence with regard to determining meaning under this account.
Kripke (1982) considers the dispositional account unsuccessful on a number of levels. It fails to sufficiently justify the use of addition, as it does not indicate what the justification is for using it rather than quaddition. The candidate that constitutes a speaker meaning one thing rather than another, by a given sign, should have the quality that, regardless of what a speaker is disposed to do, there is a unique thing that they should do (Kripke, 1982, p. 24). Not only does the disposition seem to underdetermine the present use of addition, but it also fails to meet Kripke’s criterion, ‘that it should tell me what to do in each new instance’ (1982, p. 24). While he states that this is the problem with most dispositional accounts, Kripke considers them in further detail.

The significance of the problems with this answer to the Sceptic is highlighted by the fact that dispositional accounts ignore that the totality of a speaker’s dispositions is finite. For instance, some numbers may be too large for a human mind to comprehend, and therefore are too large to add. According to Kripke (1982), a more serious problem is how to account for the disposition to make mistakes. This is the case even if a ceteris paribus clause is used to idealise the situation (Kripke, 1982, p. 30). Indeed, Kripke admits that if all dispositions to make mistakes were removed, he would give the correct answer (1982, p. 30). The problem is that no appeal to the correct answer can be made without being caught in circularity: ‘But a disposition to make a mistake is simply a disposition to give an answer other than the one that accords with the function I meant’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 30). Thus, Kripke concludes, the dispositional account does not answer the Sceptic (1982, p. 32).

### 2.2.2.1 The Machine Argument

Kripke (1982) also considers a variation on the dispositional argument where the relevant rule is embodied in a machine. The argument, which he attributes to Dummett (1959), is that a machine can follow a rule in a manner that a human cannot (Kripke, 1982, p. 32). In essence, the machine argument is that a machine that is built to perform a function will produce the right answer, and that the answer the machine will give is the answer that the builder intended (Kripke, 1982, p. 33). Whether such a creation is best categorised as a
program, or whether it is mechanical or electrical, the problems that Kripke attributes to the dispositional account are still applicable. If a program is drawn up that embodies the intention to perform a particular function, the Sceptic can argue that such a program can be interpreted in a quus-like manner (Kripke, 1982, p. 33). If the machine is of a mechanical nature, it must still be somehow instructed, and such instructions can be interpreted by the Sceptic in a problematic way.

Kripke (1982) indicates that there are two problems of greater import that parallel the previous discussion of dispositions. First, the machine is presumably finite in nature, and thus the Sceptic can raise the same objection as before—that some numbers are too large to be added, and hence the disposition is not immune from non-standard interpretation (Kripke, 1982, p. 34). Second, the machine may malfunction as gears slip or wires melt and give the wrong answer. But determining what counts as a malfunction and what does not is entailed by the designer’s intention. This malfunction can be viewed as essentially the same as the disposition to make a mistake. Thus, to say that an adding machine has malfunctioned is to say that it has given an answer other than the one that accords with the function intended by the designer or programmer. On these grounds, Kripke concludes that the machine account can be analysed in the same way as the general dispositional account, and that it falls to the same two objections (Kripke, 1982, p. 35).

Accounts of meaning that use the concept of dispositions as a response to Kripke’s (1982) arguments are both vigorous and numerous. Thus, variations of solutions of this kind (broadly speaking) of varying degrees of complexity are discussed at length in Chapter 4.

2.2.3 Simplicity

Another suggestion that Kripke (1982) considers is that of simplicity. In short, this response to the Sceptic would be that the hypothesis that a speaker means ‘plus’ is simpler than the hypothesis that a speaker means ‘quus’. This is misguided, as Kripke says: ‘Recall that the sceptical problem is not merely epistemic. The Sceptic argues that there is no fact as to what I meant, whether plus or quus’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 38). In cases where the problem is
being able to know whether a speaker means one thing or another, simplicity can tell us which of the two hypotheses we should prefer. In this case, they would be 'Kripke means plus' and its competitor, 'Kripke means quus'. But simplicity considerations cannot provide any information as to what the competing hypotheses are. The Sceptic is claiming that there is no fact in virtue of which Kripke means anything at all. Until it is established that Kripke can mean things by his words, considerations of simplicity are not relevant.

The appeal to simplicity is misguided because of the nature of the Sceptic’s claims. If the Sceptic is arguing that our condition ‘prevents us ever from knowing whether we mean plus or quus’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 39), it may have been applicable. But the Sceptic is claiming that even an omniscient being would not ‘find any fact that differentiates between the plus and quus hypotheses’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 39). Kripke (1982) concludes that appeals to simplicity are irrelevant to this paradox. Further, he argues that the idea that speakers will form tentative hypotheses about what they mean does not appear to align with the immediate and unhesitating nature of how the example of ‘68 + 57’ is calculated (1982, p. 40). While this is the most basic formulation of a solution in an epistemic sense, it should be clear that other solutions along an epistemological line fail in the same way.

2.2.4 Qualia and Mental Images

Kripke considers the possibility that there is some sort of quale that is associated with ‘adding’ that can be used to settle the issue (1982, p. 41). A quale is the singular of qualia, which are experiential properties such as physical sensations, perceptions of colour, smell and sound (Block, 2006). Kripke (1982) suggests that this might work because there may be some ‘irreducible’ experience of meaning plus for the speaker. The only reason the speaker seems unable to reply to the Sceptic is because the challenge would involve trying to find something else that the experience could be reduced to (Kripke, 1982, p. 41). If the experience is irreducible, this is obviously impossible. Kripke also points out that this must be an ‘introspectible’ experience, as people know immediately and with certainty that they mean addition by plus. The proposed solution is then straightforward. Meaning addition has
a unique irreducible quality, and the fact that a speaker means addition by ‘plus’ is to be denoted by them having (or ‘possessing’) an experience of that quality (Kripke, 1982, p. 41). But Kripke finds that this solution fails because it is ‘off target’. In light of the original challenge, he asks how this ‘special kind of headache’ could help someone decide whether to answer ‘125’ or ‘5’ when asked to calculate ‘68 + 57’. According to Kripke, no answer is provided because there is nothing obvious about this supposed quale that indicates whether the answer is ‘5’ or ‘125’ (1982, p. 42). The only way that it could indicate the correct answer is if this introspective experience had content resembling an algorithm, but then it would no longer be irreducible, and hence would be open to attack by the Sceptic.

Subsequently, it is made clear by Kripke (1982) that a similar proposed solution, where the association of an image with a word determines its meaning, also fails. We can have an image of a cube in our minds when we hear the word ‘cube’, but even though it might suggest a certain use, it is possible to use it in a different way (Kripke, 1982, p. 42). No internal impression can show, in itself, how a word is to be applied in novel future cases. This is even more clear for the question regarding ‘plus’, and Kripke points out that only an ‘infinite table of the plus function’ in one’s mind could even come close to being a candidate in this case, but this is exactly what speakers (such as one claiming that ‘+’ means plus) do not seem to have.

2.2.5 The Primitive Solution

Taking the concept of ‘mental states’ even further, Kripke (1982) considers the possibility that this ‘meaning’ state is a primitive state—one that cannot be assimilated to sensations, qualitative states or dispositions. Rather, it would be a unique state of its own (Kripke, 1982, p. 51). Kripke sees this move as potentially irrefutable, but at the same time ‘desperate’, as it leaves the nature of this primitive state as a complete mystery (Kripke, 1982, p. 51). It is mysterious in that it is not an introspectible state, but speakers are supposedly aware of it when it occurs. Even more problematic, such a state would have to be a finite object within a finite mind (Kripke, 1982, p. 52). Can we, asks Kripke, conceive of a
finite state that could not be interpreted in a quus-like way? How such an object would not
be caught in the problems of finitude, as was the dispositional solution, is left unexplained.
But the implication that Kripke intends to convey is clear. This solution, even if it can be
constructed in a way that defeats the Sceptic, has no explanatory power with regard to the
phenomena of meaning, and little rational value, as it relies on the acceptance of an object or
fact that embodies seemingly contradictory properties. As previously indicated, such a fact
would not be introspectible by speakers, but they would be aware enough of such a state to
alter or guide their behaviour.

2.2.6 Platonism

The final answer that Kripke (1982) considers before providing his own is based on
the ‘non-mental’ nature of mathematical entities. In short, the ‘Platonist’ solution to the
Sceptic’s challenge suggests that an answer can be found because of the objective existence
of mathematical entities such as the function of ‘addition’. By this view, ‘68 + 57 = 125’ is a
part of the objective reality of mathematics and has no relation to meaning or intention
(Kripke, 1982, p. 53). Thus, it would be immune to the sceptical attack because ‘68 + 57 =
125’ being true is not in the mind of the speaker. But even a brief further analysis of this
solution reveals flaws. Kripke maintains that there must be some way that the objective
entity ‘interacts’ with an idea in the mind of the subject. However infinite the platonic entity
of ‘addition’ might be, or how infinite the ‘sense’ might be, the idea in a speaker’s mind has
to be finite, and if it is finite, the problem arises (once again) where it could just as well be
interpreted as determining a quus function as a plus function. The question of how speakers,
with their finite minds, grasp plus rather than quus remains unresolved. Positing additional
ideas in the adder’s (speaker’s) mind, to assign a particular interpretation to the idea of
addition leads the argument back to ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 54). Not
unsurprisingly, Kripke concludes that platonism is of little help in settling the matter at hand
(1982, p. 54).
2.3  THE SCEPTICAL CONCLUSION

Having dismissed various straight solutions, Kripke delivers his preliminary ‘Sceptical’ conclusion in dramatic fashion: ‘That there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word’ (1982, p. 55). But what has Kripke (1982) concluded, overall, in this part of his argument? The 'sceptical hypothesis' is set up to pose the question: What fact is it about the speaker (or indeed about anything) that makes a speaker mean a certain thing by a certain word? In this case, what is it that constitutes them meaning 'plus' by ‘+’? Kripke argues that when speakers respond to the initial problem in one way rather than another, they can have no justification for one response rather than another (1982, p. 21). Since the Sceptic’s supposition that a speaker means quus rather than plus cannot be answered, there is no fact that differentiates between a speaker meaning a definite function such as plus and meaning nothing at all (Kripke, 1982, p. 21). Put another way, for sentences such as ‘I mean $x$ by $y$’, what is the truth condition? In this stage of the argument, Kripke argues that there is no such fact that meets his criteria. Similarly, he concludes that ‘I mean…’ has no truth condition. Kripke appears to be satisfied that he has made a sufficient case for the sceptical conclusion regarding the existence of meaning.

2.3.1  The Scope of Meaning Scepticism

This conclusion applies to all parts, symbols and signs of language because any word, symbol or sign presumably has some fact or state in virtue of which its meaning is conferred. According to Kripke’s (1982) arguments, no fact exists that can prevent any particular word from being interpreted in a quus-like way. Any symbol, word or utterance of any kind that supposedly has a meaning must have some rule or measure of correctness for how it is to be used and interpreted. If it does not, it is difficult to see how it could have any meaning.

This applies not only to all symbols and signs in language, but also to wherever and however they are used, even at the level of hopes and beliefs. Arguments supporting this idea have been developed in ‘The Rule-Following Considerations’ (Boghossian, 1989), and more
recently in *Solving Kripke/Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Paradox* (Cheng, 2002). Any linguistic content, no matter where it is, is prey to the Sceptic’s challenges. While it may seem dramatic, Cheng (2002) makes an important point in expressing the idea that we cannot know what we are hoping for. If a person thinks, *I hope it does not rain*, the fact that it is not said aloud does not make it safe from this form of scepticism. Clearly, ‘rain’ can be treated in the same way as ‘plus’ was by Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic. Perhaps the person hopes that it will not *quain* tomorrow. As nothing differentiates the meaning of rain from quain, I cannot justify that I mean anything by ‘rain’. A similar conclusion seems reasonable with regard to beliefs, as long as they have similar content. This line of reasoning leads to the following question: Are there any kinds of beliefs (or similar) that are not affected by this scepticism? Searle (2002) identifies ‘Background’ beliefs as an answer and bases one of his responses to Kripke’s Paradox on these beliefs. In Section 5.4, it will be argued that neither of these solutions are satisfactory responses to the problems posed by Kripke’s scepticism.

However, Cheng’s (2002) conclusion with regard to the ‘destructive nature’ of Kripke’s (1982) scepticism seems to be misguided. He concludes that not only is there no such thing as meaning anything by any word, but also that there is no such thing as hoping, believing and desiring (Cheng, 2002, p. 35). This conclusion appears to rely on a flawed piece of reasoning that is linked to the importance Cheng places on ‘content’ in his assessment of Kripke’s argument. It could be argued that a possible mistake lies in bundling ‘meaning’ together with propositional attitudes such as hoping and believing. There are important differences in the relationship between the propositional attitude and its content in these cases. For ‘meaning’, if we are sceptical about the content (plus or quus), we are sceptical about the act, because denoting or determining that content in some sense is the inherent function of what it is to ‘mean’ something. But the same cannot be said for ‘hoping’. If we are sceptical about the content or referent of a hope—that is, hoping it does not rain v. hoping it does not quain—we are justified in concluding that we cannot say *what* it is that we hope for, but it seems that we can still say that we are hoping. This is because in the case of ‘meaning’, scepticism about the content is scepticism about the act. But this is not
the case for other propositional attitudes. A person can hope that certain conditions come to pass, even if they cannot denote these conditions in language in a determinate manner. This also appears to be the case for the other attitudes mentioned. Thus, it seems that people can still hope. Or can they?

If, as shown earlier, the scepticism can be extended to all uses of language, can it be extended to the use of words such as ‘hope’, ‘desire’ and ‘believe’? The answer is dependent on how the different senses of these words are dealt with. On one level, for the sentence ‘I hope it does not rain’, the Sceptic can question any of the words used, including ‘hope’, and ask in virtue of what the speaker (or thinker) means hope rather than quope. On another level are the introspective feelings—the qualia—associated with the act of ‘hoping’. Kripke (1982), Boghossian (1989) and Cheng (2002) do not question the existence of the subjective qualia associated with these propositional attitudes. Certainly, scepticism about the existence of meaning cannot alter the existence of these, so it may be tempting to think that they provide a solution.2

Without going into detail, as this discussion is once again approaching the treatment of Searle’s (2002) work in Section 5.4, it is enough to point out that a finite state, such as a subjective quale, cannot be the fact in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain word, for the reasons that Kripke (1982) has already given regarding a particular quale in Section 2.2.4. Regardless of whether I mean anything by ‘rain’, no special subjective feeling that I associate with the act of hoping can differentiate it from a quus-like interpretation. Thus, Cheng (2002) was right in this case, but not for the right reasons.

2.3.2 Is it a priori?

Opinion appears to be divided over whether Kripke’s (1982) argument constitutes an a priori attack on the existence of meaning. At a glance, it does not follow the pattern that might be expected of such an argument. Rather, Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language

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2 This might be true of ‘hoping’, which seems to have a special kind of feeling attached to it. But is there such a feeling attached to ‘believing’, which is grouped in the same category by both Cheng and Boghossian?
(pp. 7–54) presents the Sceptic’s challenge and then tests unsuccessful candidates such as rule-following, qualia, dispositions, simplicity and platonism. Despite this, Kripke’s conclusion, that there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word, seems quite definite (1982, p. 55). If there is an *a priori* argument against the existence of meaning, it arises from the perceived difficulty of deriving normative force from naturalistic factors. Hattiangadi (2007) argues that if there is an *a priori* argument against meaning in Kripke’s work, it is entailed by the implicit attempted reduction of normative facts about how words should be used to naturalistic facts. If this difficulty can be correctly characterised as this type of problem, as Hattiangadi (2007) considers, perhaps there is an *a priori* attack on meaning. At the core of this problem is Kripke’s demand that an answer to the Sceptic be able to say what it is that a speaker *should* do (1982, p. 24). As I will argue in Section 6.1, Hattiangadi (2006) purports to overcome this difficulty by arguing that meaning is not normative in a way that entails this issue. The other possible line of reasoning may result from the infinite nature of mathematical functions and the finite nature of human minds. That is, the problem is justifying infinite future applications on the basis of finite previous applications and finite present mental capacity. However, such a line of reasoning may not be as convincing as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ problem.

The significance of whether there is an *a priori* argument against the existence of meaning is worth considering. Ultimately, even if it is not an *a priori* argument, this does not take much force out of the Sceptic’s challenge. The Sceptic starts with the hypothesis that it is at least logically possible that a speaker can be mistaken about what they have meant by a word in the past. The Sceptic claims that there are no facts that differentiate one meaning from another (Kripke, 1982), and the challenge is to provide an answer. The lack of an *a priori* argument against the existence of meaning is not the same as an *a priori* argument for its existence. Asserting that there may be a fact that answers the Sceptic is of little help when there is still a possibility that there might not be such a fact.
2.4 IMPLICATIONS OF MEANING SCEPTICISM

To fully appreciate the gravity and importance of Kripke’s (1982) conclusion, it is worth examining some examples of potential implications. Starting with the simplest, there appears to be problems with plain speaking, as well as a profound disconnect between the theoretical status of meaning and the everyday experience of communication. If speakers cannot mean anything by any word, what is happening in conversations? Speakers clearly mean things by their words, and this is the basis for Kripke (1982) characterising this problem as a paradox. Even without admitting all words to be meaningless, it is still possible to interpret this conclusion as rendering the meanings of words as arbitrary. It would at least remove the feeling of confidence that speakers have in how they use and interpret words.

It is not far to move from these positions to the conclusion that sentences such as ‘I mean “plus” by “+”’ can never be either true or false. Where the real trouble lies is that this has a profound run-on effect on how the truth or falsity of sentences is considered overall. If the content of any statement can be interpreted in a quus-like way, the truth of any given statement can never be established because nothing is capable of being true or false. For example, ‘68 + 57 = 125’ cannot be said to be either true or false. This is not only because we do not know whether ‘+’ means plus or quus; it is also because, if Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic is correct, there is no such thing as meaning plus, quus or anything else.

Consequently, there are no propositions that can be considered true or false. ‘It is raining outside’ could never be established as true or false because there is no fact that establishes whether the stuff falling out of the sky is rain or its quus-like equivalent, or whether we are in fact referring to it at all. To generalise, if you cannot establish that there is such a thing as meaning anything by any word, no statement that uses words can ever be judged as true or false.

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3 This position is not to be confused with scepticism about whether there is actually ‘stuff falling out of the sky’. 
If one accepts that the impossibility of doing a particular thing negates any obligation to do this thing (as entailed by ‘ought implying can’), the effect on the situation is clear. If a speaker cannot identify a uniquely correct way of going on because there is no such thing, it cannot be said that they have any obligation to do so. This seems intuitively out of line with how language and communication appear to work. It seems that if there is no way for a speaker to use a word in a uniquely correct way, any normative obligation on them to even try to do so must be similarly non-existent.

The Sceptic’s conclusion then could present some problems for normative ethics. In the most basic sense, this is because there is a challenge to the meanings of words that form the cornerstone of ethical and moral language. The task of determining what, if anything, is the ‘good’ or ‘right’ thing to do is difficult enough without introducing the metalinguistic challenge that the Sceptic poses. In this situation, even if we could use a word such as ‘justice’ with the same assurance that people use the ‘+’ symbol, there would still be no fact in virtue of which we could feel justified in attaching that particular meaning to that particular word. Another related, but perhaps less abstract, example concerns the word ‘marriage’. Some governments have legislated that part of the word’s meaning is that it applies to heterosexual couples, but not same-sex couples. In both Australia (the Marriage Legislation Amendment Bill 2004) and the US (the Defence of Marriage Act, September 21, 1996), a clear statement has been made: it is incorrect to apply the word ‘marriage’ to a same-sex couple. While the Australian Attorney-General spoke of the Australian legislation as ‘reflecting’ the understanding of the word by the majority of Australians (Information and Research Services, Parliamentary Library, 2003–2004), the legislation clearly states that marriage ‘means’ the union between a man and a woman. Similarly, in order to override contrary decisions in state legislatures, the US legislation has clearly defined ‘marriage’ as being exclusively between a man and a woman (Bix, 2003, p. 289).

\[4\] Which arguably we cannot.
If Kripke (1982) is correct, actions of this type necessarily fail. If there is no fact in virtue of which the word ‘marriage’ has a particular meaning, there is no fact that determines that the word applies, and should be applied, to one type of couple rather than another (or indeed to couples or even people at all). Under these circumstances, it is difficult to justify interpreting the legislation mentioned above in any particular way. Moreover, if the ability to determine that ‘marriage’ should be applied in a particular way is compromised or removed, legislating to protect its ‘real’ meaning by prescribing its application is both disingenuous and baseless. Of course, if no word means anything, there is a sense in which any endeavour using them, ethically focused or otherwise, is pointless. This would necessarily include the drafting of legislation. Such issues deserve more thorough treatment. Hopefully this illustrates that the notion that words mean one thing and not another, and that they should be used in certain ways, is not just of interest to philosophers, but has broader ramifications in the community.

This leads to more complicated implications of Kripke’s (1982) conclusions regarding rule-following. In a jurisprudential context, the act of interpretation of particular words and whole rules is important. In a situation where a judge has to interpret a rule, as Daniel Goldberg (2007) argues, certain tools cannot be used. In this particular case, Goldberg is attacking the use of the principles of textualism and originalism. But Goldberg’s argument could be applicable in any situation where a judge is using a rule to interpret another rule, such as an article of the constitution or other legislative provision. Similarly, the Acts Interpretation Act 1901 (henceforth AIA) in Australian law might be seen as problematic. To interpret the AIA, it could be argued that one must already know how to interpret an Act. But if we knew how to interpret an Act, we would not need instructions on how to do so. Conversely, if we do not know how to interpret an Act, providing instructions on how to do so in the form of an Act such as the AIA would make no sense. Of course, it

5 I was first made aware of this article and of the existence of the ‘Acts Interpretation Act’ by M. R. Hill.
could be that the AIA is not the rule that cannot be reduced any further. But if a rule is being used to interpret another rule, at what point do those doing the interpretation ‘have their spades turned’, as Wittgenstein (1967) would have put it? The discussion in this area is vastly more nuanced than shown here and should not be taken as necessarily indicative of how legislative instruments are applied. The point at this stage is to show how issues surrounding rule-following and meaning have implications that can and should be of interest to academic disciplines other than philosophy.

A final implication that can be suggested is of concern to the philosophy of mind. For physicalists, if there was a fact in virtue of which we mean ‘plus’, it would of course be physical. If there is no fact, as Kripke (1982) shows, and yet meaningful communications still occur, there is a public phenomenon occurring that cannot be physically explained. One either has to abandon physicalism or abandon meaning. Continuing to adhere to the idea that there is a ‘straight’ solution—that there is a fact to be found—leads either to the ‘mysterious and desperate’ solution described earlier or to the positing of a ‘non-physical’ fact. Neither is a particularly good option for physicalism. This said, it must be made clear that other accounts do not fare much better. Epiphenomenalism, such as the kind defended by David Chalmers (1996), still relies on physical events being the relevant causal facts in this instance. While it might seem more acceptable to have a ‘mysterious’ solution in the context of Cartesian Dualism, philosophically, no more ground is gained. Shifting the search for the relevant fact from the physical to the non-physical provides few answers. Similarly, Berkeleyan Idealism does not seem so thoroughly effected by this paradox, although it gives no answers to the problem. The reason for these divisions is that accounts of mind (or indeed anything) that include or allow the introduction of non-physical facts are more compatible with appeal to a ‘mysterious’ fact, presumably because all non-physical facts are always mysterious to some extent. But physicalism demands that all facts are ultimately explainable by physics, and that these explanations, by virtue of this, are neither mysterious nor desperate. This explains, to some extent, the amount of time and effort that has gone into developing and defending physical dispositional solutions. It is worth foreshadowing at this
point that a sceptical solution that is in no way mysterious with regard to physical facts would be compatible with physicalism. Nor is it the case that all of the solutions that Kripke considers assume physicalism. For example, the ‘quale’ solution does not need to make this assumption. But defenders of physicalism are potentially caught on the horns of this dilemma if they also want to defend the existence of meaning.

2.5 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Kripke (1982) argues that no fact meets the criteria needed for it to be that in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain word. This sceptical conclusion can be applied to all uses of language and, it seems, any state with linguistic content, including what we might think of as private propositional states such as hopes and beliefs. The philosophical implications of this conclusion are far-reaching, potentially altering everything from our ability to assign truth or falsity to statements, to being able to justify the non-arbitrary use of certain words, particularly in ethical and jurisprudential contexts. The list of implications in this chapter is not exhaustive, but it shows why we should be interested in Kripke’s (1982) sceptical paradox.

Many, if not all, of the issues mentioned in this chapter deserve further investigation. To this end, I will assess the suitability of some of the more noteworthy straight solutions put forward by other philosophers in Chapter 5. In Chapters 6 and 7, I will attempt to craft more novel arguments supporting straight solutions by extending, and in some cases re-purposing, the arguments of others. In Chapter 3, I will consider Kripke’s (1982) sceptical solution and some of its implications.
This chapter describes the solution that Kripke (1982) advances to overcome the difficulties detailed in the previous chapter. If his arguments against the existence of meaning are at all effective, it is essential to solve the problem if language and communication in general are to be explainable in a rational way. In Section 3.1, I provide an exegesis of the sceptical solution, noting the differences between that and any potential ‘straight’ solution. Despite the resistance of Kripke’s approach to the attacks of the Sceptic, it has serious issues. Implications of the sceptical solution are explored in Section 3.2. In particular, I focus on concerns around realism and the threat of global anti-realism in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 respectively.

3.1 Kripke’s Solution

Despite Kripke’s dramatic conclusion—that there is no such thing as meaning anything by any word (1982, p. 55)—the phenomena of language and communication persist and require some sort of explanation or account of what is occurring. Kripke provides a solution to the challenge posed by the Sceptic; however, before this can be considered in detail, some important distinctions need to be addressed.

It is important to understand the difference between Kripke’s (1982) definitions of straight and sceptical solutions. For a solution to this paradox to be considered ‘straight’, Kripke believes it must satisfy certain criteria. In relation to the sceptical problem regarding ‘+’, Kripke says, ‘first, it must give an account of what fact it is (about my mental state) that constitutes my meaning plus, not quus’ (1982, p. 11), and ‘It must in some sense show how I am justified in giving the answer “125” to “68 +57”’ (1982, p. 11). More generally, Kripke defines a straight solution as one that shows the scepticism to be unwarranted (e.g., one that proves the thesis that the Sceptic doubted (1982, p. 66)). In this case, the obvious candidate to prove the scepticism unwarranted is some fact (or facts) in virtue of which Kripke means
plus by ‘+’. However, it should be noted that while most solutions try to fulfil the criteria that Kripke has set, this does not necessarily need to be the case.

Two examples that Kripke (1982) gives of ‘straight’ solutions to sceptical problems would be *a priori* accounts justifying inductive reasoning or giving an analysis of causal relations as genuine connections between events as solutions to Hume’s (1975) sceptical problems of induction and causation respectively (1982, p. 66). The parallel with Hume’s problem of induction may not be ideal if this problem is seen as epistemological rather than ontological in nature. It might be that a justification of induction would show why speakers are justified in believing a speaker will go on using ‘+’ in a particular way, but does not need to provide a fact in virtue of which a speaker means plus.

Any straight solution must contain an account of what fact is the fact in virtue of which we mean something by some word, and it must show how we are justified in attributing meaning. Further, Kripke (1982) asserts that meaning entails an aspect of *normativity*, which supposedly places an obligation on speakers with regard to how they *should* use a word. To say that a speaker means plus by ‘+’ is to say something about how that speaker should use the ‘+’ sign. This is seen by some, such as Hattiangadi (2006), as being one of the most difficult tasks a straight solution has to achieve.

In contrast, a sceptical solution is a different way of addressing the problem. Kripke (1982) uses a ‘rough outline’ of Hume’s (1975) solution to the problem of causation as an example of how sceptical solutions work in general. Kripke admits that his use of this example is based on an approximation of Hume’s argument rather than a detailed study (1982, p. 68). For the purposes of illustrating how his solution functions, Kripke takes Hume’s conclusion to be that there can be no private causation. Hume’s problem of causation, as Kripke sees it, is how to show that, where two events are conjoined, there is a sense in which one ‘causes’ the other. Hume’s analysis shows that no such relation exists when two events are considered in isolation. Nonetheless, some way of making sense of such events and how people treat them is needed. The crux of this solution is that when Hume can find no relation of ‘production’ that pertains between two events, and hence no fact in virtue
of which we can say event $a$ causes event $b$, he turns to a sceptical solution with the aim of salvaging as much as possible of the notion of causation (Kripke, 1982, p. 68). In the case of causation, the sceptical solution is that even though there may not be a sense in which one event produces another, it is understandable that people would treat conjoined events as if this were the case. This is because categorising such events as being related by ‘cause and effect’, as with all inductive inferences, is a product of custom (Kripke, 1982, p. 67). While the issue of how faithfully Kripke has interpreted Hume’s argument is not the matter at hand, this seems a reasonable interpretation.

In a similar vein, Kripke (1982) proposes his solution to the problem of ‘meaning scepticism’, attempting to salvage what is needed, and indeed does happen, with regard to meaning, while jettisoning notions that are allegedly unfounded. Kripke is clear on this point: ‘We do not wish to doubt or deny that when people speak of themselves and others as meaning something by their words, as following rules, they might do so with a perfect right’ (1982, p. 69). Nor does it seem that Kripke wants to stop people from saying that a person means plus by ‘$+$’. Kripke wants to deny that any ‘superlative fact’ exists of the kind that philosophers might mistakenly attach to ordinary uses of language (1982, p. 69). Fitch characterises the sceptical solution that Kripke proposes as stating that there are no facts about meaning, but that we are not talking nonsense when we assert that we do mean things (2004, p. 165).

As with his formulation of the initial sceptical problem, Kripke (1982) bases this solution on his interpretation of Wittgenstein (1967). The core of this justification rests on Wittgenstein proposing an account of language that is grounded in assertability conditions rather than truth conditions (Kripke, 1982, p. 74). This move is necessary because it appears that if the sceptical argument is correct, using facts or truth conditions as the factors that determine meaning produces a situation where no assertion about ‘meaning’ can mean anything. Kripke contends that the assumption that meaning-declarative sentences necessarily purport to correspond to facts makes it impossible to solve the problem, as no such facts exist (1982, pp. 78–79). However, an answer can be found by examining
conditions of assertability within the language game: ‘All that is needed to legitimise assertions that someone means something is that there be roughly specifiable circumstances under which they are legitimately assertable, and that the game of asserting them under such conditions has a role in our lives’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 78). That is, if we want to demonstrate the validity of the assertion that a speaker means ‘plus’ by ‘+’, there must be specifiable conditions under which such an assertion will be accepted, and the practice of using ‘+’ under these conditions plays a role in the lives of the speaker and the rest of the linguistic community. Note that these conditions only need to be approximately specifiable for the assertion to be legitimised—the linguistic community does not need perfectly precise knowledge of assertability conditions in order to accept an assertion.

Fitch sums up Kripke’s (1982) solution by saying that to mean something is not constituted by a correspondence to truth conditions or some sort of fact, but by conditions of assertability (2004, p. 165). But I maintain that this is not consistent with Kripke’s account. Kripke argues that the conditions under which speakers can make assertions of meaning, or feel confident that no one in their linguistic community will deny their assertions, are not facts that meaning can be reduced to in the ‘straight’ sense (1982, pp. 111, 146).

A community setting is central to how this account explains the normative aspect of the phenomenon of meaning. In specific terms, a speaker ‘S’ is provisionally, and subject to the correction of others, entitled to say that they mean ‘plus’ by ‘+’ whenever they are confident in the answer (Kripke, 1982, p. 90). Similarly, in new cases, and under the same conditions of potential correction, a speaker can judge their own responses to be correct. What is important here is that other speakers are not automatically obliged to accept the speaker’s authority on this correctness of use. They will judge speaker S as being correct if the speaker gives the same answer, or at least follows the same procedure, as themselves (Kripke, 1982, p. 90). This notion of correction, which can be plausibly characterised as feedback, potentially extends to the whole linguistic community. Thus, Kripke (1982) says, of a speaker who claims to be able to add, the speaker will be: ‘judged by the community to have done so if his particular responses agree with those of the community in enough cases,
especially the simple ones’ (1982, p. 92). Passing this test allows a speaker to be admitted into the community as someone who adds. Passing enough of these kinds of tests on many other things allows a speaker to be admitted as a normal speaker of the language. The utility of passing these tests is clear, as not passing them will render a speaker unable to participate in the life of the community.

Thus, a system of correction and feedback that is both positive (‘You got it right. Have a gold star!’) and negative (‘You are consistently incomprehensible. I’m calling the asylum.’) allows a speaker to have confidence in their utterances, and to expect others to be able to meet similar standards for admission into the linguistic, and in many ways real, community. Kripke (1982) indicates the form of this phenomenon in a footnote: ‘We do not all say 12 + 7 = 19 and the like because we all grasp the concept of addition; we say we grasp the concept of addition because we all say 12 + 7 = 19 and the like’ (1982, p. 94). A possible generalisation of this contra-position might be this: We do not agree because of facts about meaning; rather, we can say that there is meaning because it is a fact that we (more or less) agree. However, such a simplification can be misleading. While the sceptical solution gives speakers licence to talk about meaning in a reasonable way, it does not allow us to attach meaning to any superlative fact. Again, Kripke’s solution does not answer the problem of how to determine whether someone is following a rule; rather, it seeks to address the conditions under which a community of speakers will say whether someone is following a rule. In short, the sceptical solution is that others in the community can check another speaker’s responses against their own to see whether they agree. It should be noted that this solution does not reduce the following of the rule to simply saying what the linguistic community would agree with, lest this fall prey to Wittgenstein’s ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ consideration (Kripke, 1982, p. 146).

This social aspect is reflected by Kusch’s conclusion: ‘Meaning and rules are essentially social phenomena, and we cannot make sense of private rule-following’ (2004, p. 576). However, as with Fitch (2004), it is important not to interpret this as the social
phenomena determining meaning in the sense that Kripke (1982) demands of a straight solution.

While dispositional accounts, as considered by Kripke, fail because they equate performance with correctness (1982, p. 24), the sceptical solution does not. This is because the legitimate use of a word only has to meet assertability conditions. The conditions under which an assertion can be made are not measured against any objective measure of correctness, and thus the problematic conflation does not occur.

Kripke admits that the way in which these checks are carried out seems to be a ‘primitive part of the language game’ and needs no further explanation (1982, p. 101). Under this solution, the checks may indeed be an intrinsic part of the language game and primitive in the sense that they are inseparable from the phenomenon of language itself. However, I argue that knowledge of how and why certain assertions are accepted is an area worthy of study.

Kripke (1982) provides further clarification on the sceptical solution in that the theory outlined should not be confused with the idea that the correct meaning of a word, symbol or function is, by definition, the response that most of the community will give. Such a theory, according to Kripke, would be a theory of the truth conditions of a speaker’s assertions (1982, p. 111), which is not what he is proposing as a solution. The reasons for this are obvious. In much the same way that an individual’s ability to determine meaning is finite, so is the ability of a whole community, leaving this solution prey to the problems foreshadowed in Section 2.2.2 of this thesis and explored further in Chapters 4–7. Most importantly, if the assertability conditions are treated as explicit instructions, the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ problem arises (Kripke, 1982, p. 146). While degrees of intentionality can undoubtedly be found in any explanation, the summary of why Kripke would say that agreement does not equal meaning is as follows: If agreement is non-occurrence, it becomes something more like a community dispositional account and thereby encounters the problems associated with dispositional accounts (which will be discussed at length in Section 4.5). If it is occurrence, it becomes a rule for interpreting a rule as Kripke describes (1982, p.
For example, if the rule for addition is reduced to another rule such as: ‘Respond to an addition problem exactly as others do’, this would count as a ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 146).

There is no fact in virtue of which a speaker means anything by any word. But since there is still a phenomenon of linguistic communication, and the concept of meaning is routinely applied to this, an explanation or account needs to be found. The answer given by Kripke (1982) is that speakers can still assert that they mean a certain thing by a certain word because of the feedback they receive regarding these assertions (explicit or implicit) from the linguistic community. Consistency of usage of a certain utterance or symbol is enforced and reinforced by feedback from the linguistic community.

3.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE SCEPTICAL SOLUTION

As briefly discussed in Section 2.4, scepticism about linguistic meaning has possible implications for the circumstances under which propositions can be (or can be considered) true. The sceptical solution that Kripke (1982) proposes accepts that there is no such thing as meaning, but it aims to provide a framework for communication and for speakers to feel justified in how they use and interpret words. This section will explore the potential implications for realism that arise from accepting that there is no such thing as meaning. I will argue that these problems are not addressed by adopting the sceptical solution as put forward by Kripke. The most important outcome is that acceptance of meaning scepticism and adoption of the sceptical solution can lead to a kind of global anti-realism. This highlights the importance of finding either a satisfactory straight solution or a formulation of a sceptical solution that addresses these concerns.

3.2.1 Realist Concerns

There are some important implications of the sceptical solution based on the possible effect it could have on certain kinds of realism. The first potential concern is that if we are not realists about the truth conditions of meaning-declarative sentences, we are not realists about the truth conditions of any sentence. An example is Millikan’s assertion that it is a
consequence of Kripke’s (1982) proposal of the paradox that truth rules assign assertability conditions to sentences rather than correspondence truth conditions (1990, p. 323). Millikan’s position is based on her interpretation of Putnam’s (1977) *Reason and Realism*: that by ‘metaphysical realism’ he means ‘correspondence truth’ (1990, p. 324). Regardless of whether this is a widely held interpretation of Putnam, it should be noted that any equivalence of correspondence truth and metaphysical realism is worth exploring further, but such a question is outside the scope of this thesis. Essentially, the realist concern here is that if the ability of speakers to make meaning-declarative sentences is grounded in assertability conditions, *no* sentences can be true in virtue of their meeting truth conditions. This is principally the concern raised by Boghossian (1989, p. 524). The situation that Kripke proposes entails that sentences are assertable, presumably because they meet the assertability conditions. By this reasoning, only a straight solution would allow us to be realists about the truth conditions, not just for all meaning-declarative sentences, but for *any* sentences. To answer the overall question, it is worth investigating the supposed rationale behind the move from ‘I mean x by y is true’ not being true but assertable, to ‘x is true’ as not being true but assertable. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

A further implication is that if we are not realists about the truth conditions of meaning-declarative sentences and therefore all sentences, our ability to be realists about the matters of fact to which these sentences refer could be altered or compromised. This sounds extreme, but the reasoning is reasonably straightforward, if only upon first inspection. If meaning-declarative sentences have no truth conditions, no sentence has truth conditions and there is no such thing as truth—only assertability. The realist concern is that if all statements of truth are grounded in assertability rather than truth conditions, how do we talk about matters of fact in any way other than being assertable or not? Would it make any sense to talk about facts in isolation from assertability? If we can only say that something is assertable, does it even count as a fact? It becomes difficult to make a claim such as ‘It is true that electrons exist’ if we have no coherent concept of truth. As extreme as it sounds, such concerns are worth addressing. This would be an account of language that makes, as
Devitt puts it, ‘no claims about how the world is’ (1997, p. 312). This type of situation is not so much that the existence of objects in the real world is in doubt, but that our words no longer have any connection to that world. A straight solution could avoid this by not starting the line of reasoning in the first place, thereby allowing truth conditions to effectively connect a statement of truth with a state of affairs that obtains.

In Chapters 4–6, it will become apparent that because most straight solutions fail against the Sceptic, very few of them can defuse this concern. It will also become apparent that there is way that the sceptical solution may not entail all of these difficulties. This is discussed in Chapter 7, along with what I will argue to be the best potential straight solution available at this time.

3.2.2 Global Anti-Realism

If the implications above are well-founded—that is, that acceptance of meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution have a profound effect on how we regard the truth conditions of sentences—it is possible that meaning scepticism can lead to a kind of global anti-realism. There are undoubtedly different conceptions of global anti-realism, but for the purposes of this thesis, it is defined as the situation where no sentence is true given its relation to reality. A similar idea is captured by what Devitt (1997) calls ‘global non-factualism’. He does not seriously entertain the notion that there could be an account of language that makes no claims of truth about the world (Devitt, 1997, p. 311), although such a situation could exist hypothetically. Rather, he points out a situation where non-factualism could be anywhere at any one time (Devitt, 1997, p. 312). The notion of global anti-realism being discussed here is somewhat stronger than Devitt’s suggestion because it is possible that no sentence is true in virtue of its relation to reality.

It is worth clarifying that the anti-realism being discussed is not metaphysical in nature. No claim is being made that one account of language being true or not has implications, in and of itself, for what exists in a mind-independent and objective reality. Nor is it being claimed that any account of meaning has any effect on whether reality is mind-
independent. While there might be arguments to the effect that being able to say that something is true somehow alters the state of the world, they are not part of the current discussion.

A brief illustration shows why this should be the case. Imagine that I have two containers on my desk—one containing 57 marbles and the other 68. If we were asked to state how many marbles there are on the desk, it is possible to express sceptical doubts about what the answer is or should be, but the grounds on which we could do so may vary. It could be that scepticism on how to answer is grounded in scepticism about the meaning of words used to denote the things on the desk. Our scepticism about the number of things on the desk might be caused by scepticism about our ability to know the fact of the matter of how many items there are on the desk, perhaps because we cannot trust our perceptions, or we might express scepticism about the actual number of things on the desk. The first form of scepticism, which is roughly the meaning scepticism that Kripke (1982) defends, does not call into question the independent physical reality of how many objects are on the desk. The second candidate, epistemic scepticism, casts doubt on the physical reality of the situation, as we may not be able to trust what we can see. The final scepticism, which is more constitutive in nature, questions the number of marbles on the desk, although it can only viably do so with an element of epistemological scepticism. This is because if we are not sceptical about the reliability of our observations in this case, we can hardly be sceptical about the number of marbles. If the Sceptic convinces us to use quus rather than plus, our answer regarding the marbles will be ‘5’. It seems sensible to assume, without further arguments to the contrary, that the physical reality of the marbles has not changed, and nor has the level of trust that we place on our perceptions.

Thus, the discussion focuses on arguments regarding anti-realism of a semantic nature, including those made by Young (1995), Millikan (1990) and Boghossian (1989). These arguments are concerned with the connection between what is labelled in a language as being ‘true’ and what is happening in the world.
In this context, the position of realism is that whether a sentence is true is related to reality. The most obvious example of this is the correspondence theory of truth. Thus, anti-realism is the position that a sentence being true is not determined by its relation to reality; it might be determined by something else or it could be the case that nothing determines the truth of a sentence. Under most realist and robust conceptions of language and truth, some sentences will never be judged as true or not against reality, hence Devitt’s formulation of ‘Correspondence Truth $x$', where only some sentences are said to correspond to reality (1997, p. 29). He cites the example that someone can be a realist about sentences regarding physical phenomena, but an anti-realist about sentences regarding moral properties (Devitt, 1997, p. 29). Global anti-realism is different in that it is the position that no sentence is true in relation to reality. Young states that this position constitutes anti-realism with regard to all classes of sentences (1987, p. 641), but there may be variations within this overall position. It may be that, as with Young’s account, truth is determined by the warranting conditions of sentences (Young, 1987, p. 641). More radically, it may be that nothing determines the truth of any sentence. The difference between these two ideas may be seen as hair-splitting and will be discussed further below. The most important feature is that the truth of any sentence will no longer be in virtue of a state of the world, even if that sentence ostensibly has that state of the world as its subject or referent.

The argument for meaning scepticism leading to global anti-realism is quite straightforward. Meaning scepticism holds that words, expressions and symbols have no meaning because there is no such thing. Sentences comprising words that have no meaning in turn have no meaning themselves; consequently, they can be said to be neither true nor false. There are only a limited number of ways that this conclusion could not follow, and none of them are particularly plausible. It certainly seems implausible (at this stage) to suggest that a sentence comprising meaningless words can somehow still have meaning. Similarly, it seems unlikely that such a sentence can be either true or false in any conventional manner. This is true even if sentences are taken as the unit of meaning, because their constituent words no longer refer to or denote anything in particular (or at all).
Unsurprisingly, it follows that the sceptical solution does not guarantee against global anti-realism. If anything, it supports global anti-realism by arguing for an account of language that views the legitimate use of words in terms of what can be asserted, and nothing more. It should come as no surprise that the notion of the assertion of a meaning of a word resembles Young’s (1995) use of ‘warrant’. The argument that the sceptical solution entails global anti-realism seems to be as follows. If individual words do not have meanings, but rather their use is simply a matter of conditions of what can be asserted (or not), whole sentences are rendered neither objectively true nor false. In the absence of anything else, the only way to make sense of sentences is to treat them the same way that the sceptical solution treats individual expressions; they are simply assertable or not. This is consistent with Millikan’s (1990) view that Kripke’s (1982) argument entails that assertability conditions apply to sentences rather than correspondence truth conditions (1990, p. 323). Millikan’s criticism can also be used to show that Kripke’s account may entail verificationism and will be discussed separately. Kripke seems to suggest that the sceptical account of meaning is incompatible with correspondence truth—that ‘correspondence-to-facts must be cleared away’ (1982, p. 79) for the problem to be solved.

In a similar line of reasoning, Boghossian (1989) argues that the sceptical solution ‘forces’ the adoption of ‘global non-factualism’. He argues that meaning-declarative sentences have no truth conditions; that is, they are not truth-conditional (Boghossian, 1989, p. 524). This is consistent with Kripke’s (1982) formulation of the problem and solution. Given that the truth condition of a sentence is at least part of a function of its meaning, it follows that non-factualism about meaning will entail non-factualism about truth conditions (Boghossian, 1989, p. 524). If there are no such things as truth conditions, it follows that no sentence can have them. It is on this basis that Boghossian founds his claim that if there is no such thing as meaning, no sentence has truth conditions.

In the context of the kind of global anti-realism defended by Young (1987, 1995), the truth of meaning-declarative sentences (and meanings) can only be determined by whether speakers are warranted in asserting something as being true. It follows that all
sentences are, at best, true in virtue of how speakers are warranted in using them. But the kind of global anti-realism that Kripke (1982) implies is much stronger. Consider (again) a meaning-declarative sentence (e.g., ‘By the “+” sign I mean “plus”’). Young’s (1995) account indicates that its truth (or not) is due to whether it is warranted in terms of its coherence with a ‘practicable system’ of beliefs. However, when taken at face value, Kripke’s account is specific in stating that meaning is not reduced to conditions of assertability (1982, pp. 111, 146). This position indicates that such a meaning-declarative sentence as mentioned above can be asserted to be true in virtue of agreement. But by this account, it will not ever be true, per se. Hence, a meaning-declarative sentence can only ever be assertable or not.

If the solution to ‘68 + 57’ is ‘125’ in virtue of community agreement, Kripke argues that this is a form of ‘community disposition’ solution, which is prey to arguments regarding finitude (1982, p. 111). This is not expanded upon in detail, but the quotations that Wittgenstein (1967) uses to support this argument illuminate this position somewhat. Wittgenstein admits that the sentences ‘Human beings believe that twice two is four’ and ‘Twice two is four’ do not mean the same thing (1967, p. 226). Kripke seems to implicitly use this to support his position regarding the equivocation of performance with correctness.

The other factor in ruling out agreement constituting truth is that, in Kripke’s opinion, the explicit use of agreement will constitute a rule for interpreting a rule (1982, p. 146). Just as the Sceptic can argue that a speaker is wrong with regard to their use of ‘+’, he can make the same claim about the word ‘agree’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 146). For example, the Sceptic can ask whether Kripke (1982) meant agree or quagree. Such a move will induce the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ problem that has been described previously. The sceptical solution, as formulated by Kripke at least, does not ostensibly allow for any possibility of any sort of truth conditions being applicable to meanings. This would constitute a stronger form of global anti-realism than Young’s (1995) account, as no account of the truth of meanings is preserved. If the step can be made from the use of all words being grounded in
assertability to the use of all whole sentences being grounded in assertability, the move to
global anti-realism is complete.

The other way in which Kripke’s (1982) account of meaning can entail anti-realism
that is wide-ranging, if not actually global, is through its potential effect on reference. If
reference is treated as interchangeable with meaning, serious issues may be raised regarding
the ability of even everyday statements to be truth-apt. Consider the following: a speaker
says ‘It is raining’. If there is no fact in virtue of which ‘rain’ refers to water falling out of
the sky as opposed to a quas-like variant, the statement cannot be judged as true or false
because the subject is indeterminate. It is not just that we do not know what is being referred
to; it appears that nothing is being determinately referred to. There is some ambiguity
regarding whether Kripke intends for this scepticism to extend to reference. On one hand, the
example of the ‘tabair’ under the Eiffel Tower (Kripke, 1982, p. 19) is clearly about
reference. On the other, his footnote differentiates the notions of denoting a meaning and
referring to an individual (Kripke, 1982, p. 9). On balance, it seems that the tabair example
makes his intentions clear. If this scepticism extends to reference, the account of truth that
can be maintained will be altered. The sceptical solution in this case will admit that there is
no such thing as a word determinately referring to a particular thing (or class of things etc.),
but that speakers’ declarations of reference, like their declarations of meaning, have
assertability conditions. If the solution is to say that words have conditions under which their
use is acceptable to the linguistic community, this would seem to capture both meaning and
reference. The point is that it appears that words such as ‘tiger’ do not really refer to
members of a class. Our use of that word does not necessarily have anything to do with that
class of felines. The only necessary connection is to the linguistic community and the so-
called ‘language game’.

One objection to this may be that assertability conditions entail that we will use the
word ‘tiger’ in response to tiger-like stimuli. However, at best, the situation will be as Young
describes: that there are causal relationships between certain sentences and mind-
independent reality, but they will not be sematic relations (1995, p. 31). Putting aside
Young’s view for the moment, if the use of a word to refer to something is nothing more than assertability, a statement such as ‘There is a tiger out of its cage!’ becomes neither true nor false; it is simply assertable or not. If this can be extended to all or any referring terms, the situation of global non-factualism as described by Devitt (1997) arises; anywhere we can think to look, there is no connection between words and the world (1997, p. 312). While this is one of the most important implications of meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution for realism, it is also the area where some of the strongest objections against Kripke’s conclusions can be made. These objections form part of the argument in Chapter 7, where I consider the interaction of meaning scepticism and causal theories of reference in more detail.

If the use of the word ‘true’ by speakers is affected by the relevant associated assertability conditions, its use will vary according to the specifics of those conditions. If the conditions favour a correspondence theory, that is how it will be used. If they favour a deflationary or warranted-assertability-based theory, that is how it will be used. The problem is that ‘true’ and ‘assertable’ will have no objectively true meaning, which may induce a paradox. If all sentences are simply assertable and not true, no sentence can be constructed to show that this is in fact objectively true (even if it is the state of affairs that obtains). Thus, sentences such as ‘There is no such thing as truth; there is only assertability’ would only ever be assertable or not. It can be said that such a line of reasoning begs the question by assuming that truth must be objective, but this does no good, as a non-objective notion of truth would still need to be retained, and Kripke (1982) is clear that agreement does not equal truth. It can appear that a way out of the paradox is to let go of truth altogether. Thus, a sentence such as ‘There is no such thing as truth; there is only assertability’ would only ever need to be assertable. This is fine, if in fact it is assertable and is also the state of affairs that obtains, and this is where the problem diverges markedly from that discussed by Young (1995, pp. 22–24). If the sentence is not assertable but it is the state of affairs that obtains, the situation is that the connection between our sentences and reality is severely undermined.
A sentence cannot be considered assertable or not in isolation from the beliefs of the linguistic community; that is simply what assertability is.

We find ourselves in a dilemma, as there is a situation where a sentence is assertable regardless of the state of affairs. To deal with this, it is necessary to take one of the following approaches. The first is severing the connection between what is assertable and reality. The other is to argue that assertable sentences will somehow match the state of the world. The former commits the sceptical account of meaning to entailing global anti-realism. On top of that, it seems odd because it has no way of explaining sentences about reality that have obvious and actual utility in speakers’ lives. The latter choice might limit the occurrence of assertable statements that are out of line with the world, but it will also introduce new problems. For example, a theory of assertability based on correspondence (applying only to certain sentences, obviously)—where statements about the world are only assertable if they correspond with the world—is only possible if determinate reference between the constituent words and the world can be shown to obtain. If reference is possible, which in itself would prove Kripke (1982) at least partially wrong, it could be difficult to justify why a correspondence theory of assertability is more applicable than a correspondence theory of truth. It is worth mentioning that a notion of ‘warrant’ is unhelpful with regard to avoiding anti-realism because it just shifts the problem. Why is \( x \) assertable? Because it is warranted. But why is it warranted? And so on.

Any argument concerning the connection between language and the world has to come back to reality eventually. An account that shows that what is assertable is restricted by reality may, upon close inspection, come to resemble a theory of truth. In any case, such details are absent from Kripke’s (1982) account of the sceptical solution. As previously stated, Kripke holds that the way in which the checks on what is assertable are carried out seems to be a ‘primitive part of the language game’ and needs no further explanation (1982, p. 101). But without any ‘further explanation’, the sceptical account commits itself to entailing global anti-realism.
The implications of global anti-realism in the context of the sceptical solution are difficult to overstate. If it were the case that sentences were simply assertable or not, the account of language put forward becomes verificationist at best. Likewise, if correct, it could render all talk of ‘truth’ as problematic at best. However, it could be much worse. If all there was to a sentence was that it was assertable or not within a specific linguistic setting, all manner of things that have no relation to reality could presumably be asserted as being true. From the perspective of the present time, it might be acceptable to say that there have been many periods in history where this has been the case, and even that it is still the case now. Significant as this is, it is not the core of the problem. The main problem is that, under such an account, there is no possibility of there ever being a certain kind of connection between language and reality.
Chapter 4: Dispositional Straight Solutions

Accounts of meaning that make use of the dispositions of speakers as straight solutions seem to be among the most numerous responses to Kripke’s (1982) sceptical challenge. As I will discuss in Section 4.1, Kripke’s arguments show a simplistic conception of the dispositional account of meaning to be almost instantly problematic. As discussed in Section 4.1.1, Hattiangadi (2006) and Handfield and Bird (2008) effectively expand upon the difficulties that Kripke saw for the dispositional approach. There are several sophisticated variations on this type of response, but they are equally problematic, as will be shown. These sophisticated responses, which are discussed in their own sections below, are as follows:

1. In Section 4.2, I discuss the idea that dispositions globally determine intentional states in a necessary rather than a priori sense, and that Kripke does not properly address such a possibility, as argued by Soames (1997).

2. In Section 4.3, I consider the argument that the dispositional account can be modified with the addition of a ceteris paribus clause to deal with the finite nature of human dispositions. Particular attention is given to the arguments of Fodor (1990) and Kowalenko (2009).

3. In Section 4.4, I explore the idea that a ‘second-order’ disposition to maintain consistent ‘first-order’ dispositions to use words in a certain way addresses the problems encountered by simple dispositional accounts, as argued by Coates (1997).

4. In Section 4.5, I consider the possibility that the dispositions of the whole community rather than the individual determine meaning. This approach is put forward by Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990).

All of these accounts of meaning fail as responses to the challenge put forward by Kripke’s Sceptic. Based on my assessment of these arguments, I will conclude that dispositional accounts of meaning fail in a generalisable sense.
4.1 GENERAL PROBLEMS

In the simplest sense, the dispositional answer to meaning scepticism as described by Kripke (1982) is as follows: ‘To mean addition by “+” is to be disposed, when asked for any sum “x + y” to give the sum of x and y as the answer (in particular, to say “125” when queried about “68 + 57”’) (1982, p. 22). Kusch phrases the answer that would be given to the Sceptic as follows: it is a fact about a speaker that when faced with the query ‘68 + 57 = ?’, the speaker is disposed to answer ‘125’ and, as shown by the symbol ‘+’, the speaker meant the addition function (2006, p. 95). The advantage of such an approach is that it is not susceptible to the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ problem. Another potential advantage is that, if dispositions can answer this question, there is a reduced need to go into further analysis or detail, at least for the case of meaning. It is worth pointing out that there is a real (or at least plausible) sense in which speakers have dispositions to react in certain ways to certain signs or stimuli. Kripke is not denying that we have these; rather, his argument is with the significance of these dispositions in terms of language and meaning.

It is reasonably clear from early on that unsophisticated dispositionalism is going to struggle as a satisfactory straight solution. For a dispositional account to work, it has to be able to say how and why we are disposed to answer using ‘plus’ rather than ‘quus’. According to Kripke (1982), a more serious issue is how to deal with the disposition to make mistakes. The problem is that no appeal to the correct answer can be made without being caught in circularity: ‘But a disposition to make a mistake is simply a disposition to give an answer other than the one that accords with the function I meant’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 30). The circularity can be summed up thus; how do you know a speaker has the right disposition? They give the right answer. How do we know it is the right answer? It is the one they are disposed to give. And so on.

We can only say that speakers have a disposition to make a mistake if it is already known what they meant. If we do not know what they mean, we cannot differentiate between a disposition to make a mistake and a disposition to mean something else. In the case that Kripke (1982) puts forward, the disposition to mean plus but also to make a mistake cannot
be distinguished from the disposition to mean quus. This is because it is not known what the speaker meant, if in fact they meant anything at all. This feature of the dispositional answer to the sceptical challenge causes the most difficulty for this approach. The disposition to answer ‘125’ can only be seen as justifying the answer if it is already known that adding is the correct interpretation of the ‘+’ sign.

The difficulty in defining meaning in terms of dispositions without falling into circularity is also reflected in Hattiangadi’s (2006) work, where she argues that the failure of dispositions as an account does not hinge on being unable to capture the normative aspect. As she formulates it, the dispositionalist solution entails that the conditions of correct use for a term can be read off a speaker’s dispositions to use that term (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 229). The difficulty is then being able to account for times when a speaker is disposed to use a term incorrectly, whether it is through error or deliberate misapplication. To isolate only the disposition to use a term correctly, the conditions of correct use must already be known. Of course, this is the same problem that Kripke points out regarding dispositions; that is, that a disposition to make a mistake is a disposition to use a term in a different way than that which accords with the supposed meaning of that term (1982, p. 30). If the meaning is in doubt, it cannot definitively be regarded as a mistake. If dispositions cannot definitively say what usage is a mistake and what is not, they cannot be the fact in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain term; that is, they cannot be the solution.

4.1.1 Finks, Masks and Privileged Dispositions

As we have seen, the ongoing difficulty with dispositional analyses of meaning is that dispositions fail to distinguish incorrect usage of a word from correct usage without begging the question against the Sceptic. It is arguably this problem that is described in further detail by Handfield and Bird in ‘Dispositions, rules, and finks’ (2008). For a disposition—in this case, a disposition to answer ‘125’ when asked to add 68 and 57—other factors can interfere and in some way stop the expected outcome from occurring. These factors are known as finks, which act to eliminate the disposition’s causal basis before it can
manifest, and *masks or antidotes*, which interfere with the normal process of a disposition producing its outcome. Martin and Heil (1998) argue that these factors can be used to fix the dispositional account. The hope is that, by allowing a clear distinction to be made between dispositions to use a word correctly and dispositions to make mistakes, those dispositions will no longer ‘underdetermine meaning’ (Hattiangadi, 2006).

Handfield and Bird (2008) argued the opposite. As some finks or masks can be intrinsic, it follows that the disposition to add correctly must be somehow *privileged* over those that cause error (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295). If one disposition can be privileged over others, this (in theory) will allow dispositional analysis to distinguish the disposition to make a mistake from the disposition to mean something different by a word. Differentiating why a certain intrinsic property of a speaker is a *privileged* disposition that constitutes them meaning a certain thing by a certain word, whereas others are excluded, is the core of what Handfield and Bird term the ‘privileging problem’. One solution they consider is that the possession of the rule for adding is demarcated by a component of their nervous system having the pertinent disposition, while all other interfering factors are considered separate components to this (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295). Handfield and Bird concede that this may, as Martin and Heil (1998) suggest, allow for *finks* and *masks* that are intrinsic to the individual, such as lack of memory or lack of capacity to add very large numbers, to be separated from the relevant disposition (296) and therefore bolster the dispositional account (295). However, some *finks or masks* may be intrinsic to the same physical component as the disposition that supposedly instantiates the rule. The part of the brain that has the disposition to add correctly is also inherently subject to decay over time, which will interfere with the ability to add (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 296). If the decay is intrinsic to the part of the brain with the disposition to add, it cannot be true that the disposition determines the correct outcome (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 296). This is because the disposition to add will not be able to be separated from the disposition to make a mistake. If the disposition to give a correct answer and the disposition to make a mistake are inherent in the same physical component of the brain and occur because of the same physical laws, they can be conceived
as part of one disposition that produces both incorrect and correct outcomes. This clearly presents a problem for the dispositional account.

Handfield and Bird (2008) describe a further permutation of the privileging problem:

What exact entity is the disposition being attributed to? In response to Martin and Heil (1998), Handfield and Bird consider the possibility that a speaker’s possession of a rule is because a particular component of their nervous system has the relevant disposition and that the interfering factors are separate from this component (2008, p. 295). For example, a calculator uses a processor to perform arithmetical functions, but it has limited memory and display capacity (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295). The limit on what size calculations it can perform is not due to the processor; it is due to the memory and display (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295). So, to extend the adding capacity, the calculator needs more memory and a larger display, but not a new processor (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295). Similarly, the hope is that the speaker has a component of their nervous system that has the disposition that entails the ‘plus rule’, but that is distinct from the interfering factors that stymie expression of that disposition (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 295).

However, this move against the Sceptic is unsuccessful. If the memory component must be considered separate from the processor component, whatever disposition it possesses may not exemplify anything that we would consider ‘adding’ (Handfield & Bird, 2008, p. 296). If this were the case, the natural question to ask is: Why is the processor component privileged in the first place if it cannot produce the required outcome? If producing the required outcome is the relevant measure of success, the system has to be considered as a whole, including the interfering dispositions. It is worth noting of this discussion that Kripke (1982) would see this line of reasoning as circular and not worth pursuing. Any notion of ‘producing a required outcome’ already assumes that a correct result exists and is known. As I will argue in the discussion of ceteris paribus clauses in Section 4.3, this is not a legitimate assumption.

One more possible problem for the component modification to the dispositional account is that the less modular an account of neurophysiology is used, the less chance there
seems to be of coherently isolating the dispositions to give correct answers from the
dispositions that interfere with them. It seems much harder to do this using an account where
the process in the brain does not fit the model of ‘components’ as distinct entities as
postulated above. An example of this is the idea that domain-general processing or executive
processing in the brain can influence the ability to undertake specific kinds of mathematical
tasks as investigated by Wilson and Swanson (2001). However, this is a lesser problem, as
no matter how well defined the account of neurophysiology is that is being used, the *finks*
and *masks* cannot be defined without circularity.

Overall, Handfield and Bird (2008) do not conclude that dispositions cannot, *a priori*, be a solution; rather, a great deal of work is needed, and significant questions remain. But the privileging problem, as they describe it, carries considerable force because it is a reflection of the problems described by both Kripke (1982) and Hattiangadi (2006). It cannot be overcome because to know which disposition to privilege is to know what the speaker meant, which entails assuming that there is such a thing as meaning.

Even if the disposition to add can be separated from other interfering dispositions, the discussion of *ceteris paribus* idealisations below will show that the way forward is not as simple as Handfield and Bird (2008) suggest. A speaker, whose dispositions interfere with their ability to do arithmetic have been quantified, and an idealised speaker, have a common quality, as there are at least some cases where it can be said that both are performing one particular arithmetical function and not another. Even if the *finks* and *masks* can adequately be identified, the problem ends up being the same as that of the ‘infinite cognitive agent’ discussed in Section 4.3.1. The disposition to perform addition correctly says nothing about the correct interpretation of the ‘+’ sign or whether a uniquely correct interpretation even exists. Knowing which dispositions are masking the ability to do arithmetic does not beg the question, but identifying the dispositions that interfere with the disposition to interpret ‘+’ as meaning plus does beg the question. The disposition to add can only be identified and separated from interfering dispositions if the question of whether the speaker is adding or *quadding* has already been settled. Therefore, if anything, Handfield and Bird’s conclusion
does not acknowledge the significance of the problems. In that sense, they are mistaken. No amount of work on identifying *finks* and *masks* can salvage the dispositional account.

Providing a justification for a normative requirement in an account of meaning is also cited by Hattiangadi (2006) as a difficulty for dispositional accounts. Even if it is clear that a speaker is disposed to answer in a certain way when asked to add two numbers together, it seems unclear that such a disposition should confer any normative force. If speakers are disposed to answer in a certain way, it does not follow that they should answer that way. At issue here is (arguably) an ‘Is–Ought’ type of problem. Saying that a speaker *should* have a certain disposition is not very constructive; even admitting that much is to accept that such a disposition cannot provide normative force. When it comes to normative considerations, the simple dispositional account has a limited number of ways to remain coherent. Essentially, there are two options: show that normative requirements are waived, thus potentially enabling a purely descriptive account to be acceptable, or show that normative requirements can be derived from descriptive factors. That is, find a way, for meaning at least, to derive ‘Ought’ from ‘Is’. In many ways, these considerations apply to all straight solutions that have no other way of accounting for normativity. Indeed, any straight solution will have to deal with these considerations unless it has another way of accounting for normative considerations.

In response to Kripke’s (1982) attack on dispositions as a possible answer to the sceptical challenge, many models of more sophisticated dispositional accounts have been put forward. These accounts all fail to some extent. The issue of circularity—where the account can only get off the ground if it begs the question—almost always sits at the core of these failures. The problem of being unable to tell a speaker what they should do—the problem of providing normative force—is often closely associated with these difficulties.

### 4.2 SOAMES ON NECESSARY ENTAILMENT

The first of the more sophisticated dispositional accounts to be considered is that of Scott Soames (1997) from ‘Scepticism about Meaning: Indeterminacy, Normativity and the
Rule-Following Paradox’. Rather than modifying the dispositional account to meet the sceptical challenge, Soames’s argument seeks to show that Kripke’s position relies on an equivocation regarding what constitutes ‘determination’. Kusch states that the core of Kripke’s (1982) criticism of the dispositional account is that non-intentional or non-occurrence facts about a speaker’s past dispositions cannot determine their current intentional or occurrence states (2006, p. 116). In one sense, Soames admits, Kripke is right to conclude that dispositionalism is unsuccessful because dispositions fail to determine meaning in an a priori sense (1997, p. 231). Given a strict account of this type of determination—’P determines Q only if, given P, one can demonstrate Q without appealing to any other empirical facts’ (Soames, 1997, p. 223)—it is not particularly difficult (especially in light of other dispositional accounts) to see how dispositions fail to determine meanings. Soames admits under these circumstances that the Sceptic may be correct in holding the position that what a speaker means is not an a priori consequence of non-intentional facts (1997, p. 231). However, he maintains that this admission is not cause to abandon all ‘pre-theoretic commitment to meaning facts’ (Soames, 1997, p. 248). This is because, while it may be the case that the proposition that a speaker meant plus by ‘+’ is not an a priori consequence of their past dispositions, it is a necessary consequence of their past dispositions (Soames, 1997, p. 225). To answer the Sceptic, the dispositional account has to defend the thesis that intentional states are a necessary consequence of non-intentional facts (Kusch, 2006, p. 117).

Soames bases his argument on a particular form of Kripke’s attack on meaning that explores equating performance and correctness. Kripke argues that if we assume determinism, even if we mean to denote no particular function by the sign ‘*’, then much in the same way as it is for ‘+’, there is a uniquely determined answer for any use of ‘*’ because the speaker’s response is causally determined (1982, p. 24).

Soames’s (1997) argument is as follows. Assuming determinism, a speaker will give arbitrary responses to m*n, where * is a sign where the speaker means to denote no particular function. In a physically deterministic universe, there is a uniquely determined answer p that the speaker will give (to m*n). It is not obvious that applying ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to the
answers in this case will make any sense, as ‘*’ denotes no particular function. Nor can appealing to the intentions of the speaker be of any help, as consistency of intention is not the same as meaning. The same cannot be said for the ‘+’ sign. Kusch elaborates that in the case of ‘+’, speakers do not just happen to conform to the function (as they do with *); rather, they intend to do so (2006, p. 117). As Kripke says, the problem for the dispositional account is that it equates performance and correctness (1982, p. 24). The answers for both * and + are equally determined by the dispositions of the speaker. Kripke’s argument is that these dispositions cannot capture the difference between the two cases. On this note, Soames concedes that verbal dispositions to respond to questioning sentences involving * or + are not enough to capture meaning (Soames, 1997, p. 226). As it is possible for a speaker to have the dispositions without meaning the function, a speaker meaning the function cannot be a necessary consequence of the specified verbal dispositions (Soames, 1997, p. 226).

Even if a narrowly construed set of dispositions fails to metaphysically determine meaning, Soames questions whether it is possible that the same result will obtain if the non-intentional facts are expanded to include, for example:

(i) the internal physical states of my brain
(ii) my causal and historical relationships to things in my environment
(iii) my (non-intentionally characterised) interactions with other members of my linguistic community
(iv) their dispositions to verbal behaviour (Soames, 1997, p. 229).

The scope of non-intentional facts thus expanded, Soames (1997) questions whether there is a possible world where these non-intentional or non-occurrent facts are the same, but where he does not mean anything by ‘+’ (1997, p. 229). His answer is, of course, ‘no’. Kusch characterises Soames’s position thus: once the net is cast wide enough for non-intentional facts, it becomes increasingly unlikely that the metaphysical determination of intentional facts fails, and that Soames’s argument comes down to a question of global v. local

The question of global supervenience on dispositions is worth exploring. Is there a possible world—physically identical to this one—where I or any other speaker might mean something different by our words? Soames (1997) would say not. In one sense, it is helpful to consider another example where the relationship between non-intentional and intentional facts is the issue at hand to see whether this would effect Soames’s conclusion.

When exploring the notion of the supervenience of the phenomenal quality of consciousness on physical structures, the question: ‘Is there a possible world, physically identical to this one where there are philosophical zombies?’ has been considered by philosophers such as Chalmers (1996), Dennett (1995), Kirk (1974) and Searle (1992). That is, is there a possible world in which all other physical facts are identical to this one, but where there is no phenomenal consciousness or qualia present? Notably, this thought experiment is used in connection with the question of whether subjective conscious experience or qualia are supervenient upon the physical world. A thorough treatment of this can be found in Chalmers (1996). Of more direct relevance to the question of meaning, Thomas (1998) argues that if the speech and claims of philosophical zombies have the same effect on each other as in the real world, the claim that zombies do not mean anything by any word must be false. This seems fair; as Thomas points out, epiphenomenalism about consciousness and epiphenomenalism about language are different propositions (1998). It is worth remembering that Thomas is assuming the existence of meaning; his point is that how meaning is construed or how it functions does not necessarily differ in relation to whether qualia are present. It is also worth noting that Thomas’s philosophical zombies would presumably behave the same way even under conditions that assume meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution.

This seems reasonable in the context of Soames’s (1997) account, as dispositions are not only non-intentional, but they are the same in his zombie twin as they are in him. If philosophical zombies were possible, meaning would only be different if it were tied to
consciousness, as Searle (1992) has argued elsewhere. Thus, if a zombie world where all non-intentional facts were identical to this one were possible and if phenomenal consciousness was a necessary condition for meaning, there would be a possible world where the non-intentional facts were identical, but where meaning was absent. If Thomas (1998) is right in his previous claim—that the speech of philosophical zombies has an identical physical effect on each other as our speech does in the real world—Searle’s claim stands in need of clarification, at the very least. Assessing Searle’s position on consciousness or the possibility of philosophical zombies would be a considerable undertaking, and it is outside the scope of this thesis, but it is a possible area for future investigation.

However, there is a much more straightforward approach to undermining Soames’s (1997) argument. The Sceptic could concede that in a possible world where the non-intentional facts were identical, the intentional facts would also be identical, without abandoning their position. This is because they could simply claim that the intentional fact of meaning something by a word does not exist in any of these possible worlds. Consistency between intentional and non-intentional facts gives rise to nothing more than the conclusion that meaning is equally likely to exist in any of these possible worlds, and the Sceptic will argue that this entails that the likelihood is equally low. Soames anticipates this response in admitting that the Sceptic would not accept his argument on the grounds that it does not show that meanings are an a priori consequence of non-intentional truths (1997, p. 230). However, this response does not carry much force, as Soames is entertaining an equivocation of his own. Despite his claims, he does not show that meanings are a necessary consequence of non-intentional facts—only that the actions of speakers are, because meanings can only be a necessary consequence of non-intentional facts if there is such a thing as meaning.

As previously stated, Kusch (2006) argues that Soames (1997) is attempting to rescue dispositionalism by showing that meaning facts supervene globally on non-intentional facts. Kusch’s response is relatively short. The complete history of the world to date—that is, ‘everything’—is not a single ‘fact’ that can be cited in response to the Sceptic (Kusch, 2006, p. 119). And even if the question of ‘fact’ v. ‘collections of facts’ is put aside, it remains a
problematic relation because all meaning attributions are justified by the same fact, which contradicts our intuitions about meaning (Kusch, 2006, p. 119). With regard to whether a single fact or collection of facts is cited, Kripke (1982) is ambivalent. Despite Kusch’s approach, both are worth examining in this case, although the outcome is ultimately the same.

First, the Sceptic can accept the global supervenience of intentional facts on non-intentional facts without giving up their position. Two worlds that are physically identical with regard to non-intentional facts can have the same intentional properties, such as meaning, if there are no such intentional properties (Kusch, 2006, p. 119). This might seem unlikely if one accepts that a speaker answering ‘58 + 67 = ?’ with ‘125’ is determined by the non-intentional facts, and that the speaker will answer the same in all worlds where the non-intentional facts are the same. The problem with this idea makes more sense if what Soames (1997) is proposing is slightly re-phrased and the assumption of meaning is removed.

Consider (again) two worlds that are identical with regard to non-intentional facts. Soames (1997) argues that in these two worlds, in identical physical circumstances, two versions of the same person will give identical answers when asked to add two numbers. This seems plausible, and the Sceptic is not denying this. However, if the assumption of meaning is taken away or suspended, the fact that these answers will be identical is the only fact that we can be sure of. Any further inferences may not be justified. Consider two versions of the same speaker in these two non-intentional fact-identical worlds. In this example, the speaker is mistaken about the meaning of a word. If Soames is right, they will give identical but incorrect responses in both worlds. The fact that these responses are identical does not make them any more correct. Soames might be right in saying that our responses and actions necessarily follow from these non-intentional facts. Unfortunately, they do so equally whether they are, by any measure, the correct response or not. The fact that I used the ‘+’ sign to mean plus would supervene globally. But if I were to use the ‘+’ sign to mean quus, that would supervene globally as well. At the risk of asking a rhetorical
question, how could my use of ‘+’ to mean quus or anything else not supervene globally? If, as Kusch suggests, the collection of non-intentional facts is considered one fact (2006, p. 119), it is the same ‘fact’ that necessarily stands behind both correct and incorrect uses of things like ‘+’. It would seem that any use of any word, correct or otherwise, would be necessarily dependent on this fact; that is, incorrect and correct uses of a word supervene globally on non-intentional facts. This would mean that, again, dispositions fail to distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of a word.

If the non-intentional facts are considered a collection of facts rather than a single fact, the way is open to choose the ‘relevant’ non-intentional facts and discard those that lead to incorrect responses. Of course, this is of little help, as it leaves the dispositional account with unresolved questions of differentiating interfering dispositions such as masks and finks from dispositions to use a word correctly, as discussed in Section 4.1.1. The underlying problem of circularity remains unresolved, as a disposition to use a word correctly can only be differentiated from a disposition to use it incorrectly if the meaning of the word is already assumed.

It seems plausible, at least, to accept that intentional facts could supervene globally on non-intentional facts. But as the Sceptic would say, this only follows if the intentional facts in question, such as meaning, actually exist. Kusch concludes that Soames (1997), at best, shows what the relationship between non-intentional and intentional properties would be like if the intentional properties existed (2006, p. 119). This would no more prove the existence of meaning than a perfectly coherent description of a dragon would prove the existence of that fantastic beast. Once the assumption of meaning is suspended, what Soames has actually shown is that actions and states—intentional or otherwise—are necessarily determined by non-intentional facts in a more global than local sense. The main problem is that not only are all correct attributions of meaning determined (and hence justified) by these non-intentional facts (Kusch, 2006, p. 119), but all incorrect attributions of meaning are also determined by them. Thus, the correct attributions would be justified by the same fact or collections of facts as the incorrect ones. Despite his claims to the contrary, Soames’s
argument still commits the error that Kripke points out—he equates performance and correctness (1982, p. 24).

4.3 CETERIS PARIBUS CLAUSES

One approach that Kripke (1982) anticipates, and that is defended by multiple philosophers, is to produce an answer to the sceptical challenge through the use of an idealised disposition. This is to avoid the difficulties that a finite disposition encounters when it is used to justify a function with infinite extension (e.g., ‘+’), as Kripke points out. Thus, the answer to the Sceptic becomes that a speaker is disposed, ceteris paribus, to give the answer ‘125’ to the query ‘What is 57 + 68?’, and that by ‘+’, they mean plus (and not quus) (1982, p. 27). Idealised speakers, those with an infinite and unencumbered disposition to add, will by definition never make an arithmetic mistake (systematic or otherwise), as they are not limited in the same way as a normal speaker. The problems with this approach, which Kripke also anticipates, are severe. He suggests that there may be problems with conceiving of this idealisation in the first place. As we cannot really know what such an idealisation would be like in reality, we cannot know what its actual outcome would be (Kripke, 1982, p. 27). This indicates that the form of the idealisation may be problematic, and that without a clear idea of what the outcome of such idealised conditions would be in real life, the exercise is, as Kripke says, highly speculative. If the conditions of the idealisation cannot be specified in a way that explains how such a theory can be applied in real life, it is difficult to see why the results of the idealisation should carry any weight. Kripke’s comments imply that if this is the case, the results of such an idealisation cannot be considered legitimate. Kripke also points out the more central issue; given that the use of the clause is potentially circular, to know that a speaker—even an idealised one—has the correct disposition, we must already know what they meant (1982, p. 28). This interpretation is shared by Kusch (2006, p. 98). All other things considered equal, it will be seen that proponents of ceteris paribus dispositionalism do not adequately address this central issue.
4.3.1 Fodor and the *Ceteris Paribus* Defence of Dispositionalism

While Kripke (1982) argues against the use of this idealisation, Fodor defends this approach on the grounds that such idealisations are used in the natural sciences, and that to discard its use with regard to meaning is to discard these other ‘legitimate’ uses as well (1990, p. 94). As previously stated, Kripke attacks the idealisation by arguing that the mechanics of the idealisation must be specified in order for it to be acceptable (1982). This is what Fodor primarily seems to be objecting to. He maintains that Kripke assumes that an idealisation cannot be accepted as lawful if the counterfactuals that would be true if the idealised condition were to obtain cannot be specified (Fodor, 1990, p. 94). Fodor’s claim is that such assumptions are not applied in other idealised laws such as ideal gas laws, and rightly so (1990, p. 94). This being the case, Fodor argues that if there were psychological laws that idealise infinite working memory, it would not be necessary to know what would happen if a speaker’s working memory really was infinite in order for these laws to be scientifically acceptable (Fodor, 1990, p. 95). As he says, ‘All we need to know is that, if we did have unbounded memory, then, *ceteris paribus*, we would be able to compute the value of $m + n$ for arbitrary $m$ and $n$’ (Fodor, 1990, p. 95).

Kusch argues at length against this position on the basis that Fodor (1990) incorrectly identifies the nature of idealisation in science (2006, p. 100). Kusch maintains that the ideal gas law is dis-analogous to ‘Fodor’s Law’ on three counts: first, that the ideal gas law is part of a broader system of laws, such as Boyle’s Law and Avogadro’s Law; second, that it is possible to experimentally approximate the values that are predicted by the ideal gas law; and third, that idealised laws tend to be ‘de-idealised’ over time as scientists seek to increase their predictive accuracy by removing idealisations. Kusch takes the progression from the ideal gas law to van der Waal’s equation to be such a case. On this basis, he concludes that Fodor’s use of idealisation is significantly different from its use elsewhere in science. Kusch then makes the comparison to the attachment of *ceteris paribus* clauses to laws in the ‘special sciences’, in particular the cognitive sciences (2006). Other laws in psychology—for example, the Müller–Lyer law regarding the perceived length of
lines with different kinds of arrows on the ends—have implicit *ceteris paribus* clauses (Kusch, 2006, p. 103). Kusch maintains that the *ceteris paribus* clause in the Müller–Lyer law can protect the law from certain kinds of experimental failures, where the experiment is incorrectly set up or there is random interference from the world, but not from substantial failure, where a group of people fail to respond as the law predicted (2006, p. 103). These substantial failures are systematic and reproducible (Mather, 2006, p. 353), making them the kind of failure that would prompt the law to be discarded or refined. For the case of a dispositionalist law, if it could be granted that the *ceteris paribus* clause could protect it from being disproved by experimental failure resulting from an experiment being incorrectly administered, or by random events that interfere with the generalisation, it would not protect it against disproof resulting from systematic and reproducible failures of the experiment to produce the predicted result (Kusch, 2006, p. 104). For a dispositionalist law such as, ‘*Ceteris paribus* when a human has a disposition to token “Lo, a horse”’, then there is a horse in their vicinity’, there are a number of different circumstances where the beliefs of that human might lead them to think ‘Lo, a horse’ when there is no horse present (Kusch, 2006, p. 104). Kusch maintains that these failures are systematic, reproducible and infinite in number, and he argues that the *ceteris paribus* clause does not protect the dispositionalist law from them. Thus, he concludes, the dispositionalist law would require an infinite number of refinements before even being acceptable as a *ceteris paribus* law, clearly setting dispositionalist laws apart from other accepted psychological laws (Kusch, 2006, p. 104).

In a similar vein to Fodor (1990), Kowalenko (2009) argues that Kripke (1982) is wrong to write off the use of *ceteris paribus* conditions. The problem with this argument is essentially the same as the problem with the one that Fodor (1990) puts forward. In terms of scientific laws, we know why the idealised version of gas law differs from reality. The same cannot be said for the disposition of a speaker to add when they see a ‘+’ sign. Like Kusch (2006), I remain sceptical when confronted with the idea that the dispositions of an ‘infinite cognitive agent’ can be identical to those of a finite agent, as advocated by Kowalenko (2009, p. 199).
However, even if Kowalenko (2009) were successful, this might not help the dispositionalist cause. For the sake of argument, let us say, *ceteris paribus*, that a person with sufficient memory can add hyper-large numbers. We could even say that this is because of their disposition to do so. However, this does not necessarily translate to giving normative force to their use of ‘+’. Kowalenko cites Carnap (1936) on dispositions regarding the disposition of glass to be brittle. But we would not say that the disposition of salt to dissolve in water carries any normative force. When we say ‘salt *should* dissolve in water’, we are expressing that we expect a certain outcome. Salt that dissolves as expected does not perform or fulfil any ethical, moral or other normative obligation, nor does it break any moral, ethical or otherwise normative rules if it unexpectedly fails to dissolve (although it would give us reason to think that it was not salt etc.).

Returning to the Sceptic’s challenge, for a disposition to be that in virtue of which a speaker means plus and not quotas, the disposition must determine the answer given to sums involving hyper-large numbers. But, as Kripke points out, the dispositions can only determine the correct answer if it is already known what function the speaker meant (1982, p. 28). The core of why this approach cannot work is that the error that the Sceptic claims the speaker makes is not arithmetical; rather, it is metalinguistic. If arithmetical performance and linguistic performance are not identical, it becomes apparent that this solution will fail. A through exploration of the *ceteris paribus* dispositional solution will show this to be the case.

The disposition of a finite agent (i.e., a normal speaker) to add numbers has an upper limit. Not only are there numbers that they cannot add because their dispositions are too small, but there are also numbers that they have never added before. An agent with infinite capacity to add has no upper limit on their disposition to add numbers. Is the assumption that there are numbers at any given time that they have not added a good one? If the infinitely capable agent exists in the normal flow of time, then yes. However, this indicates that more assumptions are required. If adding takes time, the capacity to add infinitely large numbers requires a correspondingly infinite length of time in which to do so. Thus, perhaps the infinite capacity to add entails that the act of adding takes no time. Note that this idealisation
does not presume that the agent has already done all of the additions before they are asked—if such an agent had not intended to add these numbers, they would not have, even though they could have. If adding does not take time, this constitutes a significant difference in the dispositions of infinite and finite cognitive agents outside of simply having more ‘working memory’ etc.

Therefore, the infinite cognitive agent adding hyper-large numbers requires a hyper-long time in which to do the sums. This might not be a problem, but to give them an infinite amount of time seems at least slightly problematic. It makes sense that an agent could have a much larger or better disposition to undertake some specific task than the average finite human and yet still have finite capacities in many or most other ways. But for an agent to have an infinite disposition and capacity to undertake a task but still be finite in all of their other dispositions seems odd, as considerable capacities are needed to support the infinite disposition to add. Despite the criticism that Kusch (2006) has for the *ceteris paribus* account, none of these issues should count as a fatal blow to such an idealisation, although they suggest that the process of de-idealisation could be difficult. The problem remains; if the mathematical function in question has infinite extension, can philosophers properly conceive of an agent whose dispositions allow them to add infinitely large numbers?

If idealisations are the key to making dispositions work, perhaps the best strategy is to use an idealised agent who cannot possibly make a mistake of any kind. If Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic were to ask God (who surely must be the ultimate infinite cognitive agent) to complete $68 + 57$, and the answer given was 125, on what grounds could the meaning of ‘+’ be questioned? Surely God would be disposed to give that answer. There could be no question, as an omniscient and omnipotent being has (by definition) no dispositions to make mistakes. In addition to having an infinite capacity to add, they are omniscient and so already know the answers to the sums of infinitely large numbers. If an agent with infinite capacity to add was also omniscient and benevolent enough that we trusted them to tell us the truth, surely there could be no doubt. But such an agent is clearly so different from normal finite speakers that to come to any conclusion about the similarities of their dispositions is
profoundly speculative. If nothing else, a reasonable objection would be that omniscience in
the sense of already knowing the answer is not helpful, as Kripke’ example assumes that the
speaker has never done that particular sum before. The same cannot be said for the agent
whose only infinite capacity is for adding. If they have not done the sum before and are not
omniscient, it comes down to the disposition and what it is taken to logically entail.

The primary issue still seems to be that we can only say that this agent has a perfect
disposition to add if it is already known what they meant. Kripke says that a disposition to
give an incorrect answer is to give an answer other than the one that would accord with the
function that he meant (1982, p. 30). It might then be argued that a disposition to give a
correct answer is simply to give an answer that does accord with the function that is meant
by a speaker. We can only legitimately idealise an agent that has a disposition to add and
never quadd if the question of the correct answer, in the metalinguistic sense, is already
settled. That is, we can only idealise this adding agent if we already know what ‘+’ means, or
whether it means anything at all.

If an idealised agent who is always arithmetically correct cannot make a
metalinguistic mistake, there seems to be a possible (and problematic) conflation occurring.
The Sceptic is clear that the speaker has not made an arithmetic mistake. The problem is that
the speaker does not know what ‘+’ means; they just think they do. A speaker who is capable
of adding infinitely large numbers could never make an arithmetic mistake when doing
additions. But does this entail that they really know what ‘+’ means? Perhaps it does. It is
illuminating to consider the following question: Does always being arithmetically right mean
that the speaker cannot make, or has not made in the past, a metalinguistic mistake? If a
speaker with this idealised arithmetical disposition can make a metalinguistic mistake, there
seems to be little point in continuing with this line of enquiry as an answer to the Sceptic. If
this idealised speaker cannot make a metalinguistic mistake, being arithmetically correct (in
this case) is the same as being metalinguistically correct. If a speaker gives ‘125’ as the
answer to ‘68 + 57’, not only have they performed the arithmetic correctly, but they have
also made the right metalinguistic choice by taking ‘+’ to mean plus and not quus. For
normal finite agents, metalinguistic mistakes must be able to occur. An example is a child who is given a long division question in an exam but performs a perfect subtraction. There was nothing wrong with the subtraction calculation; the child just misinterpreted the symbols on the page because they were confused about what the symbols meant. It is possible that they could have done this even if they were otherwise capable of performing long division.

How does an infinite cognitive agent avoid this? It cannot just be that their arithmetic is always perfect. It must be that they always react to the ‘+’ sign in a particular way. They must have an infinite disposition to always make the ‘right’ metalinguistic choice (regardless of whether such a ‘choice’ is considered an ‘occurrent’ or ‘intentional’ process). At this point, it seems fair to wonder if this is begging the question against the Sceptic, but we will put this aside for one moment. The example of the child suggests that it is possible that a certain idealised speaker could have an infinite disposition to react to ‘+’ by attempting to add the numbers without having the infinite arithmetical capacity to actually carry out the calculation. They may make arithmetical mistakes, but never metalinguistic ones. That such an agent is logically possible reinforces the idea that the infinite cognitive agent Fodor (1990) and others make use of must have this metalinguistic disposition. It is not just that they always perform the arithmetic correctly; it is also that they always react to ‘+’ by performing an addition.

The original question posed by the Sceptic was, in dispositional terms, to justify why a speaker had reacted to ‘+’ by performing an addition (not whether they had added correctly). For obvious reasons, a finite disposition is problematic, hence the idealisation suggested by Fodor (1990) and defended by Kowalenko (2009). This speaker has an infinite disposition to perform correct arithmetic, concurrent with an infinite disposition to react to ‘+’ by performing addition calculations. However, this idealisation is problematic. To say that an idealised speaker with an infinite disposition to react to ‘+’ by performing addition calculations will never react by performing a quaddition calculation is not very helpful, as it does not say anything new or surprising. The dispositional answer wants to be able to say that a finite speaker who answers ‘125’ when asked ‘What is 58 +67?’ is metalinguistically...
justified in doing so (because they are disposed to react to ‘+’ in that way), and because an idealised speaker with infinite arithmetical capacity and an infinite disposition to react to ‘+’ in the same way would give the same answer. This is tantamount to saying that the answer you gave is right because someone whom we know is always right would have given the same answer. This might be acceptable if the concern were purely with arithmetic—this is the kind of problem that could be addressed using some sort of mathematical proof that the addition function goes on forever in the same way. Kripke seems to admit that such a proof is possible, but that it is concerned with mathematics and has no bearing on the questions of meaning or intention (1982, p. 54). Therefore, arithmetic idealisation is not the real problem.

The real problem is the metalinguistic idealisation, as it begs the question against the Sceptic. If the scepticism were epistemological—that is, if the Sceptic were saying that there is a correct metalinguistic choice but we do not know what it is—appealing to such an idealisation might be useful. However, the Sceptic is saying that there is no real metalinguistic choice to make in the first place. As there is no fact that distinguishes between metalinguistic correctness and metalinguistic incorrectness, the scepticism is ontological. If asked to prove that there is a fact in virtue of which a speaker is metalinguistically correct (or not), one cannot appeal to an idealised speaker who is always disposed to be metalinguistically correct. The introduction of metalinguistic correctness assumes the existence of the fact that is in question. The divide between arithmetical and metalinguistic is important. Kripke (1982) never objects to anything like a mathematical proof that a given function, such as addition, continues in the same way to an infinite extent. There is no problem with idealising this—in fact, Kripke relies on addition being infinite in order to raise the issue of finitude that ceteris paribus clauses are trying to overcome. However, idealising that a speaker will always use the ‘+’ sign in a particular way, and then equating that with the speaker always meaning a certain thing by that sign, is profoundly problematic.

This should be sufficient objection to rule out using dispositions that have been idealised through the use of ceteris paribus clauses as an answer to Kripke’s Sceptic.
Another related way of stating the problem may not seem as strong, but is perhaps easier to understand. An idealised cognitive agent with an infinite and unencumbered disposition to react to ‘+’ by performing addition will, by definition, always do so when asked what the answer is to any problem of the form \( x + y \). The problem is determining whether they have made a metalinguistic mistake. If Kripke’s Sceptic were to engage in debating the dispositional analysis of the problem at hand, they would ask: Why is the disposition to react by adding known as the right disposition? This idealised speaker can clearly do arithmetic, but their disposition to perform addition rather than *quaddition* has, from the Sceptic’s perspective, led to them making a potentially infinitely long series of metalinguistic mistakes. The point of dispositional analysis is that the Sceptic cannot raise issues of interpretation because they are non-occurrence thought processes, so giving the Sceptic access to them might seem controversial. Nevertheless, an infinite disposition to react to ‘+’ in line with the ‘plus’ interpretation rather than the ‘quus’ interpretation is of little use unless it is already established that the former interpretation is the right one. This is essentially the point that Kusch makes when he asks which idealisation is ‘the right one’ (2006, p. 96).

Consider an example of a non-arithmetical nature. Assume that an idealised agent has an infinite, perfect and unencumbered disposition to identify the metal with the atomic weight of 196.966569. We know this metal as gold. But the idealised disposition to use the word ‘gold’ to refer to this substance is clearly something additional. There could be another idealised agent with the same disposition to identify the substance of a certain atomic weight, but with a different disposition with regard to the word they use to refer to it. Perhaps they are disposed to use ‘silver’ instead. If both agents identify the same substance, but one has an idealised disposition to refer to it as ‘gold’ and the other ‘silver’, on what grounds would it make more sense to say that one is correct and one is not? There are probably reasons as to why one answer is preferable to the other, but the dispositions of the speakers, even with their infinite nature, are not among them. Other factors aside, these dispositions, when taken in isolation, can give no answer to that question, because as soon as they do, they introduce
metalinguistic correctness to justify choosing one disposition over another, and are therefore begging the question. To say that ‘gold’ means gold because a speaker with an idealised disposition to say ‘gold’ always (and unsurprisingly) does just that seems a profoundly inadequate response to the problem at hand.

How then could the *ceteris paribus* idealised disposition be an answer to the Sceptic? One way it could possibly work is to treat arithmetical and metalinguistic capabilities as somehow identical—that correctly carrying out the calculation and correctly interpreting the symbols are one and the same. Another possibility would be that this idealised arithmetical disposition somehow confers an idealised metalinguistic disposition. The latter option clearly suffers from the issue of circularity that has already been explored. The former option is not significantly better. Again, this option begs the question by inducing circularity. The idealised situation above, regarding the ability to identify gold and yet disagree over which word can or should refer to the substance, is conceivable. This is good grounds to think it is right to separate such capabilities from the metalinguistic choices associated with them. The sense in which symbols and the like require interpretation cannot be discarded—certainly Fodor (1990) does not advocate such a position. Even if the idea that arithmetical and linguistic capabilities could be identical was without problems, it would not aid the dispositionalist cause. For the sake of argument, assume that carrying out a function correctly is synonymous with correctly interpreting a sign that denotes that function. If this is the case, unless the possibility of incorrect interpretation has been discarded, all that has been achieved is the undermining of the notion of arithmetic correctness. It is difficult to see how the possibility of incorrect interpretation could be ruled out. It is harder still to see how it could be done without begging the question against the Sceptic.

An illustration can be given of why it makes sense for the disposition to add correctly to be considered separately from the disposition to use the ‘+’ sign a certain way. This has some application to the ‘Machine response’ that Kripke (1982, pp. 33–36) considers (see Section 2.2.2.1), but it is primarily aimed at the *ceteris paribus* clause. Imagine that there is a computing device with infinite, unimpeded capacity to correctly calculate addition
problems, and that it can do so instantly. The details of how such a thing could exist are, despite Kripke’s comments about giant brains (1982), relatively unimportant. This device will not perform the calculations without being prompted, as it has no intentionality or volition of its own. Most importantly, it cannot scan, read or in any other way be given instructions in English or any other currently known human language. Thus, there is a human operator who can feed in the questions as needed. Given the potentially hyper-large numbers involved, the method of input must necessarily be somewhat arcane lest the operator spend the entire history of the universe typing in a very large sum. For that reason, it is taken as given that the operator has some method that allows them to input the numbers in a timely fashion. So far, it all seems simple. The operator takes the question and puts it into the machine, which invariably gives the arithmetically correct answer. However, there is a complication. This machine is not just infinitely disposed to perform addition functions correctly; it has infinite capacity to perform all arithmetical functions correctly. In fact, it has the capacity to correctly perform an infinite number of different arithmetical functions correctly, including the now infamous quaddition function. So when the operator is given the question: ‘What is 68 + 57?’, they must choose to instruct the machine to complete the addition rather than the quaddition of those numbers.

As it happens, when seeing the ‘+’ sign, the operator is disposed to instruct the machine to complete the addition calculation. Perhaps the nature of the operator’s disposition is such that no matter how large the numbers become, they will always choose the addition function when presented with the ‘+’ sign. The point being made here is clear. Dispositions of arithmetical correctness and dispositions to use a certain sign a certain way are not identical. This is where Kripke’s observation of the Machine response is related; it is not just the outputs of an adding machine, but also the inputs to such a machine that have to be interpreted at some stage (1982, p. 34). If an alternative operator—one who was disposed to react to ‘+’ a different way—were to use the machine, the answers would be different despite the infinite arithmetic capacity of the machine. It should be apparent from this example that such a machine could never be used to justify one interpretation or potential use of ‘+’ over
another, as it is the operator who interprets the arithmetic question. As it is the interpretation of the sign that is in question, the disposition of the operator cannot be appealed to. That a speaker who is disposed to use a sign a certain way will (unsurprisingly) act in accordance with that disposition tells us very little, and is not a basis for an attribution of meaning.

Perhaps at least part of the problem could be solved by having a non-circular account of why a speaker, idealised in this case, has that particular disposition. In any case, it seems fair to ask what is behind these dispositions. In one sense, once the disposition is being reduced to or explained by something else, the account is no longer dispositional. A further question that might be worth exploring is whether other kinds of answers to the Sceptic might benefit from idealisation, although the results of such a project would be invalid if the form of idealisation begged the question. That aside, it has been shown that a dispositional answer to the sceptical challenge is unfeasibly circular regardless of how it is idealised.

4.3.2 The Failure of Idealisation

In this context, the defence of the *ceteris paribus* dispositional answers seems futile. The overall point put forward by Fodor (1990) and Kowalenko (2009)—that if we disallow the use of *ceteris paribus* idealisations for meaning, we must discard them for a broader range of scientific enquiry—is undoubtedly worth some attention. Kusch (2006) addresses this issue with regard to Fodor (1990), and it can be seen that his arguments also carry considerable force against Kowalenko (2009). However, the more important factor is whether this counter-factual approach answers the question at hand. There is a sense in which it does not matter if Fodor’s view regarding the similarities between different kinds of idealisations is correct, or whether Kusch’s criticism of such views is correct. Even if Fodor were right, this would not answer the problems raised in the preceding paragraphs. There is a sense in which the drive to avoid the problems of finitude as flagged by Kripke (1982) were a ‘red herring’. Conceivably, they could have been dealt with differently. In examining the central issue of circularity, my discussion has shown that the disposition to perform an addition function can and should be thought of as distinct from the disposition to react to the
‘+’ sign by performing an addition. If dispositions are to be thought of as physical, it would not be surprising if modern neuroscience suggested that the ability to do mental arithmetic and linguistic processing occur in different parts of the brain. Such physical limitations need not apply to an idealised situation, but that is ultimately of no consequence. The dispositions to correctly perform tasks such as arithmetic or differentiating between certain metals, even when idealised, are distinct from the dispositions to use certain associated words in certain ways. Thus, idealising the disposition to undertake such tasks cannot by itself provide an answer to the Sceptic. Idealising the disposition to use a certain word in a certain way, when that is the matter at hand, is circular reasoning and begs the question against the Sceptic.

4.4 COATES AND SECOND-ORDER DISPOSITIONS

Coates (1997) considers that a dispositional account needs to provide an explanation of what it is for a speaker to use, albeit fallibly, a word in a consistent manner, and that this can be done if the account is sophisticated enough (1997, p. 180). The core of this argument rests on the idea of second-order dispositions. An illustration of this is that a watch has a first-order disposition to display a particular reading of the time, but it has a second-order disposition, facilitated by its internal workings, to change the reading that it has a first-order disposition to display (Coates, 1997, p. 180). Coates argues that speakers have a second-order disposition to use words consistently, and he formulates his dispositional account as follows:

A subject S means plus by ‘plus’ at a given time T₀ only if:

(A) S has an extended (but not infinite) disposition at T₀ to respond to input questions of the form, ‘What is x + y?’ by giving their sum.

And

(B) S has a second-order disposition at T₀ to maintain the first-order disposition she has at T₀ in respect of ‘plus’ (Coates, 1997, p. 182).

A further essential condition of this solution is that the second-order disposition that speaker S has must be strong enough to cause them to use their language consistently,
despite changes in beliefs and desires (Coates, 1997, pp. 182–183). Coates’s solution to the sceptical challenge is aimed at providing a sense in which dispositions can determine how speakers should use words. Speakers can make normative claims about meaning—claims about how they should use a word—because they commit to using a word consistently, and this commitment is grounded in a robust second-order disposition to be consistent in their first-order dispositions to use a word (Coates, 1997, p. 183). Coates adds that making such a commitment is the best way for the speaker to realise their various goals (1997, p. 183). However, there are a number of potential problems with Coates’s account.

The notion of having a second-order disposition to consistently use first-order dispositions is inductive: How do we know that we indeed have the second-order dispositional commitment that works in all circumstances at all times? If Coates’s use of ‘consistently’ entails something like the notion of being guided by past uses, the Sceptic can cast doubt on the validity of the outcomes it produces. We cannot say that we have such a disposition based on our past behaviour. More precisely, any claims about this second-order disposition in speakers would be subject to limitations, as there is only ever inductive evidence to support these claims. That is, there is a limit on how strong a claim can be made about speakers having this disposition in the future, as the only evidence is that speakers seem to have had this disposition in the past.

Even if speakers commit to using a word consistently, as has been seen with the ceteris paribus dispositional explanation, this does not entail that they should use the word consistently. The Sceptic could say that a speaker has or should have a second-order disposition to maintain their first-order disposition up to the point where they are adding numbers of 57 or larger. This would be consistent with all previous behaviour. In one sense, the second-order disposition is a watered-down version of the idealisation previously discussed.

If this second-order disposition were only extended, but not infinite, as Coates (1997) proposes for first-order dispositions, the need to justify the strong claim that it works in all circumstances at all times is neutralised. The problem is that if the second-order
disposition is only finite, it seems plausible to suggest that the same problems arise as with the finitude of a simple disposition. Similarly, if this second-order disposition is potentially subject to any sort of intrinsic *fink or mask*, as Handfield and Bird (2008) have suggested can affect first-order dispositions, the possibility of this second-order disposition becoming subject to the *privileging problem* arises. The question of whether the second-order disposition is finite makes little difference to the overall account, as will be shown below.

In one sense, it is illuminating to ask the question: How can we be sure we do not have a quus-like second-order disposition? The answer is that there is no way to be sure that a speaker does not have an irregular version of this second-order disposition that may, at some stage, cause their first-order dispositions to become inconsistent. If they commit in the sense that they consciously think ‘I will have a second-order disposition to maintain my first-order dispositions with regard to…etc.’, apart from not really being a *dispositional* account, the account is open to quus-style attack by the Sceptic because the speaker is creating a rule to interpret other rules. If a speaker commits to consistency in a sense that does not involve consciously thinking about the second-order disposition, such an attack cannot occur. In the end, this will make little difference. If the second-order disposition is anything less than infinite in its own extension to keep our first-order dispositions consistent, it is possible for the Sceptic to ask difficult questions such as: ‘How can you be sure the second-order disposition still works the same way for numbers over 57?’ or ‘How do you know that second-order disposition still works the same way after 2020?’ The opinion of Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic aside, it seems implausible to assume that such a second-order disposition would operate consistently in an individual throughout their lifetime. If it is at times inconsistent, consistency of the first-order dispositions would also suffer.

Toribio argues that there are two possible ways that the idea of second-order dispositions can be philosophically analysed, and that such an analysis presents a dilemma for their use in answering the Sceptic (1999, pp. 406–407). First, they in some way determine what a speaker means by a word. If this is the case, second-order dispositions are not helpful, as the speaker could be first-order disposed to use a word in any number of
ways, including being first-order disposed to make systematic mistakes (Toribio, 1999, p. 407). Conversely, second-order dispositions could be dispositions to mean something (Toribio, 1999, p. 407). If this is the case, as Toribio points out, these dispositions become prey to the sceptical argument, as they are the kind of mental events that Kripke describes, as discussed in Chapter 2, and particularly Section 2.2.2.

Toribio maintains that embedded in Coates’s (1997) second-order dispositions is the idea of ‘environmental correction’—that is, the ability to use the external environment as a ‘kind of ultimate normative check point’ (1999, p. 408). The idea here is that second-order dispositions keep those first-order dispositions that do not lead us off course when dealing with the environment working in a steady manner. But this does not answer the Sceptic, who can question the use of any of the words or functions involved, as our interaction with the environment is finite. More importantly, maintaining consistency is not necessarily the same as environmental correction, so Toribio’s analysis may constitute a slight digression from Coates’s argument. In the same way that the move was made from ‘quus’ to ‘quaddition’ to ‘quounting’, Toribio maintains that in the example of panelling the floor of a study, the Sceptic can ask whether she meant the length of a piece of wood or its quength (1999, p. 409). The point remains that until a stage is reached where the quus-like rule applies, ‘environmental correction’ will not differentiate between using the plus-like and quus-like functions.

Toribio (1999) describes further problems with Coates’s (1997) treatment of second-order dispositions. First, reference to the environment is entirely physical, but without including any social aspect (Toribio, 1999, p. 411). This causes the account to fail in its explanation of normativity of meaning, and it contains implicit errors about how humans solve problems such as panelling the floor of one’s study. Second, there is a presumption that it is only when the meaning we affix to words fails to be congruent with, or ‘fit’, the outside environment that our projects also fail (Toribio, 1999, p. 411). This begs the question against the Sceptic (Toribio, 1999, p. 411). Of course, it cannot be said that a speaker is disposed to mean something without begging the question against the Sceptic. The speaker’s dispositions
can only be non-semantic in nature—they are disposed to act or react a certain way. There is a sense in which the second-order disposition resembles the ceteris paribus clause as used by Fodor (1990) and Kowelanko (2009). It might be that a speaker has a disposition to maintain other dispositions with a certain amount of consistency. But the question of whether such maintenance is justifiable to the Sceptic is unclear. In the same way that the ceteris paribus clause fails to justify the linguistic (or metalinguistic) choice between different interpretations of ‘+’, the second-order disposition also fails. Thus, the overall major problem with Coates’s account is that even if second-order dispositions appear to provide for the ‘normative aspect’, it still seems to be unable to get around the ‘circularity objection’. The question is not whether speakers have an extended disposition to maintain their first-order dispositions to add; it is whether they are correct in doing so—and like the ceteris paribus idealisation, this account cannot answer that question.

Despite this, there is some positive value to Coates’s (1997) idea. If his basis for a second-order disposition or homeostasis is, as Toribio maintains, grounded in the idea of environmental feedback (1999, p. 411), it comes very close to resembling a sceptical solution, provided that the interaction with other members of the community is included within the environmental feedback. In fact, with regard to language use, it seems plausible to suggest that the social aspect is a major form of environmental feedback that is capable of providing the normative aspect. In the case of panelling the floor of the study, the environmental feedback, at most, would cause an individual to cut a length of wood that fit the gap, but would give no feedback as to what to call that particular length or how to refer to the arithmetical functions that help them determine what length to cut, at least until the quasi-like rule becomes obvious. More generally, while the non-social environmental feedback could cause an agent to do what ‘fits’ or maybe what ‘works best’, only feedback from another speaker could correct an ascription of meaning. The environment, devoid of society, contains no language; this is the whole point of Wittgenstein’s (1967) Private Language Argument, at least as presented by Kripke (1982). It is unclear why Coates would leave out this important social aspect, especially considering that, strictly speaking, all
feedback from outside the body or system could be considered ‘environmental’ feedback. It could be that to include it would commit him to something similar to the position of his opponent, Kripke. On a more serious note, it seems that Coates’s (1997) unwillingness to include the social aspect to homeostatic feedback, while attaching a role to the environmental feedback that it could not possibly fulfil, belies a misunderstanding of the way in which humans interact with and solve problems in their environment. It is plausible that a theoretical carpenter (one who builds houses for the Sceptic perhaps) who is devoid of any mathematical skills could still cut a length of wood to fill a particular gap, even if they could not count.

The idea that speakers have an overarching disposition—one that causes their dispositions to react to certain signs in certain ways to be somewhat consistent over time—is at least plausible. But as always, Kripke’s (1982) challenge is not whether speakers have such dispositions; it is about what significance should be attributed to them. Coates’s (1997) account is no closer to addressing the problems of under-determination and circularity because the question is not about the ability of speakers to use a sign consistently; it is also about showing whether they are correct in doing so in a non-circular manner. Nor does it provide a satisfactory account of normativity. In highlighting the positive aspects of Coates’s solution, Toribio (1999) shows how this account could move towards being more satisfactory. But in doing so, it becomes more sceptical than straight. Thus, Coates’s solution, as it stands, is not a satisfactory straight solution to the problem of meaning scepticism.

4.5 COMMUNAL DISPOSITIONS

The dispositional scenarios considered in preceding sections, and the authors associated with them, all defend an individualistic dispositional account of meaning in that the disposition of the individual speaker is considered more or less in isolation from the dispositions of other speakers. Kripke (1982) suggests that a potential solution is to extend the dispositional answer across the linguistic community. However, he does not think highly
of this response to the Sceptic, stating that community-wide dispositions are prone to the same problems as individual dispositions (Kripke, 1982, p. 111). Two noteworthy examples of this sort of account will be discussed—that of Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990). The accounts fail in both cases, vindicating Kripke’s rejection of this sort of solution.

4.5.1 Bloor

Bloor (1997) has postulated community-wide dispositional theories in the hope that they will be able to sidestep the problems of error and the inability to encompass a normative aspect within these accounts. He considers that his theory is community-dispositional in nature; it ‘can, indeed, be considered a form of community-wide dispositional theory’ (Bloor, 1997, p. 68). The basis of his potential answer to the sceptical challenge is that social and linguistic institutions and structures can be characterised as the sum of the interactions between the people in them: ‘An institution can be looked upon as the collective product of the interactions between the dispositions of many individuals’ (Bloor, 1997, p. 68). Bloor asserts that such institutions produce ‘social facts’ that can be the straight solution—they are the facts in virtue of which, for example, a speaker means ‘plus’ rather than ‘quus’. Bloor considers that the primary problem with the individualistic dispositional account is the difficulty in providing normative force (1997, p. 68). The interactions of dispositions create these social facts, and the fact of belonging to the group essentially creates the normative aspect.

Clearly, Bloor (1997) locates meaning within the community and will not subscribe to any notion of what Kripke (1982) considers a ‘private language’. Similarly, he would not consider it relevant to assess the correctness or not of the use of a word from an objective viewpoint: ‘Ultimately there is no standard outside the social collective according to which it can be judged’ (Bloor, 1997, p. 71). Taken at face value, this suggests that some of the problematic questions that arose for individual dispositions may not apply. If the community or collective is the ultimate arbiter of social norms, including those that apply to meaning, the only way that an answer that the whole community gives could be considered wrong is if
it is viewed in the context of other communities. This is of course to create a greater community or collective, which would produce problems of its own, as the notion of whether someone outside of a linguistic community has any license to criticise their practices is not established.

Questions regarding whole communities that appear to be following the wrong rule, or a bent *quus*-like rule, seem to have no purchase if it is allowed that there can be no outside judgement of their rule-following. However, there may still be problems internal to the account and the community that will render this solution unsatisfactory.

Bloor (1997) states that in new cases, the collective decides how to move forward. Why does the collective decide to use plus and not quus in new circumstances? Bloor gives no clear indication as to why this is the case. He says that the only proof required that a speaker was doing addition rather than quaddition (all along) is the communal endorsement that the answer to the question ‘68 + 57’ is ‘125’, not ‘5’ (Bloor, 1997, p. 70). However, it could just as easily be said that the proof that the speaker meant quaddition was the collective endorsement of ‘5’ rather than ‘125’. If it were the case that the collective could just as easily decide to go forward in one way as another, this account of meaning may not satisfy all critics.

Kusch seems to have drawn a similar conclusion on this point, indicating that Bloor (1997) gives no precise indication of what dispositions produce the ‘fact creation’ needed to enable the meaning-finitist model (2004, p. 581). This suggests the following questions: Why did the collective decide that addition, and not *quaddition*, was the way to go forward in novel cases? What fact is that in virtue of which this decision was made? An explanation is required because it would be this fact that sits at the core of Bloor’s account, and this fact that differentiates between Kripke’s (1982) interlocutor meaning plus or quus. Such an explanation is difficult for reasons already covered. Collective or not, were the decision to go one way rather than the other to be part of an occurrent mental and social process, the all-too-familiar moves of the Sceptic can be made. As Kripke points out, if the instruction is explicit—that we should respond as others do to addition problems—this becomes a rule for
interpreting a rule (1982, p. 146). Conversely, if an attempt were made to give a dispositional account of why the collective would choose to decide one way rather than the other, the problem of under-determination reappears.

Bloor (1997) attempts to pre-emptively deal with these issues by asserting that this ‘fact creation’ is something that we ‘just do’. Were this true, it would not only render the core fact mysterious or unknowable, but it would also make it quite arbitrary in nature. While this may be distasteful to some, it might be that this is what actually happens, so proving Bloor wrong would have to rest on more than just this (hence my focus on other factors). The challenge for Bloor is to prove that this is what actually happens. These points aside, an explanation that the collective linguistic community creates the relevant social facts in new cases seems lacking and suggests the question: Can nothing be said about what new facts are created (and how they are created)?

Similar questions that applied to the individualistic dispositional answer are worth asking here. Are there interfering dispositions in the community-wide dispositional account? Some could be safely seen as external—for example, no one being able to add correctly due to the whole community being drunk after their team won the big game. But if the dispositions of the whole community were to decay or change over time for reasons that are intrinsic to the individuals, it seems that the privileging problem can also apply here. As the collective disposition of the community is under consideration, the question of what counts as external or intrinsic to the community (as opposed to the individuals who are part of it) is worth exploring further. What is external to the individual may be considered intrinsic to a community-wide disposition. It is plausible that a collective disposition would not necessarily decay in the same way that an individual one would, but this relies on the assumption that a collection of individuals is somehow less likely to change their overall disposition, which may not be the case.

The problem cited so far as being at the core of dispositional accounts is that of circularity. That is, the account is using a disposition to use or interpret a sign a particular way as justification that the use is correct when the correct use of the sign is the matter in
question. Whether the disposition is individual or communal, the problem is ultimately the same. If the community can be judged from the outside, the fact that it is disposed to react a certain way does not say that it should react that way. If it cannot be judged, regardless of how it is disposed to react, the community will judge its answer to be correct. If the latter situation obtains, it is difficult to see how this is an adequate account of meaning. If the community were disposed to use ‘+’ to denote plus, individuals within that community would judge that as being correct. If, hypothetically, the same community were disposed to use ‘+’ to denote quus, the individuals would also judge that as correct. In fact, the community could be disposed to use ‘+’ to denote anything at any point, and individuals within the community would judge it to be correct. If any use of a word could be considered correct, it would be in conflict with the intuition that there is more to a correct answer than agreement. If an individual is disposed to perform addition when they see ‘+’, this says nothing about whether they should do so. If a community is disposed to endorse performing addition in response to ‘+’, perhaps this carries normative force for the individuals who form that community. But whether the whole community is justified in saying they should use ‘+’ is left unanswered. In any case, this effectively leaves the community as being infallible.

This solution seems to generate the issue raised by Boghossian (1989) and Kusch (2006, p. 124)—that any error that is possible for an individual is possible for a whole community, but that the communitarian cannot call them ‘mistakes’. Kripke cites remarks from Wittgenstein (1967) as indicating the obvious area where being locked into such a position may be unacceptable: that ‘humans believing twice two equals four’ and ‘twice two equals four’ do not mean the same thing (Kripke, 1982, p. 111). However, the fact that isolated linguistic communities cannot judge each other is not the most destructive outcome of such infallibility; there is a much more damaging outcome entailed by the infallibility of the community in these types of accounts.
4.5.2 Horwich

Kusch (2006) cites Horwich (1990) as providing a formulation of a communal disposition-based solution. As with Bloor’s (1997) account, Horwich’s move is made to circumvent the problem of an individual’s disposition being unable to differentiate between the mistaken and correct use of a word. The argument that Horwich puts forward is that the way that mistakes are identified involves reference to community opinion, and that the criteria for making a mistake is departure from how a word is generally used (1990, p. 111). Under normal circumstances, but subject to some conditions, speakers are said to mean by a word whatever that word means within their linguistic community (Horwich, 1990, p. 111). This includes times when the speaker’s use of a word is not entirely correct (1990, p. 111).

Kusch indicates that one of the issues such an account must deal with is the community being infallible (2006, p. 124). While Bloor (1997) does not seem to find any particular issue with this, Kusch and Boghossian (1989) think there is a problem. Boghossian states that just as individual speakers have dispositions to use words in a certain way and dispositions to make mistakes, a community can have the same dual set of dispositions (1989, p. 536). If an individual can be tricked by poor visibility into pointing out a cow and saying ‘horse’, Boghossian (1989) asks: What is to prevent this happening to an entire community? If mistakes that occur at the community level are systematic, there is no way for the communitarian to label them as mistakes (Boghossian, 1989). For example, the communitarian is bound to insist that ‘horse’ means ‘horse or cow’, as that is the outcome that the community’s dispositions have produced (Boghossian, 1989, p. 536). Worse still, this problem is generalisable, and there are many examples of a similar nature (Boghossian, 1989). Bloor seems to be committed to this type of position, as he claims that there is no standard outside of the linguistic community whereby it can be judged as correct or otherwise (1997, p. 71). Boghossian takes this position to entail that our words do not have the meanings that we normally ascribe to them, but that they mean something ‘wildly disjunctive’ instead (1989, p. 536).
Such an account of meaning would, as Boghossian (1989) points out, produce incorrect judgements about the meaning of expressions. The magnitude of this conclusion cannot be overstated. Boghossian only considers the horse/cow disjunction. But for ‘horse’, there would be other systematic conditions that would cause a speaker to use the word in other ways. Thus, the disjunction might be ‘horse’, meaning ‘horse, cow, pig, dog, motorbike, boulder, shadow or tree’. While not necessarily infinite, such a list could be very long. If the potential list of systematic mistakes were sufficiently expanded, it is possible that the disjunction could be that any particular word means any other word.

In the context of Kripke’s (1982) original challenge, the magnitude of the failure is stark. If the community dispositional account cannot determine whether a speaker means ‘cow’ or ‘horse’ by the word ‘horse’, it seems plausible to suggest that it cannot determine whether they mean plus or quus by ‘+’. Such a community dispositional account cannot give an explanation of what constitutes a speaker meaning plus, not quus (or horse, not cow). It will therefore also struggle to show how a speaker can be justifiably confident in their use of words when such disjunctions cannot be ruled out.

However, Horwich sees this as only being a problem for unsophisticated communal accounts where the dispositions to accept some sentences and reject others are definite and permanent (1990, p. 112). Horwich argues that the relevant communal dispositions include those that allow the revision of epistemological claims in the light of new evidence and the acknowledgement that earlier claims may have been incorrect (1990, p. 112). Given these factors, Horwich asserts that a ‘communal dispositional’ account is compatible with the ability to recognise mistakes made by both individuals and the entire linguistic community (1990, p. 112). Kusch interprets this as covering not just the individual, but also the judgements of the community overall (2006, p. 124). Such a move will not overcome the difficulties described above. If a systematic mistake can be made in one instance, perhaps systematic mistakes can be made in the process of revising previous claims and considering new evidence. Only if the process of revision were immune to systematic mistakes could its outcomes be free from error. If such a process of revision were imperfect, as it must be in
reality, it is not clear how a communal dispositional account could deal with revision that replicated an existing mistake or introduced new mistakes. A simple individual dispositional account equates performance with correctness, as does a simple community dispositional account, to the detriment of both. The more sophisticated account that Horwich (1990) puts forward potentially commits to the same position at the level of revision. If the entire community is involved in the revision that they are disposed to undertake, is their new position to be considered correct solely in virtue of the revision having occurred? If it is, Horwich is caught in the trap that Boghossian (1989) describes. If the revised position is not considered correct in virtue of the revision having occurred, the addition of dispositions to revise communal dispositions does not determine meaning.

4.5.3 Communitarian Conclusion

Neither of the accounts put forward by Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990) are successful or satisfactory solutions to the problem of scepticism about meaning. Bloor’s account ultimately commits itself to the position of the linguistic community being infallible. This leads to the ‘wildly disjunctive’ outcomes demonstrated by Boghossian (1989). There does not seem to be any good reason why transferring the location of the disposition from an individual to a collective group in the way that Bloor describes should sidestep any of the problems that Kripke (1982) raises. Horwich’s account seeks to deal with both individual and communal mistakes through dispositions to revise claims and acknowledge mistakes. But the disposition to revise simply moves the problem without providing a solution.

4.6 THE FAILURE OF DISPOSITIONS

In considering dispositions as an answer to the Sceptic, one might ask what the mechanism of the disposition to mean a certain thing by a certain word actually is. It is plausible that the dispositions that defenders of these types of accounts refer to are identical to (or at least detectable through) some physical–neurological event that occurs in the brain. If this event is measurable, can it be an answer, or at least part of an answer, to the Sceptic?
The answer is no. This is for the same reasons that the dispositional account fails. Despite the appeal of a scientific approach and the often-legitimate scientific uses of techniques such as functional brain imaging, this approach cannot work. But using a hypothetical brain scan as a window into a non-occurrence and non-intentional process further illustrates why dispositional accounts must necessarily fail.

We can put forward that a certain brain event always occurs when we use the ‘+’ sign to mean plus, but the Sceptic can always claim that this brain event is consistent with us meaning either plus or quus. Further, the Sceptic can claim that all past correlations between meaning ‘plus’ and the brain event are actually correlations between meaning *quus* and the brain event because everyone involved in the research has been mistaken about the meaning of ‘+’.

A ‘common-sense’ response might be to say that everyone who has exhibited this brain event has meant plus. But since the Sceptic has cast doubt on all meanings, including that particular one, this is not a fact that we can appeal to without begging the question. The Sceptic would accept that all those people had that brain event, but that the doubt was over what they meant. What can be said in this situation? The subjects had the brain event, and they thought that they meant plus—there is nothing that the Sceptic can object to in these propositions. This is not much help in answering the sceptical challenge, as a speaker thinking that they mean something and actually meaning something are not the same thing. It might also be true that the test subjects performed the addition function when shown ‘68 + 57 = ?’, and that this was correlated to the particular brain event. However, the Sceptic would remain unconvinced, as this would only confirm that the subject had made an error by taking ‘+’ to mean plus (and therefore to perform the addition function) rather than quus (and performing the quaddition function).

It may even be the case that a particular brain event was only correlated to the correct performance of the addition function. But the sceptical challenge is not about whether the speaker has made an arithmetic mistake; it is about the metalinguistic choice. Which interpretation of ‘+’ is the right or real one?
Further, scientists might claim that the hypothetical brain scanner can pick out different events in the brain when a subject performs either addition or quaddition. In response to this, the Sceptic would pose the following question: Can the brain scan differentiate between a speaker correctly or incorrectly using a sign such as ‘+’? For example, asks the Sceptic, can the brain scan tell the difference between a subject performing the quaddition function when, according to the Sceptic’s bizarre hypothesis, they should \((68 + 57 = ?)\) and when they should not \((56 + 56 = ?)\)?

If the scan could differentiate these conditions, it would seem that progress in determining what the speakers meant, even in light of a sceptical challenge, could be possible. However, such a result seems extremely unlikely, as it would require some type of event in the brain, that was non-occurrent in nature, that correlated not with the specific function (i.e., addition v. quaddition), but with the correct application of that function. This seems peculiar, and the closer the investigation, the more outlandish such an event appears. To answer the Sceptic, it would have to be an event that happens in the brain, but only when a function is objectively and correctly applied to a case where it has never been used before. That is, a brain event would be occurring that somehow encompasses an immediate connection to a mind-independent answer. But such a brain event seems grossly implausible.

Any assignment of ‘correct’ or not to an answer is unfounded while the meaning of the sign in question, ‘+’, is in doubt. Results of brain scans, like dispositions, can only be made sense of if the meaning is already known. This discussion does not add anything new to the treatment of dispositional accounts over and above what has already been covered. Rather, it seeks to describe the problems of dispositional accounts in a way that might be more familiar to some readers. However, it is an important illustration of how right Kripke (1982) was regarding his claim that no fact could answer the sceptical question.

It is plausible to suggest that speakers are in fact disposed to respond in certain ways to certain stimuli, regardless of which account of language and meaning is being used to answer the Sceptic’s challenge. The major consideration is what philosophical significance should be attached to such a disposition. But it also seems worth asking why a speaker is
disposed to act as they do. A speaker might be disposed to react a certain way because they have been conditioned to do so by their linguistic community, as in the sceptical solution and Bloor’s community dispositional account, although Kripke (1982) and Bloor (1997) draw different conclusions from this same disposition. They might be disposed to answer a certain way because of their immediate relation to a platonic entity, as with Feldman’s (1986) robust platonism. They might be disposed to go on in the same way because it is, as Lewis (1983) argues, more natural than the Sceptic’s alternative. Or their current dispositions might be the cumulative total of the causal chain of use and reference that leads from an initial baptism to that speaker, as McGinn (1984) might suggest could be the case. The solutions of Feldman, Lewis and McGinn are discussed in greater detail in later chapters. But for the moment, a number of conclusions pertaining to dispositional solutions can be drawn. First, it is plausible to suggest that these types of dispositions in speakers can be reduced to, or at least explained by, something else, and that some of these reductions or explanations will be considered more plausible than others. For the same disposition, it is possible to put forward different explanations, ranging from very plausible to highly fanciful and metaphysically dubious. It seems unlikely that philosophers would accept that the Sceptic is answered by a disposition to add rather than quadd, where that disposition is caused by supernatural, invisible unicorns, and nor should they. The only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the reasons and causes behind dispositions actually matter, and that an account that stops there—without any further explanation—is simply and inherently incomplete. As soon as a question is asked as to why a speaker has a disposition, the account is no longer about reducing meaning to dispositions. For example, if the speaker answers ‘125’, the fact that they were disposed to answer ‘125’ is both obvious and tautologous. Again, the real issue is why they answered as they did. Once that is identified as being more relevant than the disposition, the solution is no longer dispositional.

As a comparison, consider the disposition of salt to dissolve in water. Clearly, there is no inference regarding meaning in this example, but it is conceivable that we might draw other inferences from this disposition. That salt is disposed to dissolve in water is a
phenomenon clearly reducible to something else. When it comes to incompleteness, idealised dispositional accounts, such as the *ceteris paribus* answer, fare little better. Fodor’s (1990) example of ideal gas laws and Kusch’s (2006) discussion of the same imply that the process of de-idealisation will necessarily involve increasing levels of explanation. Likewise, if an idealised dispositional answer to the Sceptic were to be de-idealised in order to increase its predictive accuracy and explanatory power, it would probably be necessary to get behind or inside the dispositions of the speaker. It remains to be seen whether such a project is possible to achieve in the context of withstanding the sceptical challenge. On that note, it seems problematic to suggest that such dispositions in speakers are simply primitive and irreducible. A further reduction of dispositions is possible and necessary; otherwise, there is no hope of ever solving the privileging problem. It is difficult to see how a differentiation between the disposition to give a correct answer and the disposition (or combinations of dispositions) to give the wrong answer is possible without an explanation of what is behind the dispositions. So again, a dispositional analysis without an explanation of what is behind the dispositions cannot be a solution to the Sceptic’s challenge. At best, and even if all other problems were dealt with, a dispositional answer to the sceptical challenge would be, in its own way, quite mysterious.

The disposition to be able to carry out some task, such as mental arithmetic, identifying certain metals or animals, or telling the difference between different types of furniture when placed under the Eiffel Tower, is not the main focus of the argument against dispositional answers to the Sceptic. By themselves, these dispositions do not beg the question. But they also do not tell us anything about meaning. Thus, the ‘arithmetic’ disposition to perform the addition function correctly says nothing, in and of itself, about whether the correct choice was to have added or *quadded* the numbers when a speaker saw the ‘+’ sign. The discussions of *ceteris paribus* idealised super-adders, calculating machines (hyper-capable and otherwise) and interfering *finks* and *masks* are all products of focusing on the capacity to undertake a task rather than the associated linguistic capacity. To that extent, they all miss the most important problem with using dispositions as an answer to the Sceptic.
If the dispositions to undertake these tasks can be seen as separate from the dispositions to interpret signs and words in a certain way, it can be seen that the issue is not the disposition to perform addition properly, for example. However, the disposition to interpret the ‘+’ sign as denoting that particular function is the core of the matter at hand. That a speaker means plus because they are disposed to interpret the ‘+’ sign that way only makes sense if plus is the correct interpretation. As the correct interpretation of the ‘+’ sign is in question (inasmuch as the Sceptic denies that there determinately is one), that assumption must be left out lest the solution beg the question against the Sceptic. For a speaker to mean plus by ‘+’, it must also be true that they would or do interpret (occurrently or otherwise—it does not matter for this particular argument) ‘+’ to mean plus. A speaker cannot mean ‘plus’ by the ‘+’ sign if they interpret it to mean something else.

That a speaker is disposed to answer ‘125’ might be clear evidence that they have interpreted ‘+’ as meaning plus. But that contributes nothing as to whether that was the correct interpretation or if indeed there is a uniquely correct interpretation. This is definitely true if meaning is interpreted as being normative. But even if the normative aspect is reduced to the point that Hattiangadi (2006) advocates—that meaning describes correct interpretations rather than prescribes them—the conclusion still stands. It might be that the plus interpretation is correct or that there are good reasons why the speaker acted as they did. But the disposition to use that particular interpretation is not what makes that interpretation correct—it has to be something else. The disposition of the speaker, in isolation at least, cannot tell us what the correct option is; it can only tell us that they made the correct interpretation if we presume that a correct interpretation exists and that a correct interpretation is already established.

If this argument is sound, the disposition to react a certain way to a certain sign or symbol can never contribute anything to refuting scepticism about the existence of meaning. This constitutes a generalisable knock-down argument against the use of dispositions to answer the Sceptic. As this conclusion relies not on empirical evidence, but on the
relationship between the concepts within the argument, this argument in some ways constitutes an *a priori* argument against the use of dispositions to answer the Sceptic.

### 4.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While the utility of a dispositional analysis of the problem is clear in terms of avoiding the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ difficulty, this is probably its only positive feature. Regardless of whether a dispositional answer to Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic is focused on the individual or a whole community, major problems remain. It is not clear that any formulation of a dispositional type of solution adequately addresses the issues of privileging certain dispositions over others, and thus underdetermining meaning. Nor is the central issue of circularity adequately dealt with. Idealised or not, a disposition to react a certain way cannot be an answer to the sceptical challenge. Dispositions either fail to capture the metalinguistic aspect of the challenge, or they presuppose meaning and therefore beg the question against the Sceptic. As Hattiangadi (2006) argues, this is the case regardless of whether meaning is taken to be strongly prescriptive in nature. Only when the meaning is known or the correct use of a word is known can the dispositions to give a ‘correct’ answer be differentiated from the dispositions to give an ‘incorrect’ one.
Chapter 5: Non-dispositional Straight Solutions

While there are numerous variations on the theme of dispositional answers to the challenge of meaning scepticism, many responses have pursued different lines of enquiry. I will examine the following proposed answers:

1. By appealing to the notion that one interpretation constitutes a more natural way of ‘going on’, Lewis (1983) argues that it can be shown that some meanings are more legitimate interpretations than others. This argument is discussed in Section 5.1, along with the contribution of Delancey (2007) in Section 5.1.1.

2. In Section 5.2, I discuss the theory that the fact in virtue of which a speaker means a particular thing by a word results from an unmediated relation between the speaker and a concept, as argued by Feldman (1986).

3. Following this, in Section 5.3, I explore the account of Millikan (1990), who argues that to follow a rule is to have a biological purpose to follow that rule.

4. Searle (2002) puts forward two related responses. One is that Kripke (1982) unfairly rules out answers to the Sceptic that should be considered. The other relies on his concept of ‘Background’ facts about a speaker. Both of these responses are discussed in Section 5.4.

For some accounts, the distinction between satisfactory or not can seem to be more subtle than for the dispositional accounts considered so far. However, I will argue that they suffer from similar difficulties in many cases. Ultimately, these arguments all fail to provide a satisfactory reply to the Sceptic.

5.1 Lewis’s Universals

Towards the end of ‘New Work for a Theory of Universals’, Lewis (1983) considers the problem of meaning scepticism and puts forward a solution based on this work. Lewis’s
solution is as follows: to add means going on in the same way, no matter how big the numbers get, whereas to \textit{quadd} means to do something different (1983, p. 376). There is nothing about the subject (or speaker) that could count as an intention to ‘do different things in different cases’ (Lewis, 1983, p. 376). On this basis, Lewis concludes that the speaker intends to add rather than to \textit{quadd}. At face value, it might seem that this is not an adequate response.\footnote{Lewis describes it as ‘naive’ (1983, p. 376).} However, Lewis’s further unpacking shows that this solution hinges on the principle that a theory of properties must be able to show that all examples of addition are similar in a way that all examples of \textit{quaddition} are not (1983, p. 376). The property of adding is more natural than the property of quadding, (due to the disjunctive nature of \textit{quaddition}) (Lewis, 1983, p. 376). On this basis, Lewis infers that to the extent that it is less natural, \textit{quaddition} is less of going on in the same way. Therefore, he concludes, it is less eligible as something to intend to do. Lewis asserts that there must be a ‘charitable presumption in favour of eligible content’ (1983, p. 376). Without it, there is no way of solving the problem of interpretation. Lewis asserts that to solve the problem of interpretation,\footnote{Of course, if there were another way to solve the problem of interpretation, then perhaps the necessity of accepting Lewis’s solution to it would be reduced.} there must be an independent and objective distinction between properties, and there must be a presumption favouring eligible content as a constitutive constraint (1983, p. 377).

To answer the Sceptic, Lewis (1983) simply points to the objective fact that, even though the speaker is doing something that could be interpreted as either adding or \textit{quadding}, it is more eligible for the speaker to be adding. So (ostensibly at least) this account provides a descriptive element.

In reply to this argument, Sider suggests that Lewis (1983) applies ‘primitive naturalness’ to numbers in solving the problem (1996, p. 296). As he suggests, if numbers are not primitive entities, but constructed from sets (Sider, 1996, p. 296), the ‘argument from
arbitrariness’ applies, as there are different ways that these sets can be constructed. However, as Sider admits in a footnote to the above argument, if numbers can be considered primitive entities, this particular problem does not apply (1996, p. 299). As the question of whether numbers are primitive entities or constructed from sets is not considered in this thesis, Sider’s argument will not be pursued any further, although it suggests an interesting interaction of theories that probably deserves further attention.

Criticism of the descriptive element of Lewis’s (1983) answer could rest on showing that his account of natural kinds was problematic, or that the principles are somehow not applicable to this question. While not specifically about Lewis’s account of natural kinds (and not about his solution), Maddy (1984) takes the position that the Sceptic cannot legitimately presume against the existence of natural kinds. She admits that a defender of the sceptical viewpoint could object by saying that the world is not packaged into natural kinds, but also that this is only a premise (Maddy, 1984, p. 471). The implication here is that such a premise would require support just as any other would, and that such support is not wholly supplied by Kripke’s (1982) arguments. Kusch paraphrases Maddy as holding that there are no knock-down arguments against scientific realism about natural kinds; hence, the realist is entitled to rely on this worldview in their response to the Sceptic (2006, p. 135). Kusch makes no further criticism of natural kinds, so at least for the purposes of that argument, he presumably holds a similar position. It seems to be the case that within arguments in favour of meaning scepticism, there is no overwhelming case against natural kinds—for example, there is no case for nominalism. As highlighted by Maddy, this feature of Kripke’s argument plays an important role in the causal approach to answering the Sceptic, as presented in Chapter 7.

If the existence of natural kinds cannot be legitimately undermined, the question turns on how applicable Lewis’s (1983) concept is to the question of meaning scepticism. Whether this is applicable relies, in part, on whether there is ‘charitable presumption in favour of eligible content’ (Lewis, 1983, p. 376). This is not to dispute that there may be independent and objective differences between properties—only that the charitable
presumption may be either inapplicable or un-allowable. One way that this presumption may not be applicable is if, as previously noted, there is another way of solving the problem of interpretation. It must be said that if Lewis is referring to the indeterminacy of translation, any solution to that might also be applicable to the problem of meaning scepticism.

One possible response to Lewis (1983) is that this move is not allowable in seeking to solve the problem of interpretation, and that the problems of translation and presumably meaning scepticism remain insoluble, by Lewis’s standards at least. Lewis indicates that this charitable presumption must be imposed \textit{a priori} as a constitutive constraint on the problem; otherwise, there is no hope of solving it (1983, p. 377). In that regard, the Sceptic would probably agree that there is no hope of solving these problems—at least in the straight sense. It is certainly attractive to allow such a presumption if it solves a problem, but that in and of itself does not make the presumption true. Thus, the constitutive constraint favouring eligible content must stand or fall on its own merits. To allow the charitable presumption of eligible content without testing its veracity simply because the outcome is favourable would be to appeal to the consequences—\textit{argumentum ad consequentiam}. That the outcomes are desirable—in this case, solving the problems of translation and meaning scepticism—does not make the argument either valid or sound. That all meanings exist objectively in a platonic realm that could be magically accessed via the ether in a way that somehow dealt with issues of error and finitude would, apart from being a highly dubious theory, solve the problem of meaning scepticism—but no one would accept the theory purely on those terms. While Lewis’s proposal is undoubtedly vastly more sensible, it is in need of further testing for the same reasons.

Wright identifies several different ways that Lewis’s proposal—that there must be an \textit{a priori} ‘charitable presumption in favour of eligible content’ (Lewis, 1983, p. 376)—can be understood (Wright, 2012, p. 616). The first is that Lewis is suggesting that we propose or speculate that reference holds between speakers’ words and the most objectively similar class of eligible objects (Wright, 2012, p. 616). Wright observes that postulating something does not make it so (2012, p. 616). This is the case regardless of the explanatory convenience
of the postulation. In addition to this, or perhaps because of it, the Sceptic can of course put forward a conjecture of their own—that reference holds between words and the second most natural of the eligible classes. Without any additional differentiating evidence, there is no way to say which of these conjectures is true. A reading that Wright lists as being related is that Lewis is simply asserting that reference is *identical* with the relation that holds between our words and the most natural classes compatible with the other reference-determining constraints (2012, p. 616). That is, reference ‘just is’ *a* particular relation between words and the world.

It is important to note that reference would be *a* relation between words and the world, and not *the* relation, as there presumably exists a virtually infinite number of relations between words and the objects they hypothetically refer to. This feature will arise again when the ideas that Devitt (1997) and McGinn (1984) have about reference are discussed in Chapter 7. While his ideas on reference are obviously distinct to Lewis’s, a question that Devitt (1997) asks of his own account is salient at this point: Why, and on what grounds, would one identify one particular word–world relation—that which describes a ‘standard’ interpretation—as reference instead of other ‘non-standard’ word–world relations (Devitt, 1997, p. 330)? In defending causal theories of reference, Devitt proposes an answer to this question, but no such proposal is obvious in Lewis’s account. Appealing to the obvious utility of being able to solve problems of indeterminate interpretation, meaning and translation carries no weight in and of itself.

A further interpretation of Lewis’s (1983) proposal is that we ‘stipulatively re-define reference’ so that, from this time forward, ‘reference’ has a new meaning, which entails that speakers’ words refer to the most natural eligible objects or classes (Wright, 2012, p. 617). While words may not have determinately referred to the most natural eligible classes in the past, if the new meaning of reference is accepted, they will from now on. The determinacy of reference is thus a consequence of the acceptance of Lewis’s proposed new definition of ‘reference’. Wright argues that this interpretation is most likely to be correct (2012, pp. 617, 621). However, the aspect of determinacy of reference being a *consequence* of accepting
Lewis’s new definition is the one that I find most troubling; hence, I am hesitant to ascribe such a view to him. The re-definition of reference is problematic for a number of reasons. If reference were indeterminate in the past, right up to the point where the new definition is accepted, no stock can be put in the meaning of any words used up to that point. This would include, as Wright points out, the initial proposal of the re-definition of reference, allowing the Sceptic to challenge the meaning of the words in that proposal and hence put forward their own interpretation of Lewis’s proposal (2012, p. 617). The only way that Lewis’s proposed re-definition can work is if it is assumed that reference is already somehow determinate. This would not make sense because, if reference was already determinate, there would be no need for Lewis’s redefinition. More importantly, to assume that reference was already determinate in any way, including Lewis’s re-definition, would be to beg the question against the Sceptic.

Wright’s final interpretation is that Lewis (1983) is proposing that we should accept that the identity of reference is that it just is the relation that holds between our words and the most natural of the potentially eligible candidates for their referents (2012, p. 619). Again, the question arises: On what grounds is it the case that we should accept this definition? The most obvious answer that a defender of Lewis could give is that we should accept his proposal because that is what is actually happening. Putting aside that it is not clear that this is Lewis’s position, the problem with this suggestion is that there seems to be no better reason to accept it than the sceptical alternative. Wright (2012) identifies two issues in accepting that reference just is a certain way. First, the Sceptic can accept the proposal but dispute what the proposal actually means. Second, and more importantly, the Sceptic can propose recommendations of their own as to what reference should be taken as (Wright, 2012, p. 619). Given the alternatives put forward by the Sceptic—for example, ‘Reference is to be taken to be the relation that holds between our terms and the second most natural of the eligible classes of referents’ (Wright, 2012, p. 619)—a reason is needed to rule them out in

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8 When the relevant passage is taken at face value and in isolation, this is the interpretation of Lewis that I instinctively favour, although it is no less troubling than Wright’s other interpretations.
favour of Lewis’s proposal. To say that Lewis’s proposal should be accepted or that it is
correct simply because it delivers the correct extensions for speakers’ terms is, as Wright
indicates, to beg the question against the Sceptic (2012, p. 619). As discussed previously,
this aspect of the solution is not dissimilar to the difficulties that beset dispositional analyses,
and the results of accepting Lewis’s thesis on the definition of reference would be positive
because of the problems that could thereby be solved. But these positive results are not, in
and of themselves, good reasons why we should accept his definition. They do not show that
we can reasonably accept this definition over anything that the Sceptic would offer.

To say that a certain problem can be solved if a certain assumption is made only
works if the assumption is both true and can be shown to be true. If the assumption is not
reflective of the current state of affairs or cannot be shown to be reflective of the state of
affairs, its acceptability is in doubt. In the case of Lewis’s (1983) proposed solution to
meaning scepticism, the sceptical doubts have been shown to remain even under a number of
different interpretations. Regardless of whether his model of reference is taken as being
speculatively posited, re-defined or simply asserted, Lewis cannot give good reason to accept
his idea without begging the question against the Sceptic.

Successful or not, Lewis’s (1983) account has a clear rationale behind the claim that
it can provide a differentiation between a speaker meaning one thing and another by a certain
word. However, the normative aspect in Lewis’s (1983) work is harder to grasp. ‘New Work
for a Theory of Universals’ does not explicitly say much on this. The lack of a normative
element is only a problem if, as Kripke (1982) assumes, meaning is in fact normative. But
assuming for the moment that it is in some way normative, it has to be concluded that more
work is needed before Lewis’s answer can be considered complete.

5.1.1 Delancey and Kolmogorov Complexity

Delancey (2007) expands on the ideas of Lewis (1983) to formulate a more explicit
solution. What is most relevant to Lewis’s resolution of the problem is how Delancey deals
with the normative aspect of this type of account. Delancey argues that Lewis’s remark that
quaddition is less natural than addition is largely analogous to saying that quaddition is more complex than addition (2007, p. 245). Delancey claims that this complexity, as measured using Kolmogorov complexity, is a viable measure of this naturalness (2007, p. 245). Kolmogorov complexity is defined as ‘a theory of computational complexity based on the amount of information contained within an entity’ (Daintith & Wright, 2008). The descriptive part of Delancey’s solution is that speakers who ‘produce and recognize meaningful utterances tend to use simpler procedures to produce and recognize those utterances, all other costs being equal’ (2007, p. 248). How this conclusion is reached will be discussed later, but in the interim, the parallel with Lewis’s solution is clear. The normative part of this solution is that speakers should choose the least complex procedure for producing and recognising utterances, all other costs being equal (Delancey, 2007, p. 249).

In arguing to support this normative explanation, Delancey (2007) argues that when deciding between different interpretations of the same utterance, the least complex alternative is the most likely to be true. It should be preferred because humans want true interpretations of utterances and because, all other things equal, humans will accept that they should try to get what they want. The question now is: Can this be applied to Lewis’s (1983) solution? Essentially, it would be that when a speaker is doing something that could be interpreted as either adding or quadding, we should interpret it as adding because adding is more natural and therefore more likely to be the most accurate interpretation and the most desirable because we should try to get what we want (in this case, the accurate interpretation of whether we are adding or quadding). It is not initially apparent that such a move is present in Lewis’s argument. However, if Delancey’s (2007) argument were successful, it would be worth considering as an addition to Lewis’s solution.

Consider the following possible formulation of Delancey’s (2007) argument:

1. Humans want to have accurate interpretations of utterances.
2. Humans will accept that, all things considered equal, they should try to get what they want.
3. The most natural interpretation of an utterance is most likely to be accurate.

4. If humans want to have accurate interpretations of utterances, they should use the most natural interpretation of an utterance. (From 1, 2 and 3.)

It should be noted from the outset that Delancey (2007) cannot successfully establish that the most natural interpretation of a word is the most likely to be accurate without begging the question against the Sceptic, as it relies on the prior assumption that there are correct and incorrect interpretations. Showing which choice is more likely to be correct answers an epistemological problem of how to decide which interpretation is correct. But it does not address the constitutive problem of whether there is such a thing as a correct interpretation in the first place. For this reason, the focus of this discussion is on whether Delancey’s account can improve the normative aspect of these types of solutions rather than function as a solution in its own right.

In terms of assessing any possible normative force that this account can provide, the key is the second premise. Delaney’s exact formulation is that human speakers ‘will accept that, ceteris paribus, they should do whatever is required for getting what they want’ (2007, p. 249). Given that what is being said is ‘that humans will accept that they should do something’, rather than ‘humans should do something’, it appears that the normative claim is weakened. That humans will accept a normative claim as being true is not a normative claim but a factual one (about the people accepting the normative statement about getting what they want). It is not clear that humans accepting a normative claim as true automatically makes it so. This being the case, Delancey’s (2007) account can only provide a weaker sort of normative justification at best. Being able to say ‘that a speaker will accept, ceteris paribus, that they should interpret “+” as adding rather than quadding’ is different to saying ‘that a speaker should interpret “+” as adding’, and so on. If in fact this claim cannot be used to uphold the normative weight of Delancey’s account, it will not bring any normative force.
to Lewis’s (1983) either. Nor is it clear that Delancey’s (2007) use of the idealisation is any more legitimate that it was for Fodor (1990) or Kowalenko (2009). It would certainly be the case that the idealisation would have to avoid certain assumptions lest it beg the question against the Sceptic.

A further criticism of Delancey’s (2007) attempt to bring normative justification to his solution is also possible. Consider the first part of the compound platitude regarding normative justification: ‘that human beings want to have true interpretations of the utterances they interpret’ (Delancey, 2007, p. 248). While it might seem radical to suggest that this is not platitudinous, it would also be negligent not to ask whether this is in fact what humans actually ‘want’. It seems safe to suggest that humans would favour interpretations of utterances that are more likely to get them what they want. But achieving their desired end is not always going to be best served by the most accurate interpretation.

The following example might seem unlikely, but its possibility illustrates the problem with Delancey’s (2007) account. A says to B ‘I may give you five apples on Saturday’. The listener, B, interprets this as ‘I will give you five apples on Saturday’. This is because what B wants (until Saturday at least) is to believe that A has both the motivation and capability to deliver the apples. That interpretation is more appealing than the more precise interpretation—that the supply of apples is doubtful or that A’s motivation with regard to B is ambivalent. In everyday life, examples would probably be more subtle in nature. Nonetheless, it is plausible to suggest that those who are interpreting the utterances may sometimes have their interpretations influenced by psychological factors such as cognitive biases. Of course, misinterpreting utterances could lead to negative outcomes that could have otherwise been avoided. Even so, a more accurate platitude concerning normative justification would be this: Human beings want to have interpretations of utterances (both others’ and their own) that are most likely to achieve their desires.

Delancey asserts that speakers and listeners are not necessarily aware of the norm he has proposed (2007, p. 249). If these people are not aware that they are conforming to this accuracy norm, they may not be aware that their application of it was distorted by wishful
thinking, denial, pessimism, disordered thinking or other psychological factors. Obviously, following this norm cannot be conscious for two reasons. First, thinking to oneself ‘I want to have a true interpretation of 68 + 57, so I should choose the least complex interpretation, that the answer is 125 rather than 5’ is a rule for interpreting a rule. Second, it simply is not what people do; it seems to be out of line with the experience of interpreting the utterance of another speaker.

The consequence of this is that Delancey (2007) cannot say that humans always want accurate interpretations of utterances and that they are not always aware of whether they want accurate or inaccurate interpretations. Further, this would mean that even if the statement ‘they will accept that, ceteris paribus, they should do whatever is required for getting what they want’ (Delancey, 2007, p. 249) were taken as normative, it does not necessarily entail that humans should prefer the least complex interpretation of an utterance because they do not necessarily want the most accurate interpretation.

To say that a person should take certain action to achieve their goal (because that action will lead to that goal) does not carry a very strong sense of obligation. Kripke (1982) originally demanded some level of normative justification of any potential solution. Whatever fact constitutes a speaker meaning one thing rather than another by a given sign should have the quality that, regardless of what a speaker actually does, there is a unique thing that they should do (Kripke, 1982, p. 24). At best, the obligation that Delancey (2007) introduces entails that when computing ‘68 +57’, if a person wishes to give the correct reply, they should answer ‘125’. However, it does not in and of itself entail that people should want to give the correct reply. Nor does it successfully show that ‘125’ is the correct reply or even that a uniquely correct reply exists. Again, Delancey’s solution fails to deliver normative force to either Lewis’s (1983) account or his own. Further, if the Sceptic’s claim that there is no uniquely correct reply stands unrefuted, any sense of obligation to provide a correct answer counts for very little.
5.2 FELDMAN’S PLATONISM—ROBUST OR OTHERWISE

It has been proposed that a possible answer to the Sceptic is a form of platonism. A (and possibly the only) major proponent of this view has been Feldman (1986), whose argument stands aside from many covered in this thesis. Other accounts make use of facts about speakers that are relatively uncontroversial. In contrast, Feldman’s proposed candidate in answer to the Sceptic may be arguably more questionable. Feldman argues that meaning facts could be nothing more than brute facts, and he defends this view with what has been termed by Fitch as robust platonism (2004, p. 164), which he argues is somewhat different to the version that Kripke (1982) briefly considers. As discussed in Section 2.2.6, Kripke proposes that, by this account, to grasp a concept is to directly observe a private idea that is somehow representative of that concept. Feldman claims that the problem with the version of platonism that Kripke explores is that if this idea is small enough to be ‘seen’ in its entirety, it is not big enough to distinguish between plus and quus (1986, p. 686). That is, if the idea is small enough to be within the finite mind of a speaker, it will not be big enough to determine the infinite extension of the function. In response, Feldman proposes that ‘grasping sepia is an unmediated relation between me and sepia itself’ (1986, p. 686). Thus, ‘grasping’ a concept is not something that occurs in the mind; it is an unmediated relation between a speaker and a concept or property (i.e., sepia). This solution would then work by saying that it is in virtue of speaker S grasping the concept of ‘plus’ directly that they mean ‘plus’ by ‘+’, for if they meant quus, they would have grasped something different. It seems reasonable that the Sceptic might still have doubts regarding which concept or property had been grasped. Feldman claims that this can simply be resolved as an epistemic problem (1986, p. 687). In the case of sepia, it would be to examine more examples and discuss with another speaker what the correct thing to say about them is. Although he admits that some doubts remain about which property was grasped, he claims that simplicity would support the hypothesis that he meant one thing rather than another (1986, p. 686). Further, Feldman claims that God could tell if a speaker was using one term rather than another simply by observing them grasping the property directly (1986, p. 687).
There are a number of problems with Feldman’s (1986) proposed solution. One is that it seems implausible, or at least controversial, to suggest that there is no mental entity involved in the grasping of these concepts anywhere. It is also unclear how we could ‘grasp’ a property directly, and then make a mistake in using it. The only explanation would be that we grasped the ‘wrong’ property or failed to grasp the ‘right’ one.

Note that the sceptical position does not need to be hostile to the existence of platonic entities. But the question of why a speaker connects a certain platonic entity to a certain word is not adequately resolved by Feldman’s (1986) discussion. Assume that a multitude of platonic entities exist that correspond to arithmetic functions, including both the addition and quaddition functions. That a speaker answered ‘125’ when asked to complete ‘68 + 57’ is consistent with them grasping the addition function in some unmediated manner. If they had grasped quaddition, they would have answered ‘5’.

However, before reaching the point of the example, there would be no difference in the result, regardless of which entity they grasped. Notwithstanding that, a more serious issue arises from Feldman’s account of how difficulties could be resolved regarding what property was grasped.

If the only way we can say that a speaker is using ‘plus’ rather than ‘quus’ is by appealing to discussion of what the correct thing to say is, Feldman’s (1986) solution at best starts to resemble the sceptical solution. This is because what is occurring looks very much like feedback and correction from the linguistic community. Feldman’s assertion that God would know if a speaker meant ‘plus’ or ‘quus’ under this account seems plausible at least.

However, it is not particularly helpful, as only entities that could observe the unmediated relation between the speaker and the property they were grasping have access to the ‘straight’ aspect of this solution. A solution that is in practicality sceptical, as it is impossible to publicly ask God what a speaker ‘really meant’, contributes little to finding a straight solution other than to make room for it to be resolved in an epistemic manner. Nor is it clear

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9 I use this word loosely here.
how simplicity would favour the hypothesis of meaning ‘sepia’ rather than ‘quepia’ (as the problem is not solved by appeals to simplicity, as we have seen). For one thing, it is not clear that the immediate grasp of one platonic entity rather than another has a greater level of simplicity than another. More importantly, if simplicity of the hypothesis is the deciding factor, there being no grasping of platonic ideals is less complex than either grasping plus or quus. This might seem unlikely, but since the question of which concept is grasped is only practically resolved by discussion, platonic entities could be left out altogether and the same result would occur.

This is where the difference between this answer and a dispositional account, for example, becomes relevant. In resisting an answer to the Sceptic based on dispositions, it is less controversial to question the philosophical significance of those dispositions than it is to question their existence. The Sceptic would not get much mileage out of denying that we are in fact disposed to respond to stimuli in certain ways. But Feldman’s (1986) proposal is different, as new entities and relationships enter the discussion. In defending the sceptical position, one could say that if there were such a thing as the platonic entity of sepia, and if a speaker could grasp it in a direct and unmediated manner, it would be true that they meant sepia and not quepia. The arguments regarding whether such platonic entities exist in the way that Feldman proposes deserves a more thorough discussion than can be given here. It is enough to say that without further discussion, there is no reason why the Sceptic should feel compelled to accept their existence.

Feldman’s (1986) proposal fails in a severe manner. But this brief treatment hopefully shows that Kripke (1982) was justified in not including this and other forms of platonism as possible solutions.

5.3 MILLIKAN AND BIOLOGICAL PURPOSE

Millikan (1990) puts forward her answer to the sceptical challenge in ‘Truth Rules, Hoverflies and the Kripke–Wittgenstein Paradox’. In considering this proposed solution, the main question of whether it is satisfactory will be considered. In addition, there may be some
doubt regarding whether this constitutes a straight solution. While this solution takes an approach to the problem that is unlike that of many others, it will be argued that it shares important features with the solutions of Soames (1997), Coates (1997) and Searle (2002). Ultimately, Millikan’s solution faces similar problems and shares the same fate; it is neither satisfactory nor straight.

As has been previously mentioned, Millikan (1990) is concerned with the effect that the sceptical conclusion and sceptical solution has on the status of correspondence truth; namely, that it will be replaced with assertability conditions (1990, p. 323). Millikan’s account rests on dispositional and teleological foundations. She equates the normative and purposive elements: ‘to mean to follow a certain rule is to have as a purpose to follow it’ (Millikan, 1990, p. 329). The measure of a linguistic disposition being right or wrong, says Millikan, is how well it lines up with the purpose a speaker has in making a certain use of language. Having a purpose to follow a rule may involve having a representation of that purpose in mind. Millikan observes that such a representation in this context would be in need of interpretation; hence, a rule governing how it was to be interpreted would be required (1990, p. 329). In order for this further rule not to induce the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ regress, Millikan concludes that it must not be represented; rather, it must be unexpressed (1990, p. 329).

Millikan (1990) proposes three ways that speakers can conform to rules. The first is by coinciding with a rule in that we are merely disposed to act in a way that happens to be in accordance with it (Millikan, 1990, p. 329). The second is by intending or purposing to follow an expressed or explicit (or occurrent) rule (Millikan, 1990, p. 329). The final way to conform to a rule is by purposefully conforming to an unexpressed or implicit rule (Millikan, 1990, p. 329). According to Millikan, this third way is to have a non-occurrent purpose to follow a rule and to succeed in achieving that purpose. Of the three ways that Millikan proposes that speakers can conform to rules, it is the third that she ultimately makes use of in attempting to answer the sceptical challenge. According to Millikan, the unexpressed purposes that underlie acts of explicit purposing and expression of intentions are biological
purposes, and the competence to act in a way that conforms to an unexpressed rule is likewise biological in nature (Millikan, 1990, p. 330). With regard to the specific challenge, Millikan states that ‘…if knowing a language involves having a competence in following certain rules for construction and interpretation of sentences, the purpose that informs this competence, I will argue, is a biological purpose’ (Millikan, 1990, p. 330). That is, if being able to use a language entails that speakers follow certain (presumably explicit) rules when they use words and interpret the words of other speakers, the purpose that underlies these explicit rules is biological and non-occurrent in nature.

An example of a seemingly simple rule in a less complex organism is deployed by Millikan (1990) to illustrate the point. The organism in question is the hoverfly—in this case, either *Eristalis* sp. or *Volucella pellucens*. The rule is that which concerns its reaction to certain specific stimuli—namely, the insects’ reaction to small moving objects crossing their field of vision. Male hoverflies (as their name suggests) tend to hover for much of the day in one position and will rapidly pursue a range of small objects that cross their path (Collett & Land, 1978, p. 191). This not only includes female hoverflies, but also small pebbles, midges and birds (Collett & Land, 1978, p. 191). When this response to stimuli is elicited, the male hoverfly does not head straight for its target; rather, it proceeds at an angle so as to intercept its target downrange. Given the constants regarding the distance at which the female hoverfly can be detected by the male, as well as her speed and his acceleration, it is possible to formulate an equation to calculate the angle that the male must turn away from his target in order to intercept it. According to Millikan, this can be given as: ‘The turn that his body must make, given as a function of the angle off center of the target’s image on his retina, equals the (signed) angle of the image minus 1/10 its vector angular velocity, plus or minus 180º’ (1990, p. 331). On the basis of their experiments, Collett and Land conclude that hoverflies behave in line with the model they put forward (1978, p. 201).

Millikan cites Collet and Land (1978) as holding the view that regardless of the nature of their quarry, this is the rule (my emphasis) to which the flight of the male hoverfly conforms (1990, p. 331). Characterising this rule as being about how a hoverfly should
behave in relation to the proximal stimulus of a moving spot on its retinal, rather than in relation to distal objects, Millikan designates this as the ‘proximal hoverfly rule’ (1990, p. 331), asserting that it is unlikely that the hoverfly needs any inner representation of the calculation of this rule in order to follow it (1990, p. 331). While there might be some small danger of speculation when it comes to talking about the inner life of other species, it seems safe to think that this is not an intentional or occurring process in hoverflies. According to Millikan, the hoverfly has an ‘unexpressed biological purpose’ to conform to this rule and expresses a competence in doing so (1990, pp. 331–332). Millikan concedes that the proximal hoverfly rule is not the only rule that ‘fits’ all past examples of hoverfly behaviour; it is possible to construct quus-like formulations that fit all behaviour to date, but that would produce different behaviour under certain conditions (as is the case with quus) (1990, p. 342).

The distinction between so-called proximal and distal rules is important for Millikan’s (1990) account. While the proximal hoverfly rule is about specific reactions to specific retinal stimuli, the distal hoverfly rule is something like ‘if you see a female, catch it’ (Millikan, 1990, p. 335). The normal explanation of conformity to the distal rule entails that the hoverfly has conformed to the proximal rule.

By Millikan’s (1990) account, it seems fair to suggest that humans are born with a number of innate ‘Homo sapiens rules’—both proximal and distal—that they have biological purposes to follow, and that there are physical structures and processes in the body and brain of a normal human to implement such purposes (Millikan, 1990, pp. 341–342). Millikan asks us to consider any human behaviour produced by ‘well-functioning’ regulatory biological systems (as well as dismissing behaviour that is the result of malfunction). There will be a way to describe this behaviour in terms of its biological purposes—both proximal and distal—as well as any biological competencies that it expresses (Millikan, 1990, p. 342). Millikan maintains that any descriptions of this behaviour that are ‘quus-like’ will fail to express its biological purpose. What to make of this leads to what is possibly the core of the question for Millikan: What is the relationship between everyday human intentions and
meanings and human biological purposes? She maintains that human intentions do not accidentally coincide with our biological purposes, and that to suppose otherwise is to subscribe to a kind of epiphenomenon of biology, where our desires and intentions are by-products of systems designed for other purposes (Millikan, 1990, p. 342). Thus, explicitly intending or meaning something and representing this meaning presupposes prior purposing—in this case, the purpose to ‘let the representation guide one a certain way’ (Millikan, 1990, p. 343). This prior purposing cannot be analysed in the same way that explicit intentions are analysed lest a regress occur. Rather, it must be a prior assumption.

Millikan’s (1990) stated conclusion is that ordinary explicit intending is underpinned by biological purposing. Specifically, it rests upon the biological purpose to be ‘guided by, to react this way rather than that to, ones representations’ (Millikan, 1990, p. 343). To return to Kripke’s (1982) original challenge, Millikan holds that what a speaker intends to do when they read or use ‘plus’ has been determined by the experience of the speaker in combination with their evolutionary design. Likewise, other speakers with the same cognitive equipment and the same experience will mean the same thing by plus. For example, I mean plus rather than quus by the ‘+’ sign because underlying the explicit intention to mean plus is a non-occurrent biological purpose, whereas to mean quus has no such biological purpose underlying it; hence, quus is not a viable interpretation. Millikan’s position is that this meaning has been determined by the application of the various proximal and distal Homo sapiens rules to human experience. While she concedes that the specifics of what these rules entail and exactly how they interact with arithmetic training are beyond the scope of her investigation, she maintains that these considerations are the basis of a broad solution to the Kripke–Wittgenstein paradox (Millikan, 1990, p. 345).

There are a number of problems with Millikan’s (1990) account. It seems plausible that intentions and representations are based (in some way) on biological ‘purposes’. But it is conceivable at least that not all biological purposes (and therefore biological proximal and distal rules) are incompatible with the fact that there is no such thing as meaning. For example, if the proximal rule is to ‘use language in a way that is within conditions of what is
assertable within one’s linguistic community’ in order to achieve the distal rule ‘communicate with others in a way that maximises genetically desirable outcomes’ (or something similar), this does not entail that meaning as such must necessarily exist. Millikan expresses the view that the exact content of the *Homo sapiens* rules was not important to support her conclusion that there is such a thing as meaning. If, as has been described, not all conceivable biological rules entail that meaning exists, she must at least be wrong on that account.

If, for the sake of argument, evolution is taken as being true, it would be a consequence of Millikan’s (1990) argument that our individual intentional states are the product of our evolutionary history combined with our individual experience. If speakers with a common evolutionary history and consequently common cognitive structures have similar experiences—that is, arithmetic education—it is not surprising that they react to arithmetic stimuli in similar ways. The Sceptic’s argument with Millikan is not over whether this occurs; once again, the disagreement is over what significance should be attached to this state of affairs. Although Millikan seeks to distance her answer to the Sceptic from dispositional accounts, this is where parallels start to be seen.

The evolution of individuals is uniquely individual.10 Likewise, the experience of individuals is unique in at least some respects. Given what Millikan (1990) has argued, it would therefore be expected that there will be some variation in responses to stimuli, at least in complex organisms such as humans. When a combination of these variables causes an individual to react to the ‘+’ stimuli in a way other than by interpreting it as ‘plus’, the question arises as to how Millikan’s account deals with this occurrence. Putting the notion of ‘biological purpose’ aside for one moment, it appears that interpreting the ‘+’ sign to mean quus rather than plus is just as grounded in the individual’s biology as another interpretation by another individual to mean plus. This would be in much the same way that a ‘correct’ interpretation supervenes globally as much as an ‘incorrect’ one, as I have argued regarding

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10 Except in the case of, for example, twins or cloning.
Soames’s (1997) account. Thus, for the quus interpretation, it might be argued that they have some sort of biological malfunction or that their experience was different. Now the parallel with dispositionalism becomes more apparent. The biological factors that cause a speaker to give an ‘incorrect’ answer are simply those that cause the speaker to give an answer that does not accord with the ‘correct’ meaning. The most obvious response is that an incorrect answer does not express a biological purpose. But in this case, this only shows that we would attribute the expression of a biological purpose (or not) on the basis of whether the correct answer was given—that is, whether the answer accords with the function that we meant.

Without a prior assumption of ‘+’ correctly meaning plus, there is no way to attribute the expression of biological purpose and hence no way to differentiate between the ‘+’ sign meaning one thing or another. This can be stated in a similar way to the parallel problem with dispositions, as discussed in Section 2.2.2. A speaker is correct if they express the biological purpose. But the speaker also expresses the biological purpose if they are correct. This is where Millikan’s seemingly innocuous comment about the behaviour produced by ‘well-functioning’ regulatory biological systems (1990, p. 342) becomes significant. With regard to how a speaker uses language, under Millikan’s schema, their biological systems are judged to be ‘well-functioning’ on the basis on whether they give ‘correct’ answers. If they give incorrect answers, they are not functioning properly and are not expressing a biological purpose. To say that a speaker is not expressing a biological purpose is simply to say that their answer does not accord with the function that we meant. The result is the same for Millikan’s account as it is for dispositional accounts.

One recourse would be to appeal to the communitarian nature of our evolutionary history and hence our biological purposes. It seems plausible to suggest that it is much more likely to have a biological purpose that involves us effectively communicating with other humans than to have a purpose not to effectively communicate, unless this trait somehow enhanced survival and/or reproduction rates, which seems at least implausible. Thus, to mean plus by ‘+’ is to express the biological purpose to communicate effectively with others, whereas to mean quus does not express this purpose. The result of this is that we have
grounds for thinking that a speaker means one thing rather than another by a particular sign or utterance. However, this leads to two related and arguably problematic positions; either the account fails, or it can be interpreted as entailing a verificationist position.

This first problem is that, even using biological purposes that resist sceptical attack, this account is still either circular or it underdetermines meaning. Under the proposal that meaning is defined by the biological purpose to communicate effectively, the attribution of the expression of biological purpose and hence meaning becomes a reflection of what most other humans say or do. It follows from this that if one lived in a community of people who used ‘+’ to denote *quus*, to use ‘+’ to mean plus would be to fail to express the biological purpose of effective communication. Millikan seems to accept, albeit only in a footnote, that if ‘we all’ mean *quus* by plus, that is what ‘plus’ means (1990, pp. 343–344). Whether this is a problem partly depends on what other truth rules one might try to make consistent with this attribution of correctness. The communitarian nature of this solution does resemble the community-dispositional accounts already covered. Millikan is clear that the expression of biological purpose is simply not the same as a disposition. A disposition does not express a competence; it can simply be an accident (1990). However, the discussion of Boghossian’s (1989) objections to other communal-dispositional accounts in Section 4.5 suggests that this solution may encounter similar problems. On these grounds, the implications of a communitarian interpretation of Millikan’s argument should be explored in greater detail.

In theory, Millikan’s (1990) account avoids the problems of under-determination that face dispositional accounts because, while there may be factors that cause a speaker to misuse a word, the relevant biological purpose will stay the same. Whereas in a dispositional account there could be difficulty in differentiating dispositions to use a word correctly and dispositions to make a mistake without inducing circularity, Millikan’s account could overcome this. As previously discussed, it cannot do this by assuming specific meanings lest circularity occur. Not all potential biological purposes or *Homo sapiens* rules present this issue. For example, the biological purpose along the lines of ‘communicate effectively’ does not assume the specific meaning of ‘+’, and yet it would fit Millikan’s requirement that it
would cause speakers to be guided by, and react one way rather than another to, their representations (1990, p. 343). Moreover, it would do so in a way that does not instantly produce results that contradict common sense, and it produces a situation where ‘+’ means whatever the linguistic community says it does. Thus, while a speaker in one community might be expressing a biological purpose by using a word in a particular way, in another community, a different speaker could be expressing the same biological purpose by using that same word in a different manner. In one sense, this means that there is no point in asking which community is ‘right’ if they are considered in isolation. It might be that, as discussed previously with Bloor’s (1997) community-dispositional solution, there can be no judgement from outside of the collective. It is plausible to think that a particular conclusion would not be palatable to some philosophers. Kripke (1982) cites Wittgenstein (1967) as indicating that a group of people agreeing that something is a certain way does not make it so. In any case, as the discussions of Bloor, Boghossian (1989) and Horwich (1990) show, a situation where the community is always judged as being correct can lead to a failure of the overall account of meaning.

A troubling parallel with dispositions may be that of error and what it implies about truth. It is possible for an individual to experience or have inflicted upon them a confounding factor that interferes with their ability to express a biological purpose. For example, it may be too dark to differentiate between a cow and a horse, or perhaps they are suffering from myopia. Even if they fail to express the purpose of effective communication by sometimes saying ‘Lo, a horse!’ when a cow presents itself, the biological purpose, whatever it is, remains the same. Consider a situation where a whole linguistic community experiences this same confounding factor. Thus, they all, for whatever reason, use the word ‘horse’ to denote cows. In one sense, they cannot be judged as having made an error, as the whole community is using the word ‘horse’ in the same way. While it makes sense that a systematic error may become the norm under certain conditions, it remains an error in the sense that the object in question is a cow and not a horse. Alternatively, that such an error has been made is not something that those inside the community have epistemic access to, so labelling them as
being in error should be done with caution. Regardless, it seems plausible that it would not *solely* be agreement at work as a biological purpose. Consistent and clear communication of content that was nonetheless evolutionarily maladaptive (such as miscategorising cows and horses) expresses some biological purpose, but fails to express others. Thus, a purpose to use language in such a way as to not lead us into error in the environment, as Coates (1997) might have put it, is distinctly plausible. Note that this purpose would still not necessarily attach a certain word to a certain use, concept or thing. If no negative outcomes occur on the basis of using both ‘cow’ and ‘horse’ to denote cows, the biological purpose of avoiding error in the environment is still expressed.

Imagine a situation where a whole community had *always* been operating in error (although there is a certain suspension of judgement involved in saying that) and then conditions improved, so that the error could be detected. The community always used both words to describe cows. Insomuch as it did not lead to maladaptive outcomes, all biological purposes were expressed. When the situation improved and the members of the community could see that they were sometimes using ‘horse’ in the wrong way, those *same* biological purposes are still being expressed. A somewhat cheeky Sceptic might claim that this is the position they place us in with regard to our use of ‘+’ to denote the plus function. Prior to adding 68 and 57 for the first time, and before our encounter with the Sceptic, we express biological purposes by taking ‘+’ to denote the plus function. The Sceptic might say that once they had enlightened us to the real meaning of ‘+’, we would still be expressing the same purposes. If for some reason (and I cannot imagine what that might be) speakers decided that ‘+’ denoted quus, to that extent the Sceptic would be right. In reality, speakers would not change how they used ‘+’ unless there were some social or environmental factors that made such behaviour adaptive rather than maladaptive. On this score, Kripke (1982) and Millikan (1990) would (or should) be in agreement.

It is plausible that the *same* biological purposes can be expressed through different uses of the same word. This could include incorrect uses of that word if the whole community is afflicted with the same interfering factor. Unless one is willing to concede that
‘horse’ can mean either cow or horse in a situation where the whole community is, for example, in the dark, even this communitarian interpretation of Millikan’s (1990) account is in danger of failure. An account where the fact in virtue of which we mean certain things by certain words is the same fact that causes us to use the words both correctly and incorrectly is failing at the most basic level. As described in Section 2.2.2, in the case of dispositions, Kripke (1982) argues that prior assumptions of specific correct meanings cannot be used, as they would beg the question against the Sceptic. One approach to alleviate this problem is to separate and specify the interfering factors. There might be a state of affairs that is possible (albeit one that is improbable in reality) that could cause certain systematic errors in how words are applied across whole communities. One potential approach to deal with this is borrowed from Martin and Heil’s (1998) work on finks and masks. In one sense, this shows promise if the interfering factors are still simply dispositions and Millikan’s differentiation between dispositions and biological purposes are maintained. There are biological purposes to be guided by and react to our representations one way rather than another, but sometimes certain dispositions interfere with the expression of these purposes.

However, there are two drawbacks to this approach. The first is (as foreshadowed) that this only works if it is simply dispositions that act as finks or masks—that is, they interfere with the expressions of biological purpose. Perhaps a situation could arise where two different biological purposes are in conflict. While this seems unlikely in a hoverfly, it is at least plausible to suggest that this could happen in humans. If it were the case that two biological purposes were in conflict in such a way as to cause a speaker to use a word differently than they would have otherwise, writing the interfering factor off as a fink or mask becomes much more problematic. If two biological purposes are in conflict, the question of privileging one over the other arises, as it does for two dispositions that interfere (as described in Section 4.1.1). If two Homo sapiens rules are in conflict, which one do we privilege and how do we do it in such a way as to not fall into circularity? I would argue that, on this point, the answer is not clear.
The second drawback stems from the fact that even if the interfering factors are simply dispositions rather than other biological purposes, problems remain. The core of this is that the writing-off of interfering factors as dispositions may not extinguish the potential circularity of attributing the expression of biological purpose and hence meaning. Recall that the biological factors that cause a speaker to give an ‘incorrect’ answer are simply those that cause the speaker to give an answer that does not accord with the ‘correct’ meaning. This would be true regardless of whether an absolute or communitarian conception of meaning were used. Consider that the correct meaning of a word is that which occurs in accordance with the expression of a biological purpose and where there are no interfering dispositions. To say that ‘a biological purpose has been expressed and that there were no interfering dispositions’ is to say that the word was used in accordance with the function that we meant.

Once this point is reached, it should also be apparent that no idealisation of Millikan’s (1990) answer to the Sceptic will make it any less problematic. This account could be, for example: A speaker expressing a biological purpose will, \textit{ceteris paribus}, give the answer ‘125’ to the query ‘What is 57 + 68?’, and that by ‘+’, they mean plus (and not quus). This fails for reasons similar to those given in Section 4.3 regarding Fodor’s (1990) \textit{ceteris paribus} idealisation of dispositional accounts. Idealising arithmetic ability so that a speaker will always add correctly is not the same as idealising the ability to always be metalinguistically correct. Nor should it be, as idealising which sign applies to which function unfairly begs the question against the sceptical position. A communitarian formulation of Millikan’s account does not fare much better. A speaker expressing a biological purpose will, \textit{ceteris paribus}, give the answer that most others in their linguistic community would, \textit{ceteris paribus}, give to the query ‘What is 57 + 68?’, and that by ‘+’, they mean plus (and not quus). This makes the metalinguistic begging of the question all the more apparent because we have assumed that we know how the idealised community will act. Thus, finally, if all reference to specific meaning is removed, a speaker expressing a biological purpose will, \textit{ceteris paribus}, give the answer that most others in their linguistic community would, \textit{ceteris paribus}, give to the query ‘What is 57 + 68?’, and that by ‘+’,
they mean whatever the rest of the community meant (and not something else). This shows that a speaker with a biological purpose might act a certain way under idealised conditions. Most importantly, it shows that they will use a word in the same way as their idealised community. It is not clear how this would, by itself, justify any attribution of meaning.

If it were shown that meaning was nothing more than non-occurrent community assent, perhaps Millikan’s (1990) account would be more successful. Millikan has not shown this—she does not commit to what the relevant *Homo sapiens* rules are. The notion that there might be a distal rule of communicating effectively, enabled by a proximal rule of using words in accordance with what the community would agree with, is an idea that I used in an attempt to extricate Millikan’s theory from circularity—nothing more. It seems plausible that humans should have evolved in such a way that communication in a manner that enhances reproductive and survival potential is a ‘biological purpose’. But such a biological purpose need not entail that meaning exists. All it entails is that it will be somewhat predictable that groups of humans will use particular signs, symbols and utterances in similar ways under similar conditions. Even if such rules were taken, for the sake of argument, to be true, the problems that such a thesis about meaning would generate remain. Should it be accepted, as Bloor argues, that the creation of new knowledge—such as a community would do when adding two numbers that it had never added before—is something that we ‘just do’, and that nothing more can be said (1997)? If the answer is yes, this may not be a reason to reject the theory. But the kind of scrutiny that Boghossian (1989) applies regarding community infallibility would surely be relevant.

As previously indicated, Millikan accepts the possibility that her solution entails linguistic relativity—that whatever the intentional attitude the community holds towards how a word is used is what that word means (1990, pp. 343–344). At its core, this position will have difficulty satisfying the Sceptic. According to the Sceptic, an individual can be wrong about the meaning of ‘+’; it actually means quus, not plus. The Sceptic trades upon the fact that the individual has never previously added numbers of that size or larger, and so all of their past behaviour is as consistent with them meaning plus as meaning quus—hence the
challenge. This is also possible for a whole community if it has never added numbers of that size or larger. This would be true whether the calculation was undertaken collectively or by individuals within the community. The Sceptic would argue that everything about the community to date supported the hypothesis that they meant plus just as much as it supported the hypothesis that they meant quus. Kripke (1982) is quite short with such a position, dismissing community dispositional solutions, but he also cites Wittgenstein (1967) as supporting the view that agreeing that ‘2 + 2 = 4’ is not the same as it being true that ‘2 + 2 = 4’. Millikan’s solution to this problem is to make use of the idea of biological purpose insomuch as answering one way expresses the purpose, whereas answering another way does not. But, as has been shown, this purpose cannot specifically be that, by ‘+’, a speaker means plus and not quus, lest Millikan beg the question. This is why a purpose such as using words in line with community use is more plausible.

Regardless of the form it takes, a biological purpose that entails that a speaker means plus would be indistinguishable from the biological purpose to mean quus, right up to the point described in the sceptical challenge of knowing what to do in a new case. No counter-factual about the behaviour of humans in the past—for example, our ancestors—can separate plus and quus, as the behavioural output prior to the new case will be identical. Further, this would be as true for a group as an individual. For either an individual or a group, the Sceptic can argue that they always had a biological purpose to mean quus. This is because the expression of the purpose to mean quus and the expression of the purpose to mean plus will be identical up to the point of the sceptical challenge. In these terms, the biological purpose cannot be the fact in virtue of which a speaker or a group of speakers means plus rather than quus. Appealing to the group consensus is not helpful, as the whole history of how the group has used a word is as compatible with one meaning as it is with the Sceptic’s alternative.

While Millikan states that biological purposes are not open for interpretation in the way that explicit intentions are (1990, p. 343), this does not mean that they are not reducible in some way. Nor does it make them off limits to closer inspection. However, it is unlikely that such scrutiny would produce a better outcome for her answer to the Sceptic. For a specific
biological purpose to mean plus, the Sceptic could surely dispute what biological purpose the speaker or speakers actually have. All of the evidence and history of both the individual and the group would be as consistent with a biological purpose to mean plus as it would be with a biological purpose to mean quus. What fact in virtue of which does a speaker have one purpose and not another? It is not clear how Millikan could answer this in a non-circular manner.

Millikan (1990) is aware that the same behaviours can be described in more conventional or more quus-like ways. However, she argues that only plus-like interpretations make sense from an evolutionary perspective because the link between human conscious actions and human biological purposes is not coincidental (1990, p. 342). This might be true, but the assumptions that support the existence of meaning and the possibility of meaning one thing rather than another require scrutiny. On what grounds can we assume that we have a purpose to mean plus? It cannot just be accepted as a fact. Further, the idea that we have a purpose to mean plus because that is what we all consciously think ‘+’ means would not survive scrutiny from the Sceptic.

A biological purpose that does not presume prior meaning—for example, ‘to communicate effectively’—is less problematic, but only under certain circumstances. If the purpose of communicating effectively is thought to entail meaning one thing rather than another, the same problem as above occurs; the whole history of expressing the biological purpose of communicating effectively is as applicable to meaning plus as it is to meaning quus. It is not clear how speakers could differentiate in any case, as Homo sapiens rules are not occurrent. One could posit that a purpose or distal rule to communicate effectively does not have a proximal rule specifically about plus, and so on; rather, the proximal rule is, for example, ‘use the word in the same way as everyone else’. The problem with this suggestion is that using a word in the same way as everyone else will not address the sceptical challenge.

If ‘communicating effectively’ is not taken to entail that a speaker means one thing rather than another, but just that they will attempt to use a word within what is assertable or
not, no circularity occurs and the Sceptic has nothing to object to. Nor is the description of the outward behaviour ‘quus-like’, so Millikan (1990) could not object to it on those grounds. The expression of this biological purpose would provide a justification for speakers interpreting ‘+’ as plus and not quus, as long as plus is the option with greater assertability and hence greater efficacy. But the solution is no longer straight, as it no longer necessarily supports the existence of meaning.

As mentioned earlier, broadly speaking, Millikan’s (1990) account entails two problematic issues. This is the second of those. This somewhat less serious problem is that the position that meaning is determined by whether a speaker is expressing a biological purpose to effectively communicate is in itself a verificationist position. Millikan argues specifically against the sceptical conclusion because she holds that it would entail that truth rules are verificationist rules rather than correspondence rules (1990, p. 323). Even if it were accepted that such rules could entail meaning, and even if they could somehow capture specific meanings, the attribution to a speaker of a state of expressing a biological rule or not will ultimately come down to whether they exhibit the ‘correct’ outward behaviour. To say that a speaker means plus and not quus by the ‘+’ sign, because meaning plus expresses a biological purpose whereas quus does not, is to place verificationist rules on meaning-declarative sentences. If it could not be determined whether a speaker was expressing a biological purpose in their use of a word, the question of what they meant by that word could not be answered one way or another. Under Millikan’s account, it seems unlikely that this would happen in reality. However, it is apparent that the criteria for deciding whether a biological purpose has been expressed are verificationist. If this entails that the conditions of meaning are verificationist, it is only a small step by Millikan’s own argument to show that the truth conditions of whole sentences are verification rules rather than correspondence rules. It may be that the move from verificationist rules for meaning to verificationist rules for the truth of whole sentences is possible under these circumstances as well. I argue that such an outcome is against the spirit of Millikan’s line of reasoning, if nothing else.
The consideration of verificationism is secondary to the main argument of whether Millikan (1990) can provide a satisfactory response to the Sceptic. Any biological purpose or *Homo sapiens* rule that could make Millikan’s (1990) account a straight solution renders it unfeasibly problematic by assuming that which is in question: That there is such a thing as meaning one thing rather than another by a sign. Any presupposition of prior meaning begs the question against the Sceptic. Biological purposes that try to make use of the communitarian aspect of language also either beg the question or fail to differentiate between alternate meanings as given by the Sceptic. The only formulation of Millikan’s solution that does not fall prey to these difficulties is a version where biological purposes do not entail meaning. A biological purpose aimed at optimally effective communication does not need to entail meaning—only that words are used and understood well enough to enable the needs and goals of those using the language. From this perspective, it appears fortunate that effective communication does not require ‘real’ meanings, so that every conversation does not need to be peppered with sceptical concerns about the use of the words therein. While there is not sufficient scope in this thesis to examine the interplay between the question of meaning and human evolutionary biology and psychology, it is tempting to wonder whether the reason that communication works at all is that it does not require meaning in the sense that the Sceptic attacks.

Speculation aside, it is clear that Millikan’s (1990) answer to the Sceptic fails to act as a satisfactory straight solution, although it appears that if the *Homo sapiens* rules are considered a certain way, it could be compatible with a sceptical solution. Even if the solution works, it is possible to make the argument that it fails in its overall aim to bolster correspondence truth against verificationist truth rules as applied to sentences, although this is a secondary consideration. Nonetheless, the overall result is that appealing to the expression of biological purpose through *Homo sapiens* rules will not provide a satisfactory straight solution to the problem of meaning scepticism.
5.4 Searle’s Solutions

Searle’s (2002) solution to the sceptical problem of meaning, which he puts forward in *Consciousness and Language*, sits more in a category of its own. To be completely accurate, Searle gives two related answers to Kripke’s (1982) challenge based on two differing interpretations of Kripke’s argument. Searle asserts that the first version of this argument extends to both rules, and words or symbols, whereas the second version only applies to rules. I argue that this is a dubious distinction. If something applies to ‘rules’, it applies to words and symbols via the application of these rules. Kusch holds that there is no indication in Kripke (1982) that the scepticism can be separated into two different challenges (2007, p. 154).

In his first argument, Searle (2002) objects on the grounds that the nature of the scepticism unfairly rules out the facts to which we should be able to appeal in order to settle this dispute—namely, facts about the past. At a glance, it might seem that this argument should not be taken seriously as a solution. However, it is interesting in that it unwittingly re-enforces Kripke’s (1982) analysis of the problem. Searle compares Kripke’s scepticism about meaning to Bertrand Russell’s (1921) scepticism about the past in terms of how the scepticism is structured (2002, p. 255). Searle’s objection seems to be that any answer that could work begs the question against the Sceptic because the field of acceptable answers is too narrow. With regard to the specific example of a wrist-watch, it is asked: What facts about it make it the case that it existed in the past? The answers that Searle (2002) thinks are acceptable are that it was made in Switzerland a certain number of years ago, and so on. This of course begs the question, because facts about the past are ruled off limits by the scope of the question. Assume that no fact (in the present) can be found about an object that showed it existed in the past. This does not, in and of itself, show that it is acceptable to beg the question by appealing to the past, or to conclude that the question is somehow inappropriate or non-nonsensical, as Searle (2002) would suggest in this case. Put another way, there may be things that are perfectly reasonable to believe (or at least assert) as being true, but that can
never be proven beyond doubt. Other problems in this category include the existence of other minds and the existence of internal subjective experience other than one’s own.

It seems that in this case, no matter how the problem is re-framed, all that Searle (2002) can do is give an answer that, at best, makes it seem reasonable to believe that the watch existed in the past, or that by ‘+’, he always meant plus, and not quus. However, within the context of the question, it cannot constitute proof. It might be tempting to see this in terms of the explanatory/reductive dichotomy that Chalmers (1996) mentions, but this solution is neither reductive, nor strongly explanatory. Kusch (2007) characterises the challenge of the Sceptic as being able to produce an analysis of what it is (for a speaker) to have the concept of addition. In this context, argues Kusch, this part of Searle’s solution says nothing more than that a speaker means addition by the ‘+’ sign because they were taught addition (2007, p. 163). Put this way, I have to concur with him that this does not seem like much of an answer. If a more charitable interpretation of the ‘facts from the past of a speaker’ is used, perhaps a version of this solution can be constructed that rests on a more thorough causal history—one that would show it was impossible for the speaker to have meant quus. The solution then starts to resemble McGinn’s (1984), which will be discussed in Section 7.2. However, Searle does not make such a factor explicit in his explanation; thus, this part of his answer to the Sceptic remains unsatisfactory.

The next argument Searle (2002) refers to, claiming that it is the second part of Kripke’s (1982) argument, as well as a more faithful interpretation of Wittgenstein (1967), is that the sceptical paradox can be solved by appealing to what he calls ‘Background’. Essentially, Background beliefs are traits that a person or agent can have, but not be conscious of. These include things as basic as biological responses, beliefs such as objects being solid, and learned linguistic capacities and behaviours. Background has two important qualities. First, it is a physical phenomenon—Searle claims that the Background functions can be located in the brain (he is a physicalist after all). Second, it is context-dependent; that is, it is not fixed, but is influenced by the environment. Background fixes interpretation in actual practice (Searle, 2002, p. 264). While Searle does not detail how this answer is
supposed to work, problems are immediately apparent. If these physical events in the brain can be treated as equivalent to dispositions, and if they determine meaning \textit{a priori}, this account must fail at the most fundamental level for the reasons already discussed in Chapter 4 and Section 2.2.2.

However, it is not clear that Searle (2002) intends for Background to determine meaning in that sense. The manner in which he approaches the problem in some ways resembles Soames’s (1997) argument that dispositions, when considered more globally, can necessarily determine meaning. Recall the characterisation that Soames gives of \textit{a priori} determination: ‘\( P \) determines \( Q \) only if, given \( P \), one can demonstrate \( Q \) without appealing to any other empirical facts’ (Soames, 1997, p. 223). Would Background determine meaning without the need to appeal to any other empirical facts? From the sceptical side of the argument at least, the answer is no. However, if it is taken in a broad sense to be the biological capacities and beliefs of a speaker, as well as their interactions with their environment (both social and otherwise), Background could \textit{necessarily} determine meaning in the sense that Soames argued for. If the Background for a speaker necessarily determines meaning, the meaning must change if the Background changes. This is consistent with the idea of Background fixing interpretation in practice (Searle, 2002, p. 264).

However, if this were the case, the same objections used against Soames (1997) would apply. One could object to Background being the fact or collection of facts in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain word on the same grounds that Kusch (2006) does—that it is too broad and that such a global ‘fact’ determining all meanings is out of line with our intuition about meaning (Kusch, 2006, p. 119). However, as with Soames’s argument, there are stronger objections.

The Sceptic could accept that Background would necessarily determine intentional facts such as meaning if meaning existed. But they do not need to accept that the effect of Background on present behaviour and thought entails the existence of meaning. This could seem unconvincing, but applying the arguments as previously should show that this is a plausible position. If the status of meaning is suspended, it is plausible that Background
necessarily determines present actions, including how speakers use words and how they accept the use of words by others. This can be acknowledged by the Sceptic without them having to change their position. From here, the parallel with Soames (1997) continues and the outcome is largely the same. If Background is considered a single fact, it determines uses of words that are considered incorrect, as well as those that are correct, in which case it underdetermines meaning. If Background is considered a collection of facts and we attempt to separate out the interfering traits that cause incorrect responses, the problem of finks, masks and privileging re-occurs. We cannot separate out the traits that lead to ‘wrong’ answers if the existence of a ‘right’ answer itself is in doubt, without begging the question against the Sceptic. It might be plausible that Background determines actual performance, but there is nothing in Background that determines correctness. In equating the two, Searle (2002) makes the same error as Soames and other defenders of dispositional accounts.

The only way that correctness can be equated with performance is if the notion of a uniquely correct way of going on, or the notion that there is a uniquely correct answer, is discarded. If this were to occur, the answer would be arguably closer to the sceptical solution than to a straight solution, as well as contradicting some deeply held intuitions on the nature of meaning itself—primarily, that thinking that something is correct and it actually being correct are two distinct and different things. For communication to occur, any equation of performance and correctness would have to be in a community context, so that there was at least the minimum consistency of interpretation between speakers. Thus, even if performance and correctness could be equated, other parameters would have to be met; even the Sceptic would admit that using a word in any random way is not going to be acceptable to other speakers.

Regardless of whether this position is consistent with Searle’s (2002) aims, it would much less resemble a straight solution in this form. This is similar to Kusch’s observation that Searle’s ‘Background’ solution may have much in common with the sceptical solution (2007, p. 165).
Regardless of whether Searle’s (2002) solutions are considered straight, the conclusion has to be that they are not satisfactory straight solutions to the problem of scepticism about meaning.

5.5 **NON-DISPOSITIONAL CONCLUSIONS**

All of the straight solutions examined in this chapter fail to provide an account of the fact in virtue of which a speaker means one thing and not another, or fail to provide reasons why such a fact carries any normative force. Most descriptive accounts struggle to provide normative force regarding why speakers ‘should’ use a word in a certain way, but this is overshadowed in many cases by the inability to provide a coherent descriptive account of meaning. At its core, the problem Kripke (1982) presents is one of how meaning can be coherently reduced to something else. His conclusion is that no such reduction is possible.
Chapter 6: Novel but Unsatisfactory
Straight Solutions Arising from
Prior Investigations

The position that a satisfactory straight solution has yet to be formulated has been
the core of the thesis so far, as argued in the previous two chapters. However, it is still
possible to formulate novel solutions or novel interpretations of existing solutions, and to test
them against the Sceptic’s challenge. Depending on which other arguments are judged as
sound or not, these new solutions may be less defensible than this core idea. Nonetheless,
they are worth investigating. In this chapter, I formulate and examine two new arguments. In
both cases, I have used arguments for purposes or in ways that they were not necessarily
intended. The first argument is loosely based on Hattiangadi’s (2006) work concerning the
nature of meaning and whether it is prescriptive. In Section 6.1, I lay out Hattiangadi’s
argument as I understand it. Section 6.1.1 contains the problems with this account. Following
this, in Section 6.1.2, I attempt to construct a solution based on a modified version of
Hattiangadi’s account.

In Section 6.2, I put forward a second argument based on Young’s (1995) account of
coherence truth and global anti-realism. In both cases, I argue that these adapted accounts are
not satisfactory solutions—straight or otherwise—to the problem of meaning scepticism.

6.1 AN ATTEMPTED SOLUTION BASED ON HATTIANGADI’S ACCOUNT

Hattiangadi’s (2006) argument is in ‘Is Meaning Normative?’ Hattiangadi states that
it seems necessary that for a word to have meaning, there has to be conditions of its correct
application (2006, p. 222). Hattiangadi formulates her argument as follows: Where $t$ is a
term, $M^{11}$ its meaning and $f$ the feature or collection of features in virtue of which $M$ applies, what Hattiangadi calls the *Meaning Platitude* is:

*Meaning Platitude:* $t$ means $M \rightarrow (x)(t$ applies correctly to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is $f)$

‘Applies correctly’ in this argument is simply a placeholder for the various semantic relations a term can have with the world, such as reference, ‘applying correctly’ or denoting. Under Hattiangadi’s schema, it also captures ‘$t$ being true of $x$’ (2006, p. 222). Hattiangadi notes that the *Meaning Platitude* could equally apply to both truth-assertion-based accounts and truth-condition-based accounts. This is because the *Meaning Platitude* does not specify what exactly is meant by ‘correctly’ or what these semantic relations actually are. Nor is there any specific mention of what $f$ has to be. It ($f$) could be a set of truth conditions or a set of assertability conditions. Regardless, since the *Meaning Platitude* does not mention a speaker, it does not imply that meaning is normative (Hattiangadi, 2006). Hattiangadi asserts that the assumption that meaning is normative comes from the further assumption that a speaker who means a certain thing by a certain word must be following a rule or norm for its correct application (2006, p. 222), which is formulated as follows:

**R1:** $(x)(t$ applies correctly to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is $f)$

Hattiangadi gives the example that in the case of ‘square’, R1 would state that for all $x$, ‘square’ refers to $x$ if and only if $x$ is in fact square (2006, p. 223). But according to Hattiangadi (2006), it is only if rules are ‘prescriptive’ that meaning is normative in the sense that causes problems for naturalistic accounts. For a rule to be considered prescriptive, it must tell a speaker what they *should* do. In contrast, ‘R1’ only describes the circumstances under which a speaker is correct in their usage (for a truth condition account) or the

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11 In the original article Hattiangadi designated ‘$F$’ as being the meaning of a term
circumstances under which a speaker would be able to assert that their usage is correct (for an assertability condition account). Bringing the speaker into the picture, Hattiangadi makes explicit the notion of Correctness that R1 (supposedly) entails:

\[ \text{Correctness: } S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f) \]

(Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 224)

Again, Hattiangadi (2006) argues that if this notion of Correctness is implied by saying that ‘meaning is normative’, the problems for naturalistic accounts of meaning need not arise. In this context, to say that something is ‘correct’ is not to prescribe behaviour; rather, it is to describe that it meets a certain standard (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 224). To say that a speaker has used a term correctly—for example, that they describe a red object as being red (or a round object as being round)—is not (according to Hattiangadi, at least) a normative statement. It does not necessarily imply that they should have used the word ‘red’ to describe a red object. It implies only that in using ‘red’ to describe or refer to a red thing, they have applied it in accordance with the standard of the correct application of that word: ‘To say that some use of a term is “correct” is thus merely to describe it in a certain way—in light of the norm or standard set by the meaning of the term’ (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 225).\(^{12}\)

For meaning to be considered normative in the sense that is relevant to this argument, it needs to be prescriptive—it needs to prescribe a course of action (Hattiangadi, 2006). Hattiangadi points out that Kripke (1982) seems to hold this view (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 225) and cites several examples from Chapter 2 of Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language. Arguably, the most strongly worded of these is: “The point is not that, if I meant addition by ‘+’, I will answer ‘125’, but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of ‘+’, I should answer ‘125’” (Kripke, 1982, p. 37, cited in Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 225).

\(^{12}\) What the standard actually is—truth conditions or assertability conditions—is not important at this stage.
Kripke’s point is clear. In his opinion, meaning is unequivocally normative and prescriptive in nature. To capture this, Hattiangadi suggests the following:

*Prescriptivity:* $S$ means $M$ by $t \rightarrow (x)(S$ ought (to apply $t$ to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is $f))$

(Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 225)

If a speaker means something by a term, for all $x$, a speaker should apply that term correctly.

When comparing meaning as *Correctness* and meaning as *Prescriptivity*, it is initially plausible that the latter potentially implies the naturalistic fallacy, whereas the former does not. As Hattiangadi points out, ‘…according to *Prescriptivity* it is a necessary condition for someone to mean, say, square by “square” that she should apply “square” to all and only squares’ (2006, p. 226). Conversely, *Correctness* being true produces no such difficulties. By this account, to say that a speaker means something is to do nothing more than to give a special description of their behaviour (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 226). Hattiangadi goes on to argue that Prescriptivity is false. As Hattiangadi presents it, *Prescriptivity* essentially says this: ‘If I mean horse by “horse”, I ought to apply “horse” to something if and only if it is a horse’ (2006, p. 226). It is clear that this is a very strong statement in terms of the obligations of a speaker to use a certain word in a certain way. Hattiangadi asserts that it is too strong, and the implications of the bi-conditional highlight the difficulty (2006, p. 226). The problem is as follows: If a speaker applies a term to something if, and only if, that thing matches the definition of that term, it follows that if something matches the definition of a term, the speaker will apply the term to it.

\[(1) \ (x) \ (S \text{ applies } t \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)\]
\[(2) \ (x) \ (x \text{ is } f \rightarrow S \text{ applies } t \text{ to } x)\]
As Hattiangadi points out, (1) is possible, but (2) will almost certainly be impossible for a speaker to achieve (2006, p. 226), at least in any thoroughgoing way. For example, (2) would entail that if the speaker meant *horse* by the word ‘horse’, in order to meet their so-called ‘semantic obligation’, they would have to apply ‘horse’ to all of the horses in existence (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 227). If one were to assume that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, this conception of normativity in meaning asks the impossible of speakers, as there are going to be some times when it is impossible to apply the word correctly.

Thus, Hattiangadi (2006) maintains that Correctness rather than Prescriptivity captures the normative aspect of meaning. Since her position is that it is the ‘Is–Ought’ nature of the sceptical problem that gives Kripke’s (1982) work its *a priori* force, if she can neutralise this particular aspect of the problem, by her reasoning, she has neutralised the argument that it is *a priori* impossible for there to be any superlative fact in virtue of which speakers mean certain things by certain words.

6.1.1 Gaps in Hattiangadi’s Account

Hattiangadi (2006) has interpreted Kripke’s (1982) argument as containing an *a priori* argument against the existence of meaning. As previously discussed, her claim is that the *a priori* aspect comes from the ‘Is–Ought’ nature of the sceptical problem (Hattiangadi, 2006). Her further claim is that meaning is not in fact normative in a way that induces this problem. She argues that once the *a priori* nature of the sceptical challenge has been dealt with, the way is clear for potential solutions, because it is at least possible that a solution can be found. While it would be an important step to establish that a solution to this sceptical problem is not impossible, it is also true that this does not, in and of itself, constitute a solution—straight or otherwise. An example of how this solution might be applied is: If a speaker means plus (and not quus) by the ‘+’ sign, for all x, the speaker applies ‘+’ correctly to it; that is, they apply ‘+’ if and only if x has the feature or collection of features in virtue of which plus (rather than quus) applies.

13 Although I suspect it is quite difficult in reality.
There are three main problems with Hattiangadi’s (2006) account. The first is the challenge of finding an acceptable candidate for $f$—the feature in virtue of which a meaning applies. The second problem is that this account may induce the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ regression. The final difficulty is in showing that this account logically entails that a speaker means anything by any word. Each problem is considered in turn below.

Part of the first problem is whether this solution can coherently differentiate between meaning one thing and another. Consider the following example. If a speaker means quus by ‘$+$’, for all $x$, the speaker applies ‘$+$’ correctly only if $x$ has the feature in virtue of which quus applies. Whether this can be differentiated from meaning plus may hinge on exactly what $f$—the feature in virtue of which a meaning applies—actually is. But as has been shown in previous sections, this is not an easy task. Recall that the original formulation of the sceptical argument given by Kripke (1982) is that the sum is one that has not been computed before. For all examples in the past, the conditions under which plus applied correctly and the conditions under which quus applied correctly were identical. Does the sum to which the ‘$+$’ is being applied, having the feature in virtue of which plus applies, exclude the possibility that the speaker could mean quus, or that they meant quus in the past? If the feature ‘in virtue of which $t$ applies’ presumes a correct answer, it begs the question against the Sceptic.

It seems that this presumption is deeply embedded in Hattiangadi’s (2006) account: ‘To say that some use of a term is “correct” is thus merely to describe it in a certain way—in light of the norm or standard set by the meaning of the term’ (2006, p. 225). This key phrase captures the core of the problem in Hattiangadi’s answer to the Sceptic’s challenge. When coupled with her other assertion, that for a word to have meaning, there has to be conditions of correct application (Hattiangadi, 2006, p. 222), a potentially problematic situation arises. If being correct is simply conforming to the norm or standard set by the meaning of a term, and this is identical with the features in virtue of which the meaning applies, one must be presumed in order to justify the other. By Hattiangadi’s account, for a word to have meaning, there must be conditions of correct application, which are set by the meaning of the
word. If the meaning is grounded in conditions of correctness, and conditions of correctness are as they are because of meaning, apart from gross circularity, the account is open to sceptical attack.

The problem is that the Sceptic can dispute which norm or standard is in fact set by the meaning of ‘+’. Since, as the Sceptic’s hypothesis suggests, ‘+’ means quus, conforming to the norm set by its meaning must be that the correct use is to give the answer ‘5’ when responding to ‘58 + 67’. The way forward against the sceptical position is a difficult one. For example, if the feature in virtue of which ‘+’ applies to a sum is simply that the addition function was used, it becomes a rule for interpreting another rule and potentially leads to the regress mentioned in Section 2.2.1. The sceptical position would explicitly deny that any such feature exists, and the onus is on critics of this scepticism to show that it can. The Sceptic’s hypothesis is that Kripke (1982) always meant quus rather than plus by the ‘+’ sign, and the challenge is to disprove such a claim. It is not entirely clear how this account would do this in a manner that refutes the Sceptic without begging the question against them.

Given Hattiangadi’s note that the Meaning Platitude could function under ‘assertion-theoretic’ accounts (2006, p. 222), it is tempting to substitute a condition of assertability into the account to see whether its overall prospects improve. If the features in virtue of which a particular meaning applies are the conditions under which that meaning can be asserted or not, the account will be something like this:

If a speaker means plus (and not quus) by the ‘+’ sign, for all x, the speaker applies ‘+’ correctly to it; that is, they apply ‘+’ if and only if x is something of which it can be asserted that plus (rather than quus) applies.

This effectively states that the conditions of correctness for how a term is used, regardless of normative considerations, are simply read off the collective reaction of the linguistic community to the assertion that a speaker means plus by ‘+’. This leads back to the problems of community dispositions and of equating agreement with meaning, as discussed...
in Section 4.5. The implications of these problems will be explored further below, but another problem requires attention first.

The second problem is that there is a possible interpretation of Hattiangadi’s (2006) account that induces the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ regression. Hattiangadi says that the rules we are ‘following’ when we use words are normative only in the sense that they are ‘descriptive’ of us meeting a standard (2006, p. 225). It is worth recalling at this point what Kripke (1982) writes about rule-following. A rule that determines and justifies our use of a word will be prone to the Sceptic questioning our usage of the constituent words in said rule (Kripke, 1982, p. 16). If the rules in Hattiangadi’s account in any way ‘determine’ our usage, they might be open to the same attack. We can safely leave out ‘justifies’, as the Correctness account is only supposed to be descriptive. Does a description of how a word is used, and whether it meets a certain norm/standard in any way, determine the usage of that word? On one hand, to determine the usage of a word is in some sense to be a cause of how the word is used, and if a description is an effect, it seems that a purely descriptive account has little to fear from the Sceptic. However, Hattiangadi’s account can still be seen as a way of deciding whether a speaker is following a rule. Consider Correctness again:

\[
S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)
\]

This would entail that if the consequent were not true, neither would the antecedent be true. It would also be false that the speaker means something by a particular utterance:

\[
\text{not } ((x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)) \rightarrow \text{not } (S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t)
\]

Likewise, it seems that one could use Correctness as a set of instructions. If I, speaker S, wish to mean M by t, for all x, I should apply t ‘correctly’ to x. This leads to the rule for interpreting a rule regression. The account precludes asking what is meant by
‘correctly’, as the answer is already there, that the ‘x’ to which the speaker is applying ‘t’ is the feature in virtue of which the meaning applies.

As seen previously, Hattiangadi explicitly states that the correct application of a rule is R1, and that its use by a speaker can be captured by Correctness (2006, p. 223). However, there seems to be a sense in which R1 is not the actual rule that describes the correct use of something such as ‘+’. Consider R1 for use of the ‘+’ sign:

R1: (∃x)(t applies correctly to x ↔ x is f)
R1: (∃x) (‘+’ applies correctly to x if and only if x is an addition function)

If the Sceptic is allowed to cast doubt on our past use of the term ‘addition’, a familiar pattern appears. It might be asked what rule specifies the correct use of the term ‘addition’? If we were to flesh out Hattiangadi’s formulation, we may end up with something like the following:

(∃x) (‘addition’ applies correctly to x only if x is ‘the sum of two or more numbers etc.’)

But, what is the rule that specifies the correct use of ‘sum’?

(∃x) (‘sum’ applies correctly to x if and only if x is …)

It seems that every time we specify the feature or features that are those in virtue of which the ‘meaning’ applies, we have to apply the ‘correct use’ conditions of another term (t). I argue that ‘x is f’ is true in virtue of the correct application of the rule(s) for whatever constitutes ‘f’. The interpretation above uses a simplistic version of the notion of correct application—one that clearly sets up the rule for interpreting a rule problem. If Correctness is explicitly used as an instruction to categorise the given use of a word as correct or not, it is
a rule for following a rule. If it is not explicit, it suffers (again) from either communal or individualistic dispositional problems.

The third problem, and one that surely must be fundamental to treating Hattiangadi’s (2006) account as a solution—straight or otherwise—is the direction and nature of the conditional in the Correctness schema. Consider Correctness:

\[ S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f) \]

Aside from other issues that have been covered so far, the application of this schema as a solution must necessarily fail to answer the Sceptic. In the simplest sense, Correctness states that if a speaker means a certain thing (e.g., plus) by a certain word or sign (e.g., ‘+’), they will ‘correctly’ apply that sign under certain, albeit unspecified, circumstances. The problem with trying to apply this as a solution is that the antecedent—that is, that a speaker means plus by ‘+’—is exactly what the Sceptic is attacking. Obviously, it would not be acceptable to appeal to the fact that speakers apply ‘+’ correctly under the circumstances that Hattiangadi describes, as that would constitute an illegitimate affirmation of the consequent. This would apply equally to any attempted answer to the Sceptic. Consider the differences between these two ways of stating a simple dispositional account:

1. If a speaker means plus by ‘+’, they will be disposed to give the answer ‘125’ to the original problem.
2. If a speaker is disposed to give the answer ‘125’ to the original problem, they mean plus by ‘+’.

A defender of a dispositional answer to the sceptical challenge may argue that both are true, but the former will never prove that the speaker indeed meant plus because all the Sceptic needs to do is deny the antecedent, which they can do safely because it does not affect the status of the consequent. There are a number of reasons why a speaker might be
disposed to answer as they do; likewise, there are a number of reasons why, for all \( x \), a speaker might apply a term ‘correctly’, as Hattiangadi (2006) describes. It could be argued that even if \((x)\text{S applies}\ t\ ‘correctly’\ to\ x \leftrightarrow x\ is\ f\) is a good way to describe what is happening, the fact that the speaker meant something, or indeed anything, does not need to be the antecedent. It could be argued that:

\[ S\text{ can successfully assert that they mean } M\text{ by } t \rightarrow (x)\text{S applies}\ t\ ‘correctly’\ to\ x \leftrightarrow x\ is\ f\] 

Or, worse:

\[ S\ says\ words\ at\ random\ but\ is\ improbably\ lucky \rightarrow (x)\text{S applies}\ t\ ‘correctly’\ to\ x \leftrightarrow x\ is\ f\] 

It seems safe to say that this is hardly what Hattiangadi, or indeed most defenders of straight solutions, intended for their accounts of meaning.

This goes to the centre of the challenge that Kripke (1982) sets out. When he asks whether there is a fact in virtue of which a speaker means a certain thing by a certain term, he is looking for something to be the antecedent and meaning as a consequent. An account where the speaker meaning something is the antecedent might be able to show that meaning is not normative in a prescriptive way, but it cannot be an answer to the Sceptic. Consider the following example of an argument where the consequent is affirmed:

If the kettle has been boiled recently, it will be hot.
The kettle is hot.
Therefore, the kettle has been boiled recently.
Obviously, it is wrong to deductively conclude that the kettle has been boiled recently on the basis of such an argument as it stands—there might be other reasons why the kettle is hot. Likewise, it would not make sense to conclude that Correctness entails meaning. However, there are ways to change some of these arguments in order to render them deductively valid.

6.1.2 The Modified Solution

This observation leads to the consideration of how Hattiangadi’s (2006) account could be changed so that it could be a solution. One possibility is that there may be an unstated or suppressed premise. This might include other evidence or a rule of thumb that makes it at least likely that the only way the consequent could come about is if the antecedent has occurred. For the ‘hot kettle’ example, this would be that, generally speaking, the most likely reason the kettle is hot is if it has been boiled recently. Although of course the only way to make such an argument deductively valid would be to insert a premise that the only way that the kettle could be hot is if it has been boiled recently, which might be questionable in reality. The problem with this approach is that it would almost certainly beg the question against the Sceptic by assuming the existence of meaning. For example: ‘Generally speakers only apply terms correctly if they mean a certain thing by that word’.

Clearly, this is not a fair move against the Sceptic, and the grounds on which this claim could be made are plainly open to attack. Of course, if the relationship is stronger than what would be covered by just a rule of thumb—that is, the only time speakers apply terms correctly is if they mean a certain thing by a certain word—the situation is somewhat different to that which Hattiangadi describes, and we now turn to this possibility.

Consider the possibility that the relationship between a speaker meaning something by some words, and their correct application of words, is bi-conditional rather than conditional:

\[ S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t \leftrightarrow (x) (S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f) \]
That is, if and only if a speaker means a particular thing by a particular term will they apply that term correctly. Assuming that Hattiangadi’s (2006) modified account is correct, it would be uncontroversial to derive:

\[(x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f) \rightarrow S \text{ means } M \text{ by } t\]

That is, if a speaker applies a term correctly, that speaker means a certain thing by that term. This is close to the spirit of Hattiangadi’s (2006) argument. For a word to have meaning, it must have conditions of correct use. A speaker meeting these conditions of correct use captures the notion of that speaker meaning a certain thing by a certain word.

One consideration that this leaves open is the possibility that a speaker could unintentionally use a word correctly, and the account would still hold that they meant something by that word. For example, an English speaker is in Paris, a dog walks in front of them and a friend asks ‘What’s that?’ The English speaker responds by pointing at it and uttering a random collection of sounds. Now, by an amazing stroke of luck (and it is luck because they do not know any French), what comes out is ‘Un chien!’ Amazingly, they have applied the word in a way that is arguably in accordance with Correctness. However, it does not seem satisfactory to say that the English speaker in this case meant ‘dog’. Whether this is a problem in part depends on considerations regarding the significance that conscious intention plays in meaning. However, in the main, it can be resolved by being precise about not conflating notions of a word meaning something and a speaker meaning something by a certain word. Alternatively, the addition of a minor condition to exclude inadvertent ‘correct’ use might also be acceptable. While it might appear that this is not a minor issue, it is categorised as such mainly because it is less serious when compared to those discussed next.

With the deductive validity of the argument in satisfactory shape, the conditions under which the application of a word, sign, symbol or term is ‘correct’ must be addressed. The problem that we have been circling can be avoided no longer. Is there a possible
candidate for $f$—that is, the feature or collection of features in virtue of which a meaning applies—that is not open to sceptical challenge, or that does not beg the question against the Sceptic? Given the sceptical argument, the Sceptic could argue that $f$ is the same for plus as quus, or that no feature exists that can fill the role that Hattiangadi’s (2006) account demands. There are few candidates where, prior to being asked about ‘$68 + 57’’, the features in virtue of which plus and quus apply are distinct. Nonetheless, to answer the Sceptic, an effort must be made to find whether a worthwhile candidate exists.

It was suggested earlier that the use of ‘correctness’ as a placeholder for different semantic relationships, and the possibility that the Meaning Platitude is compatible with accounts based in assertion rather than truth, would allow for a range of possibilities of what $f$ could be. The potential different ways of unpacking this possible solution highlight the deliberate vagueness of Hattiangadi’s (2006) use of ‘correct’ and of the fact ‘$f$’. While it might seem that what is required now is to test any potential feature within Hattiangadi’s framework, such a move will not be necessary.

Whatever the feature or collection of features in virtue of which a meaning applies is taken to be, the same problems arise that have already been discussed with existing failed straight solutions. Not that Hattiangadi (2006) would advocate this, but if $f$ were that a speaker had a disposition to apply a term to something in response to particular stimuli, all of the questions previously asked of dispositional solutions would be applicable once again, including Hattiangadi’s own observations concerning under-determination. If the feature is that the speaker, $S$, has an immediate relationship with a particular platonic ideal or entity that does not involve interpretation, the previous question of how such a thing is possible must be asked, as it was of Feldman’s (1986) suggestion. If the feature in virtue of which a meaning applies is that it is the most natural interpretation of the available options, the same questions asked of Lewis’s (1983) account must be asked. If the feature or collection of features in virtue of which a meaning applies is based in assertability, the solution effectively becomes a long way of stating the position that meaning is agreement, and the problems of that particular position resurface.
The point is not that such discussions in the previous paragraph are exhaustive. What is relevant is that the identity and nature of the feature in virtue of which a meaning applies is what constitutes a straight answer to refute the Sceptic. Insomuch as Hattiangadi (2006) considers this feature connected to a speaker using a term in a way that meets a standard or norm, the response of the Sceptic is fairly straightforward and largely generalisable. If ‘correctly’ is taken to mean a uniquely or objectively correct way of using a term, all the Sceptic needs to do is either deny that there is a uniquely correct way of using a term, or say that there is no such feature in virtue of which a term can be correctly applied. Given the biconditional nature of the relationship between them, disputing the existence of one is as destructive as disputing the existence of the other. If there is no such thing as a uniquely correct way of using a term, there cannot be a feature in virtue of which a meaning applies. And if there is no feature in virtue of which a meaning applies, there cannot be a uniquely correct way of using the term. This is analogous to Kripke’s (1982) initial discussion, where he disputes that there is a uniquely correct way of going on or a uniquely correct choice in giving the next numeral in a finite series of numbers.

Importantly, if there is no such thing as a uniquely correct way of applying a term, under Hattiangadi’s (2006) schema, it will not be the case that a speaker means a certain thing by a certain term. This outcome applies to the adapted version of Correctness, but also to the original version and to the Meaning Platitude, by denying the consequent in all cases. The only version that would survive the sceptical challenge would be something like this:

\[ S \text{ can successfully assert that they mean } M \text{ by } t \rightarrow (x)(S \text{ applies } t \text{ ‘correctly’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f) \]

Most of the terms used in Correctness denote the same concepts as in the original formulation, except that now \( f \) is the feature in virtue of which such an assertion of meaning applies. There is nothing for the Sceptic to object to, but the problem now is that the account no longer entails a straight solution.
Hattiangadi’s (2006) discussion of the problems that dispositional accounts have, as well as the considerations of the kind of normativity involved in meaning, are important contributions to the project of making sense of the problem of meaning scepticism. However, it is clear that no modification of the Correctness schema, in and of itself, produces any further advances against the sceptical position than has been gained by any other straight solution. The criticism of Correctness calls into question not only its effectiveness in dealing with the sceptical challenge, but also its accuracy as an account of what speakers do and how language works—this is perhaps outside the remit of this thesis, but it is worth flagging for future consideration. This aside, the core of Hattiangadi’s approach to the sceptical problem is jeopardised by the inefficacy of Correctness. If there is no way to derive what is ‘correct’ from non-intentional facts without begging the question against the Sceptic or otherwise falling prey to sceptical moves, it can be argued that the ‘Is–Ought’ nature of the problem, as described by Hattiangadi (2007), still stands.

An alternative interpretation is that the focus on correct use was misguided if the sceptical problem remained unanswered. Consider a speaker who is completing the sum ‘56 + 56’. In giving the answer ‘112’, they have given the correct answer in light of both the plus and quus interpretation of ‘+’. There is no way, when examining the ‘correct’ answer, to determine whether the speaker meant plus rather than quus. Or rather, there is no way to do this without presuming what the correct interpretation is. Thus, Hattiangadi’s (2006) account as it is presented here, even with some modification, fails to provide a satisfactory answer to the challenge of meaning scepticism.

6.2 A SOLUTION BASED ON YOUNG’S COHERENTISM

In assessing Kripke’s (1982) argument in favour of scepticism about the existence of meaning, it seems relevant to consider the underlying assumptions of his argument. One such question that arises is: What conception of truth does Kripke use in formulating his arguments? Some accounts, such as those of Millikan (1990) and Boghossian (1989), who are critical of meaning scepticism, are concerned with the implications for our ability to
attribute truth or falsity to sentences. This section is not directly concerned with the effect that Kripke’s account has on truth as such. Rather, it is concerned with the conception of truth that Kripke might have assumed, and whether this has some effect on the strength of his conclusion. More importantly, it is worth considering whether a straight solution can be found through the use of this analysis.

Given that Kripke (1982) is arguing for the non-existence of meaning, there is surely a base conception of truth underlying his argument. Young’s (1987, 1995) coherentism, as put forward in his defence of global anti-realism, is considered here because it potentially offers a different way of addressing Kripke’s scepticism. The argument I am putting forward here is not intended to be a defence of this particular account of truth. I argue that it is clear that having a coherentist rather than correspondence theory of truth changes how the sceptical challenge could be addressed. It is less clear that this counts as a solution, and if it is a solution, it is less clear that it is a straight solution. While this approach overcomes many of the obstacles encountered by other accounts, I argue that it has one major flaw in that it may entail community infallibility in a similar way to the arguments of Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990).

Young (1995) argues in favour of global anti-realism as an alternative to semantic realism and does not seek to directly address Kripke’s (1982) specific challenge. His account of truth can be characterised as ‘coherentist’, as its core feature is that the fact in virtue of which a sentence is true is that speakers recognise its coherence with other sentences that they hold to be true (Young, 1995, p. 9). Such a system of sentences can be classified as a system of belief. Young describes this as a ‘practicable system of belief’, which is the non-idealised maximally coherent set of beliefs held by a community (1995, p. 117). Individual speakers can detect whether a sentence coheres with their beliefs (Young, 1995, pp. 23–24), which allows them to say whether a proposition is warranted.

Young’s (1995) approach to the question of the nature of truth relates to the issue of meaning scepticism. Young would undoubtedly agree with Kripke (1982) that adherence to correspondence truth makes solving the sceptical problem impossible: ‘When the meanings
of sentences consist in detectable truth conditions, sentences are true if and only if these detectable conditions obtain’ (Young, 1995, p. 89). Kripke would argue that in the case of meaning, not only are the truth conditions not detectable, but they are also non-existent. But a different outcome seems to be achievable if the account of truth is different.

Consider Young (1995, p. 122): ‘In general, then, the meanings of sentences consist in the conditions under which they cohere with a practicable system’. This obtains within Young’s account, because a sentence is true if it has warranted assertability—and it has warranted assertability if it coheres with the practicable system of beliefs. Young holds that sentences are warranted if it coheres with other sentences that speakers have assented as being true (1987, p. 645). It follows from this that if a speaker understands a sentence, they understand which other sentences would have to be true if the sentence is to be warranted (Young, 1987, p. 645). This will presumably include sentences about the meanings of words. If it is assumed that this applies to meaning-declarative sentences such as ‘By the “+” sign I mean plus’, there is a clear set of circumstances under which this sentence would cohere with a system of beliefs in a linguistic community. Likewise, the suggestion by the Sceptic that I mean quus does not (presumably) cohere with the system of beliefs—practicable or otherwise. Thus, there is a potential answer to the Sceptic: I mean plus and not quus by the “+” sign because the interpretation that I mean plus coheres with a practicable system of beliefs, whereas the interpretation that I mean quus does not. The quality or property of coherence is what constitutes meaning plus rather than quus. Arguably, the account could be taken one step further. The fact that such conditions of coherence are detectable by speakers is what allows coherence to give justification to the use of plus. To clarify, by Young’s account, a sentence such as ‘By the “+” sign I mean plus’ is true because speakers recognise that it coheres with other sentences that the community hold to be true. Correspondence truth clearly falls into Kripke’s (1982) trap. But coherence truth does not need to struggle in the same way. It may be that there is no correspondence truth condition for the sentence ‘I mean plus by the “+” sign’. However, that same sentence would surely cohere with a practicable belief system, as would the related belief.
The question of how coherence deals with new cases is important to resolve. In the case of a new addition problem, it may be true that while that particular sum has never been calculated, other sums have been. If no conditions of warrant can be detected by speakers, it may be the case that a new case of addition cannot be said to be either true or false. But this would only be true if no answer that cohered could be found, or if multiple answers that cohered equally were found. In any case, to object to this on the grounds that one answer was right, regardless of the detectable conditions, is to beg the question against coherence truth.

At a minimum, it requires an argument against coherence truth in itself, rather than the interaction of coherence truth with meaning scepticism.

Objections that this account of meaning is finite are likewise not a problem, at least internal to this account of truth. The coherence theory of truth does not require that truth be eternal or objective—just coherent (Young, 1995). There are probably arguments against coherence truth on these grounds alone, but this is not the issue here. The issue of finitude does not count against the application of coherence truth as an answer to the sceptical challenge from ‘within’ this account of truth at least.

Coherence does not need to fall victim to Kripke’s (1982) concerns with ‘a rule for interpreting a rule’. It would have to be true that speakers could detect the conditions under which a sentence warrants assertion—that is, they can detect whether it coheres with their beliefs. The rule for interpreting a rule issue only arises if speakers are explicitly following an instruction such as: ‘To give the correct answer when asked “68 + 57”, give the answer that coheres with a practicable system of belief’. This would be similar to the objection that Kripke raises against using agreement as a measure for meaning (1982, pp. 111, 146). It does not seem that Young (1995) is advocating this, and it seems as plausible an idea as any to say that such detection of the conditions of warrant could be a non-occurrent or non-explicit process. Further, explicit instruction does not seem to be what happens any more than speakers consult each other when adding in the example Kripke gives (1982, p. 146). The issue of circularity that caused so much difficulty for the dispositional account does not arise either—at least, not initially.
Making use of Young’s account of truth provides, at least potentially, a solution to the sceptical challenge. Whether it is a straight solution is slightly more contentious. In the strictest sense, it is a straight solution because it cites a fact in virtue of which the speaker means ‘+’—a fact that the Sceptic was unaware of or mistaken about—namely, the nature of truth and meaning. A meaning-declarative sentence does not have to correspond to anything to be true (because that simply is not the nature of truth); rather, it has to cohere with a practicable system of beliefs. However, as a solution, it has a drawback in that it is only acceptable as far as a coherence theory of truth is acceptable. This in and of itself would obviously render it unacceptable to anyone who did not subscribe to such an account of truth, but we will leave this to one side for the moment and concentrate on issues internal to the account. Some of these problems can be overcome, but I will show that there is at least one objection that could comprehensively weaken this account as a potential solution.

Thus, the sentence ‘I mean plus by the “+” sign’, is true if and only if it coheres with the practicable system of beliefs in use at the time—that is, it has warranting conditions: ‘Sentences have warranting conditions as their truth conditions. Warranting conditions are conditions which speakers are able to recognise as counting in favour of the truth of a sentence’ (1987, p. 641). The question then becomes: What would the warranting conditions of this sentence be? In one sense, this is the overall argument that has already been occurring. Without getting into specific examples, the issue may be that there are conflicting conditions of warrant and differing contexts within which the same conditions may be seen as either counting for or against the truth of a sentence. This issue is presumably not unique to this particular question.

If a speaker meaning plus by ‘+’ is as coherent with a practicable system of beliefs as them meaning quus, the account will fail as an answer to the sceptical challenge. This situation would require that whatever has been given as warranting conditions for the meaning-declarative sentence ‘I mean plus by the “+” sign’ is no more coherent than the warranting conditions for ‘I mean quus by the “+” sign’. If this were the case, any decision to favour plus over quus would be somewhat arbitrary. While this situation seems to be out of
line with everyday intuitions, it is exactly the type of argument that the Sceptic puts forward. According to the Sceptic, any and all past behaviour and any other facts are consistent with both potential meanings of the ‘+’ sign.

That said, these two arithmetical functions are in fact distinct. Kripke’s (1982) argument relies on this fact to create the dilemma in the first place. For example, plus and quus are dissimilar enough that one seems as if it is ‘going on in the same way’, and another is not. More importantly, meaning plus by ‘+’ is contrary to meaning quus by ‘+’; thus, they cannot both cohere with a practicable system of beliefs at the same time. For arithmetic at least, in the context of a known community of speakers, it seems unlikely that quus could be as warranted as plus as a potential meaning. The fact that a speaker’s past behaviour is as consistent with plus as it is with quus makes no difference to this solution. Even if it were objectively the case that the facts are as consistent with my meaning plus as meaning quus, it would not matter. There are presumably an infinite number of quus-like permutations that the Sceptic can put forward as potential meanings, all of which are objectively consistent with a speaker’s past behaviour. But these permutations are contrary in that they cannot cohere at the same time; only one coheres with the existing system of beliefs. It might be a fact that meaning quus is as consistent with a speaker’s past behaviour as meaning plus, but for an answer to the Sceptic based on Young’s (1995) work, the fact that matters is that meaning plus is more coherent than meaning quus. That particular fact makes the meaning-declarative sentences true, as truth is actually, by Young’s account, coherence with existing beliefs. This would allow for situations where it is true that a speaker means quus by ‘+’ if the associated meaning-declarative sentence coheres better with the existing system of belief than the ‘plus’ interpretation. How to resolve this with existing intuitions about meaning and truth might make use of Kripke and Wittgenstein’s (1967) remarks regarding different ‘forms of life’, but that is a discussion for another time. This problem aside, in its own way, Young’s account allows for there to be facts in virtue of which a meaning-declarative sentence is true or not, and hence for it to be true that a speaker means a particular thing by a particular word.
The notion of coherence with a system of beliefs necessarily relies on the existence of a community to hold those beliefs. As this potential answer to the Sceptic has a communal aspect, it is worth considering whether the same problems arise with communal infallibility as were seen previously with Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990) in Chapter 4. In Young’s (1995) view, a sentence is true if and only if it is warranted, and that sentence is warranted if it coheres with the practicable system of beliefs. The notion of coherence with beliefs can be taken in different ways. The practicable system of beliefs is, by Young’s definition, not an idealised system. Rather, it is the maximally coherent set of actual beliefs of the community (Young, 1995, p. 117). If an idealised system of beliefs were used to produce a particular outcome, this would count as begging the question against the Sceptic. If the system of beliefs is not idealised, no particular outcome can be necessarily ruled out. The detection of conditions of warrant by individuals must be non-occurrent to avoid the rule for interpreting a rule regression. It then follows that it is at least plausible to consider them in a similar light to dispositions. As the practicable system of beliefs is communal, the closest parallel is that of community dispositions.

The use of a word that is consistent with coherence with a system of beliefs will be altered by different conditions that affect the ability of speakers to detect conditions of warrant. For an individual, this could include a situation where, due to poor visibility, they point to a cow and say ‘horse’. The same could be systematically true for a whole community in a way that does not necessarily produce inconsistency in their practicable system of beliefs. If this is the case, the same argument that Boghossian (1989) deploys against communal dispositions will become relevant. If conditions of warrant are systematically affected for the whole community, what will cohere with the practicable system of beliefs will be similarly affected. If this is the case, there will be no way to say that using ‘horse’ to denote a cow is mistaken, because it is coherent for the whole community. The situation is now that the conditions of warrant are such that ‘horse’ applies to both horses and cows because this is what coheres with the practicable system of beliefs. This is analogous to Boghossian’s conclusion regarding communal dispositions, and there is no
reason to think that it is not just as generalisable. Thus, the coherentist account could be forced into a position where the meaning of ‘horse’ is the disjunctive ‘horse or cow’. There is no reason to think that this outcome is any less destructive for this potential solution than it was for communal dispositions.

Revising the conditions of warrant and coherence along the same lines as Horwich (1990) does for communal dispositions is unlikely to produce a more satisfactory conclusion. If the ability to revise and reconsider earlier beliefs is included within the coherence account, there is little evidence to suggest that the outcome could be any different to the treatment of Horwich’s account. As the possibility of systematic mistakes in the process of revision cannot be eliminated, the fatally disjunctive outcome must remain.

Young (1995) responds to possible objections against the adoption of truth being coherent with a practicable system of beliefs on various grounds, including that it can lead to relativism or internal inconsistency. He seeks to address concerns such as situations where practicable systems of beliefs might include specific beliefs such as Holocaust denial (1995, p. 119) and astrology (1995, p. 120). But the possibility of a systematic but consistent community error of the type that concerns Boghossian (1989) is never explicitly considered.

There is a possible response to this objection. Boghossian’s (1989) argument applies to the community dispositional account because that account is committed to a certain relationship between how a word is used and what that word means. It is possible that Young’s (1995) account is not committed in the same way. In the example above, the conditions of warrant allow ‘horse’ to be applied to both cows and horses. The conditions of warrant for the sentence ‘It is true that “horse” means horse and not cow’ can only be altered by how ‘horse’ is applied if people know they are sometimes applying it to cows. If speakers are not aware that they are applying ‘horse’ to cows, the conditions of warrant for a meaning-declarative sentence regarding ‘horse’ will not be affected. Thus, the meaning of ‘horse’ does not need to be disjunctive in the way that Boghossian describes. Performance and correctness are certainly not being equated now.
However, I am not convinced that this is an ideal solution. The coherence-based account is in a position where the truth of meaning-declarative sentences is grounded in how well they cohere with the warranted beliefs that speakers hold about how they should use a word—not how they actually use it. An extreme interpretation of this is that there is no necessary connection between how a word is used and what it means. To argue that this entails that coherence cannot distinguish correct and incorrect applications of a word is a step too far, as it requires begging the question against coherence truth. But it is true that the application of a word that would be accepted by both individuals and a whole community could be altered in ways that are not reflected by the conditions of warrant of the relevant meaning-declarative sentences. A meaning-declarative sentence for something like ‘cow’ or ‘+’ only needs to cohere with the other beliefs that speakers have about how they use that word or symbol for it to be true. This same meaning-declarative sentence does not have to cohere with what speakers actually do for it to be true. Again, this reinforces my suggestion that the meaning of a word and how speakers actually use that word are not necessarily connected. Whether this is a serious problem for the theory or just something that opponents of coherence truth would find ‘unpalatable’ is an undertaking that is beyond the scope of this thesis, as it would require a more thorough consideration of the epistemological basis of coherence truth than is possible for me to provide in the space available.

The prospect of community infallibility entailing disjunctive meanings is probably the strongest objection that can be made to this account. However, this objection relies on the characterisation of coherence with a practicable system of belief being analogous to communal dispositions. It also relies on the disjunctive meanings being considered an unwanted outcome. If it were possible to overcome these factors, the account would be in much better shape, but such an undertaking would be difficult. The detection of conditions of warrant by speakers must not be occurrent or explicit, so that they are not rules for interpreting rules or explicit instructions on how to proceed. I argue that there seems to be little possibility of a solid objection on those grounds. The disjunctive meanings—for example, that ‘horse’ means ‘horse or cow’—are a problem, as they seem to be out of line
with intuitions about meaning. More tellingly, they might fail to cohere both with specific beliefs about the word ‘horse’ and with how meanings are more broadly construed in the linguistic community. Importantly, meanings being wildly disjunctive in a generalisable manner, as described in Section 4.5.2, would undermine the rationality of the notion of meaning in the first place, rendering any possibility of coherence remote in the extreme.

It seems to be the case that accepting Young’s (1995) position on the nature of truth potentially constitutes a solution to Kripke’s (1982) sceptical challenge to the existence of meaning. This solution would be ‘straight’ in the sense that there is a fact in virtue of which a speaker means a particular thing by a particular word, and that this fact is used to undermine the Sceptic’s position. That is, it could be argued that the Sceptic overlooked the facts regarding coherence with the existing system of beliefs because they were mistaken as to the nature of truth. This is clearly not accepting the Sceptic’s thesis in the same way that Kripke does for his own solution.

However, the discussion of community infallibility shows that this solution has serious flaws that would need to be addressed before it could be considered a satisfactory answer to the problem of meaning scepticism. The linguistic community being infallible entails more than just the global anti-realism that Young (1995) describes, where the use of words has no necessary semantic connection to reality. If the arguments of Boghossian (1989) are both correct and applicable, it entails meaning being so radically disjunctive in nature that any ideas of coherence, meaning and language become deeply paradoxical.

Even if this important difficulty could be dealt with, there remain potentially undesirable implications of accepting Young’s (1995) account of truth. A whole community could be using a word a particular way, and as long as that use was coherent with the practicable system of beliefs in the community, it would be the correct use, and nothing more would need to be said on the matter. Such a solution can only be compelling if Young’s account of truth is itself acceptable, which was not tested here. It is worth noting that Boghossian’s (1989) arguments might also present a problem for Young’s defence of global anti-realism in and of itself, and that further investigations are warranted.
If the aim of defending a straight solution was to protect the notion of correspondence truth, this solution would be considered unsatisfactory. Certainly, the concerns raised by Millikan (1990) are not allayed; under Young’s (1995) account, truth rules are essentially assertability rules. The possibility that Young’s account can be used in such a way suggests that there may be other accounts of truth that could stymie the Sceptic. The question of whether it makes sense to abandon the account of truth that one was seeking to protect from meaning scepticism in order to overcome it remains unresolved and would potentially recur any time a new theory of truth was considered a potential solution.

The question of whether the adoption of coherence truth is acceptable is a secondary consideration. The problem of the infallible linguistic community must be resolved before it can be a viable answer to the challenge put forward by the Sceptic. Any solution that implies such a thoroughly disjunctive quality of meaning must surely be rejected. That said, if it could be shown that Young’s (1995) account of global anti-realism can deal with community infallibility, it would be a strong contender in the search for an account of meaning that can resist the Sceptic’s attacks.

6.3 CONCLUSION

Answers to the Sceptic based on Hattiangadi (2006) and Young (1995) fail as satisfactory accounts of meaning for different reasons. The modified version of Hattiangadi’s notion of Correctness fails to show how one interpretation being considered correct and another incorrect can be derived from non-intentional factors. Even after considerable alteration, the only feasible version of this account is no longer a straight solution. However, it is possible that this could be because this was not the use for which Hattiangadi’s account was originally intended. It is apparent that Hattiangadi’s claim to have solved the a priori nature of the problem is in doubt. The solution based on Young’s anti-realist account of truth fails because, in allowing the linguistic community to be infallible, it invites the possibility that meaning is so disjunctive that it radically undermines normal ideas of communication. Even if this problem could be overcome, the philosophical cost of giving up an account of
truth to maintain an account of meaning may be considered prohibitively high. The factor that both accounts have in common is that they do not properly determine meaning. Hattiangadi does this by failing to specify the relation in virtue of which the particular use of a word is correct. If Boghossian’s (1989) argument is applicable, Young does this by equating performance with correctness. Both have failed in ways that are similar to the more established accounts considered in Chapters 4 and 5. We now turn to the final potential answer to the Sceptic.
Chapter 7: A Causal Theory of Reference and Meaning

In this chapter, I develop an approach to dealing with the problem of meaning scepticism that utilises a causal theory of reference. This solution is based on McGinn’s (1984) brief causal account of meaning, which I expand upon through the use of arguments regarding the relationship between Devitt’s (1997) formulation of the causal theory of reference, meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution. Of all of the solutions covered in this thesis—novel or otherwise—this one comes the closest to providing a satisfactory account of reference and meaning. This is not to say that it is perfect; the solution that I present here has possible limitations. Even though I categorise this solution as a qualified success, I argue that it should be considered a strong candidate for a satisfactory straight solution. If successful, this account of meaning would allow speakers to have confidence in how they use and interpret words, and it would provide justification for speakers choosing one meaning over another.

Unlike many of the other attempts to show that there is a satisfactory solution to Kripke’s (1982) problem, this account does not initially take the approach that there must be a fact that proves the Sceptic wrong. Rather, a path whereby there is nothing that the Sceptic can object to is described with the aim of formulating an account that is both satisfactory and straight (or as straight as can be achieved). This approach to finding where the Sceptic is mistaken is oblique to such an extent that this first argument begins with the assumption that Kripke’s Sceptic is in fact right. Nonetheless, a straight solution, or something very much like it, is achievable. As a result, the first part of my argument, which draws heavily on Devitt’s (1997) causal theory of reference, is compatible with the acceptance of meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution. Thus, one reading of the first half of my proposed solution, in Section 7.1 (and associated sub-sections), could be as a diagnostic account—an effort to rehabilitate notions of reference and correspondence truth in the context of an
acceptance of the sceptical attack on meaning. I also argue that, if nothing else, Kripke was wrong to assert that correspondence truth was incompatible with solving this form of scepticism. It follows that many of the concerns expressed by Boghossian (1989) and Millikan (1990) regarding realism are addressed, as well as some that I raised in Chapter 3.

Once the compatibility of a causal theory of reference with the sceptical position is established, the next step taken, in Section 7.2, is to integrate this with the ‘causal’ answer to the Sceptic, as suggested by McGinn (1984). The hope is that this will produce a more satisfactory account than McGinn’s original. Even if this solution were not considered a ‘straight’ one, showing that notions of reference and correspondence truth could be compatible with the sceptical solution would be a worthwhile contribution to the overall debate. (This was, I admit, the origin of my line of reasoning.) Is it a satisfactory solution to the sceptical paradox? If so, is it ‘straight’? This remains to be seen. But if determinate reference is possible under acceptance of the sceptical solution, the step to determinate meaning is arguably a relatively small one.

7.1 REFERENCE

Devitt’s (1997) formulation of ‘Correspondence Truth (x)’ is that sentences of type x are true or false in virtue of their structure, the referential relations between their parts and reality, and the objective and mind-independent nature of that reality (Devitt, 1997, p. 29). Thus, there are potentially multiple issues in showing how a limited correspondence theory could be defendable under conditions of meaning scepticism and compatible with the sceptical solution. This section primarily addresses the question of showing that there are referential relations between parts of a sentence (i.e., words) and reality. In leaving the issue of whether reality is mind-independent and/or objective, I have followed Devitt’s lead. This is not because I hold that such a question is not worthwhile—just that it is distinct from the question of how language relates to the world and deserves to be considered separately.

Regarding science, among other things, Neurath held that ‘We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry-dock
and reconstruct it from the best components’ (1983). This discussion of reference is focused, at least initially, on the arguably less problematic cases regarding the world. This is so we can, to use Neurath’s image as borrowed by both Quine (1960) and Devitt (1997, p. 312), see whether it is possible to find at least a small area of the boat we can stand on while we rebuild it. Note that because the defendable version of correspondence truth does not need all sentences to correspond, not all words need to, or indeed can, refer.

Since my aim for the first half of this chapter—of showing how scepticism about meaning can be compatible with metaphysical and hopefully semantic components of realism—was inspired by Devitt (1997), it seems appropriate to make use of his definitions. In the simplest sense and in the context of the larger discussion, reference is taken to be the relation between words (in a language) and the world (Devitt, 1997, p. 330). It will also be taken that it relates a singular term to a single object, or a general term to a whole class of objects (Devitt, 1997, p. 330). Devitt goes on to say that to identify a word–world relation as reference is to identify a particular interpretation of the language, as the truth conditions and hence meanings of a sentence can be explained in terms of reference (1997, p. 330).

For a theory of reference to support correspondence truth, it needs to show that enough reference obtains for us to say that our sentences are ‘about’ the kinds of things that concern realism. The relation needs to be of a kind where whole sentences can be true or not according to the relation between their content and reality. It is not initially necessary that reference in any way determines the meaning of individual words—not that it would be possible because, according to Kripke (1982), there is no such thing. At this point, it might seem to be paradoxical or inconsistent that meanings of sentences and their truth conditions are mentioned in the context of scepticism about meanings of words, but this perceived difficulty will be resolved in later sections.

In the next section, the possibility of an account of reference that is compatible with the sceptical conclusion and sceptical solution will be explored.
7.1.1 Assertability Conditions and Reference

Under the sceptical conclusion and sceptical solution, there is no such thing as meaning a particular thing by a particular word. Instead, the meaning-declarative sentences of speakers, and in fact all of their usage of words, can be described in terms of the conditions under which they can make such assertions and have them accepted by the linguistic community. There are no truth conditions for sentences declaring meaning—just the assertability conditions that roughly specify the acceptable use of words within the linguistic community.

In considering this question, the starting position is important. As mentioned in Section 3.2.2, the arguments concerning realism start with the assumption that there is an objective and mind-independent reality. It also assumes that there are facts, or at least states of affairs, that obtain. The other basic assumption is that there are words. In terms of an account of language, it does not get much more basic than this. To summarise, the assumptions are that there are words and there is reality.

Under the sceptical solution, words still seem to have some sort of relation with reality. Take the sentence ‘The cat is on the mat’. With regard to the word ‘cat’, the conditions under which its use is acceptable to the linguistic community are at least roughly specifiable. Presumably, these assertability conditions include, among other things, using the word when talking about certain small felines. Thus, when a speaker uses the word ‘cat’ to talk about a thing, in reality, which we would (due to assertability conditions) call a cat, there would seem to be a relation of sorts between the word and the world. This should be relatively uncontroversial so far—so uncontroversial, in fact, that it would be a challenge to show that the word ‘cat’ has nothing to do with a cat out in the world, especially the one being specifically discussed.

The question then becomes: What sort of relation is this? Can we, as Devitt (1997) would put it, specify this relation as a relation of reference? There is a sense in which we can. Recall the initial problem as Kripke (1982) formulates it—that we cannot say whether we mean plus or quus by ‘+’ because there is no such thing as meaning anything by any
word. Recall also, Kripke’s solution—that we use ‘+’ in a particular way (and feel confident in doing so) because that use is legitimately assertable under conditions that are roughly specifiable (and that asserting them under those conditions plays a role in our lives) (1982, pp. 78–79).

Assertability conditions specify acceptable use, but is that the same as specifying an interpretation? And while these conditions demarcate the boundaries of acceptable use, is this the same as determining reference? It is clear that using a word legitimately because of assertability conditions constitutes using ‘+’ in a manner that favours the plus interpretation over the quus one, and that the conditions under which we do so are at least roughly specifiable. As Kripke states, they restrict speakers’ behaviour (1982, p. 93). To return to the cat, the assertability conditions of ‘cat’ specify, albeit roughly, particular interpretations of the language. The importance of this should not be overlooked, as the situation begins to more closely resemble the picture of reference that Devitt (1997) puts forward. The difficulty at hand does not seem to be that assertability conditions fail to specify interpretations of words, or that they do not entail word–world relations; it is that assertability conditions may not do so in a determinate (enough) manner to defend a determinate account of reference.

An issue worth acknowledging at this point is the significance of the ‘rough’ nature of the specification of the particular interpretation of the language. At this stage, it would appear that if the specification of a particular interpretation of language has to be completely exact to count as reference, and that there is no room for roughness, the relationship entailed by conditions of assertability could not constitute reference. Kripke comments that the circumstances under which a speaker can make an assertion only need to be roughly specifiable in order to legitimise the assertion (1982, pp. 77–78). It is important to consider why he would state it thus. It would seem that there are two main possibilities. One is that the assertion conditions for given words are rough in the sense that they are inexact and can never be completely specified. The other is that they are potentially specifiable because they are exact (at least in a sufficiently thin slice of time), but that such an exercise would be unfeasibly difficult. This could be because the dynamic nature of language would cause the
conditions to change more quickly than they could be specified, and because of the complex nature of trying to observe every possible application of a word by every member of a linguistic community. I argue that the latter possibility is more likely. The reasons for not demanding an exact specification of the assertability conditions are on the grounds of practicality and because only rough specifications are needed to explain the majority of language use. Thus, rather than saying that assertability conditions roughly specify the acceptable use of words within the linguistic community, it is more correct to say that assertability conditions specify the acceptable use of words, but that our knowledge of these conditions is limited by epistemic factors. Assertability conditions are not rough or vague per se, but our knowledge of them is. It is tempting to suggest that for any given word at any given time, there are a finite number of circumstances under which its use would be deemed acceptable by the linguistic community, which further supports the view that assertability conditions are potentially specifiable.

It seems likely that our knowledge of the totality of conditions under which words can be used legitimately is most likely incomplete at any one time, and this is probably true in both the theoretical sense and for individual speakers. However, it will be seen that despite this, assertability conditions play a role in language that seems to be either resemble or compatible with that of certain theories of reference in terms of its power to explain the meaning of sentences and their truth conditions.

More explanation is obviously needed. To say simply that assertability confers, fixes or is somehow otherwise involved in reference by itself says very little unless the mechanics of such a relationship are explored. Assertability seems to be part of a process whereby a word has some sort of relation with a state of affairs. If it appears that a speaker can talk about a feline pet using the word ‘cat’ because that use is within the conditions of assertability, there must be more going on than a relationship between that particular utterance and the rest of the language game. If the relatively basic metaphysical realism is assumed, in that there is an objectively existing world that is independent of the mental, any explanation that rules out our language having any relation with it makes little sense. If there
is an external world and we have any interaction with it at all, a theory of language where our individual words and whole sentences have no connection to it seems unlikely. In the context of Kripke’s (1982) sceptical solution, it seems sensible to suggest that assertability conditions and the language game are shaped by the interaction of the linguistic community not just with itself, but also with their environment. If this were acceptable, there is at least an indirect causal link between the world and the words we use when we talk about it.

If assertability conditions are involved in reference fixing, my suggestion is that the existing theory this relationship most resembles is a kind of causal theory of reference. To illustrate this similarity, it is instructive to examine how Devitt’s (1997) version of a causal theory of reference would deal with arguments deployed against the determinacy of reference, including those put forward by Putnam (1978, 1981). Devitt asks: Why identify one particular word–world relation—that which describes a ‘standard’ interpretation—as reference instead of other ‘non-standard’ word–world relations (1997, p. 330)? One suggestion, which Devitt attributes to Putnam (1989), is that the only relation relative to which an epistemically ideal theory would be true is reference (1997, pp. 330–331). The problem is that any given sentence is true relative to many relations other than that which we would understand as standard (Devitt, 1997, p. 331). Devitt considers the causal theory of reference an answer to this problem. He considers that it is successful against Putnam to a certain extent in that it can give an account where ‘All terms are fixed to their referents by causal relations, not by “metaphysical glue”’ (Devitt, 1997, p. 332), including the term ‘reference’. Devitt accepts that reference is ultimately fixed by causal relations, but also that a further problem remains (1997, pp. 333–334, 336)—that this notion of reference is just one relation, and that the account needs a way to show how it is different from reference* and why it should be preferred. His response is to point out that the standard interpretation plays a role in explaining our actions, whereas the non-standard interpretation does not (Devitt, 1997, pp. 334–335). Further, the standard interpretation affects our formation of thoughts and presumably our use of them, whereas the non-standard interpretation does not (Devitt, 1997, p. 336).
Whatever the strengths or weaknesses (of which I can find few) of Devitt’s (1997) arguments against Putnam’s attacks on the determinacy of reference, it is clear that there are certain similarities between the characteristics of reference put forward in his arguments and the account of language being given here. While the idea that reference can be somehow fixed by assertability conditions has not been explicitly characterised as causal so far, it is an idea worth considering. As far as using a word to refer to a particular thing is concerned, there seems to be a causal connection between a word and the world via assertability conditions. A speaker using the word ‘cat’ in a way that is acceptable to the linguistic community must be simultaneously affected by and causing the conditions of assertability for that word. The speaker is affected because those conditions cause them to use that word in one way and not another. At the same time, they contribute to the conditions of assertability by reinforcing or perhaps challenging the existing conditions. Putting this contribution aside for the moment, if the assertability conditions of a word specifying a particular interpretation that is acceptably applied to something can be considered reference, there would appear to be a causal element. Whether this is what would be considered an ‘appropriate’ causal relation would probably be debatable, but it is enough for the moment to suggest that it is plausible.

It can be said with more certainty that the assertability conditions of the word ‘cat’ are what cause a speaker to use that word regarding cats rather than dogs, as well as explain such occurrences. This clearly parallels Devitt’s (1997) account and foreshadows later discussions concerning the meanings of sentences and their truth conditions. Importantly, it highlights the potential explanatory power of assertability conditions, which strengthens assertability conditions as a candidate for reference.

Given this feature of occupying the same ‘causal nexus’, as Devitt (1997, p. 338) put it, assertability conditions can provide a response to the kind of concerns raised by Quine (1960) and Putnam (1975) regarding the supposed indeterminacy of reference. In the context of Quine’s argument against the determinacy of reference, it seems appropriate to explore how the speaker is referring to one thing and not another. If the assertability conditions of the
word ‘cat’ allowed it to refer equally to ‘cat’ and ‘un-detached cat part’ (even in the context of a whole sentence), this would be a problem, but hardly one that is unique to meaning scepticism. If this were the case, it would suggest that there might be more to reference than simply assertability conditions. However, this should not be especially problematic for this project. According to Kripke (1982), assertability conditions allow us to feel confident that we are adding and not quadding. In a similar way, it seems perfectly reasonable to suggest that they allow us to feel confident that we are talking about cats rather than various cat tropes, such as un-detached cat parts or thin time-slices of cat.

### 7.1.2 Causal Reference and the Sceptic

The relationship between assertability conditions and reference is still unclear at this point. Do assertability conditions cause reference, or does reference cause assertability conditions? Such a question almost certainly oversimplifies the issue. Assertability conditions and relations of reference seem to operate in parallel or simultaneously. At this stage, it is easiest to treat them separately, which is reasonable, as an account of how meaning works and an account of reference play different theoretical roles at different times.

Leaving the relationship aside for the moment, the question that is of most concern for the goal of allowing at least a limited form of connection between our words and the world is: Can a causal theory of reference be compatible with meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution? Can any theory of reference be compatible with Kripke’s (1982) conclusion and solution?

If anything actually refers to a specific thing out in the world, it is a proper name (Reimer, 2010). Thus, the investigation of whether a causal theory of reference is ruled out will start with that example.

Devitt and Sterelny (1987) give an account of a causal theory of reference. A unique thing—for example, an individual person—is ostensively dubbed ‘N’. This can be formal or informal, and the dubbing is in the presence of the individual or object in question. The event of dubbing is perceived by the person undertaking it, and the event is causal in the sense that
to perceive an event or object is to be causally affected by it. A speaker witnessing this event gains the ability to use that word to designate or refer to that individual. When a speaker uses ‘N’ to designate that individual, they do so in virtue of the causal link to that individual. Those present at the dubbing acquire a semantic ability that is causally grounded in that object or individual (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 56).

After the reference fixing, the name is passed on to other speakers via communication. This occurs when speakers not present at the dubbing hear the name in conversation with those who were; such interaction can be characterised as causal in nature (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 56). Speakers successfully refer to the thing when they use its name because of the causal chain that goes back to the initial dubbing. For example, we can use the name ‘Einstein’ to designate Einstein because we are causally linked to that individual by a chain that runs from us back through our linguistic community to someone present at his dubbing (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 56).

Changes in reference are accounted for under this causal-theoretic model. There is an ongoing process of perceptual confrontation with multiple semantic groundings whereby the reference of the word ‘N’ is either maintained or changed over multiple groundings (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 62). This allows for reference to change if groundings subsequent to the initial dubbing are different to that first designation. This entails that the initial dubbing is not the only causal event that connects a proper name to its referent (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 63).

The sceptical argument against ‘N’ meaning a certain thing is familiar enough by now. The Sceptic would ask us to consider a speaker encountering ‘N’ in a new situation. Perhaps the Sceptic would put forward a hypothesis that we were wrong about our previous usage of the word ‘N’. An example of this might be that ‘N’ means a particular person prior to 24 December 2013, but it means something else on 25 December 2013. As of Christmas Day, what fact is it in virtue of which ‘N’ means a particular person and not some other object? There is no fact about a speaker’s past usage that justifies its present use, and no rule for following a rule, dispositions or qualia etc. Nor can it be just that the speaker intended to
use ‘N’ in the same way as the previous day. The sceptical solution of course allows 
speakers to use ‘N’ in a particular way—it is assertable to say that ‘N’ means that particular 
person.

On what grounds can the Sceptic deny that ‘N’ refers to the particular person rather 
than some other object? Can they make the same claim about reference as they did about 
meaning if reference is causal? Keeping in mind the God’s-eye-view that Kripke (1982) 
allows opponents of the Sceptic to have access to, there is at least some sort of causal chain 
that runs from the current use of ‘N’ back to the initial dubbing. The facts that form this 
causal chain might be epistemically difficult to access, but they would be there nonetheless. 
The initial dubbing, ‘I’m going to call you N’ occurred, as did the passing of the name to 
other speakers. Likewise, the intention of speakers to use the word in the same way as the 
reference lenders is a fact. It is true that speakers have only used ‘N’ to refer to that 
particular individual a finite number of times, but this is not a problem for the causal theory 
of reference. Nor is it clear that any part of the causal model raises the ‘rule for interpreting a 
rule’ difficulty. This can only be invoked in cases where speakers give themselves (or each 
other) instructions. Speakers do not say to each other that, in order for ‘N’ to refer to a 
unique individual, they must use the name in such a way that the causal chain stretches back 
to the initial dubbing, and that they must intend to use it in the same way as reference 
lenders.

Even if the Sceptic could try to use bent, quas-like variants of the words in the 
causal theory of reference to render it indeterminate, this would not work. This is because, 
unlike Kripke’s (1982) initial argument, this conversation is occurring in the context of the 
sceptical solution. Even if there is no superlative fact in virtue of which a philosopher means 
‘causal’, their assertion that they mean ‘causal’ rather than quasal is legitimate because of 
assertability conditions. At this point in the argument, superlative facts are not required per 
se—only that assertability conditions block the Sceptic from questioning how we should be 
using words like ‘causal’. At the risk of pre-empting the discussion in Sections 7.1.3, 7.1.7, 
7.1.10 and 7.2, blocking the use of quas-like interpretations means that the causal chains of
reference that would support speakers meaning quus etc. never occur, hence speakers not meaning ‘quus’. For the moment, it is enough to curtail the sceptical possibilities by appealing to assertability conditions, and to realise that, inasmuch as the words of the causal theory of reference themselves refer to anything, it will be causally (Devitt, 1997, p. 332).

The Sceptic could ask: Why reference rather than some bent variation such as reference*, where reference* is the same as reference until 25 December and then changes as described above? Presumably, the response that Devitt uses when discussing reference v. reference* (1997, pp. 334–336) would apply just as well in this situation. That ‘N’ has a particular person as its referent is a particular causal relation. This relationship has an explanatory and causal role in our thoughts and behaviour. The alternative relations of ‘N’ referring to something else or ‘N’ referring* to something else do not have the same, or indeed any, explanatory or causal role in our thoughts or behaviour.

The Sceptic could still try to press the point in that they can give an explanatory and causal role to reference*, as has been given for reference. In this case, perhaps we would have no reason to prefer one over the other. But what would this alternative role actually be like? For it to be as significant as the relation that reference entails, it would have to be effectively indistinguishable. A situation where ‘N’ refers to a particular individual and ‘N’ refers* to that same individual under virtually identical conditions does not seem particularly indeterminate. Nor is it much of a problem for the idea that some word–world relations play more of a role in our lives than others. Any suggestion that reference is indeterminate because a multiplicity of indistinguishable relations can be proposed—reference*, reference**, reference*** and so on—seems somewhat specious. The question of reference, where ‘N’ is concerned, is why that particular word refers to that particular person and not to a completely different object. If the Sceptic is trying to give an account where we have no reason to prefer reference over reference*, they fail at their original task in showing that the particular word does not relate to a particular object. Further, if reference and reference* etc. are indistinguishable even with full epistemic access—for example, the God’s-eye-view—there is good reason to say that they are not separate things in the first place.
There might seem to be a contradiction here. How can ‘N’ not mean anything and at the same time refer to a particular individual? Again, this is only a contradiction if it is assumed that the meaning of words and that which they refer to are irrevocably linked. Kripke seems to suggest that the way he uses ‘meant’ in his argument is in the sense of denoting a meaning rather than referring to an object (Kripke, 1982, p. 9); this appears to be frequently overlooked in the bulk of secondary literature. The sceptical solution is that speakers confidently use words in a particular way because their use is legitimately assertable under conditions that are specifiable, and that asserting them under those conditions plays a role in our lives. Once the link between reference and meaning is broken, it does not seem (as) outlandish to suggest that such an account is compatible with a causal theory of reference. That said, arguing for a stronger conclusion—that if there is determinate reference, there is also determinate meaning—forms the core of the argument I put forward in Section 7.2.

For the moment, my assertion here is that the conditions under which a speaker can legitimately use ‘N’ to mean (if that is the right word) a particular person, and the causal conditions under which the reference of ‘N’ to that person develop, supervene upon the same conditions—or they at least do not necessarily contradict each other. As far as proper names are concerned, there does not appear to be anything in the sceptical solution that would prevent a causal theory of reference from also obtaining.

If a causal theory of reference can be formulated that includes classes or kinds, the same account can potentially be extended. Consider the example, ‘Trees have leaves’. Under the sceptical solution, what is this sentence about? We can say that the assertability conditions of the component words cause us to use the words in certain ways. Insofar as classes can be said to exist, we could say it is about two classes and the relationship between them. This is presumably because the legitimate usage conditions of ‘trees’ include using the word with regard to a particular class of things. Is the speaker in any sense talking about the classes of things called trees and leaves? One would hope so—not least because an account of language that did not include this would seem odd.
Classes can seem vulnerable to the attacks of the Sceptic, but consider the following causal account. Assuming there are classes of things (or natural kinds), we can imagine that it is discovered that there is a class of things and the linguistic community decides to call the class ‘mammals’. There is an initial dubbing based on the perception of samples of things in that class. The reference of ‘mammal’ now goes to whatever has the same internal structure as those samples. Speakers at dubbing lend the reference via communication to others, and as this happens, there is an ongoing process of perceptual confrontations and semantic groundings whereby the use of the word ‘mammal’ is either reinforced or changed. Speakers who do not know the properties of that class of things can still be said to refer to the class, as there is a causal chain stretching back to the process of initial dubbing.

On what basis can the Sceptic dispute this account? What fact is it that allows us to say that the word ‘mammals’ refers to the members of the class mammals and not the members of its quus-like variant, *quammals*? The circumstances of a sceptical attack on meaning and the solution should be familiar enough by now. But an attack on reference will be largely the same as with proper names. The causal chain back to the process of initial dubbing cannot be disputed. Nor can rule-following considerations come into play, as speakers do not give themselves instructions regarding this causal process. If there is vulnerability, it is that the process of initial dubbing is based on a finite sample of things. Perhaps the Sceptic would argue that the class of mammals was ill-defined because future samples would cause us to question the coherence of the class. But this seems like a question about what is the most appropriate way to classify things rather than a question about the existence of meaning or reference. Future samples might cause the definition of what a mammal is to change, or justify the creation of different classes or sub-classes. The discovery of monotremes and marsupials, which forced a rethink on the exact nature of the class of mammals (i.e., that not all mammals have the characteristic of being ‘placental’), is an example of this. After all, reference can change. The Sceptic might dispute that they were all the same kind of object, or that subsequent things in fact have the same ‘internal structure’, but in the context of full epistemic disclosure, this would be of little use.
Admittedly, these are idealised conditions, but those were the parameters that Kripke (1982) initially set.

The Sceptic might also dispute that the class of mammals exists, or even that any classes or natural kinds exist. But this is arguably moving into a different area of metaphysics. At the very least, the question becomes one of whether there is something to refer to—not of the determinacy of reference. Where classes are concerned, it is not clear that there is anything in the Sceptic’s approach that justifies nominalism. This is certainly the position that Maddy (1984) and Kusch (2006) seem to accept, as was shown in the discussion of Lewis (1983) in Section 5.1. That natural kinds exist (or not, as the case may be) is a question worth asking, but it seems that the Sceptic can only cast doubt on the idea that a particular word is somehow ‘metaphysically glued’ to a particular meaning, or in this case, to a particular referent. This should not be taken as a defence of the existence of natural kinds or coherent classes. Rather, on the question of whether they objectively exist, the Sceptic can have little to say. This is especially true if we follow Devitt’s (1997) lead and assume (for the sake of argument if nothing else) that the metaphysics is already settled. That the Sceptic cannot legitimately question the existence of natural kinds is central to how questions concerning the finitude of a causal chain can be dealt with, as discussed in Section 7.2.1.

How this account would deal with sub-classes is fairly straightforward. For example, it is also discovered that there are subclasses of mammals, and that one of these sub-classes is dubbed ‘cats’. If the process whereby ‘cat’ refers to this particular sub-class of mammals is allowable, a sentence such as ‘Cats are mammals’ can be said to refer to a sub-class and class of things in a determinate manner. What is important in the overall argument is that in virtue of its structure, it describes a certain relationship between the class and sub-class. Regardless of how these words came to be attached to those classes, it should be apparent that the conditions under which they can be used legitimately and refer, are compatible.

A further example that illustrates the usefulness of the account is how it applies to Kripke’s argument regarding whether the object under the Eiffel Tower is a tabair or a table.
(1982, p. 19). A ‘tabair’ is something that is a table when not found at the base of the Eiffel Tower, or that is a chair when found there. While the sceptical argument concludes that in cases such as this, there is no fact in virtue of which a speaker means table rather than tabair, the sceptical solution indicates that the tabair interpretation of the term ‘table’ is no more likely to be accepted by the linguistic community than the ‘qus’ interpretation of the ‘+’ sign. A causal theory of reference indicates that speakers are referring to a table even when it is under the Eiffel Tower, because the causal chain does not go to tabairs. We can say this because tables are involved this causal chain in a way that chairs, regardless of their location, are not—that is why the assertability conditions are the way they are. Even if there were an unusual relation that linked ‘table’ with tabairs, it would have no explanatory or causal role in our lives. The question of whether a causal theory of reference can extend to artefacts as such is important, and in this case, the explanation of why we are referring to tables and not tabairs is only as acceptable as the account that supports it. The short answer is that if there is a causal-type theory of reference to be given for artefacts that is in line with Devitt’s (1997) account as stated above, the question of whether a speaker is referring to a tabair or table when under the Eiffel Tower is settled.

A further objection, and not necessarily one that the Sceptic would raise, concerns the compatibility of the sceptical solution and the causal theory of reference. Under the sceptical solution, it is simply the conditions of assertion that govern how words can be applied in a way that will be acceptable to the linguistic community. Under these circumstances, there is no reason to assume that the acceptable use of a particular word, and the conditions under which related meaning assertions will be legitimised, will be static over time. Given that language appears to change over time, it would be odd to assume otherwise. There is no incompatibility as long as the causal theory includes an account of how reference can change. A series of ‘semantically grounding’ perceptual confrontations will cause the reference of a word to switch from one individual or type of thing to another (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 62). The process of how the assertability conditions of a word would change would be quite similar, if not identical. This relationship is worth exploring further.
Similarly, it can be imagined that in different linguistic communities, the same words are applied under sometimes radically different assertability conditions, leading to radically different uses. Again, the causal theory has no real problem with this, as long as both communities have the appropriate causal chains leading back to the initial dubbing, and so on. In the same way that the sceptical solution does not allow for one community to be judged ‘from the outside’ as being incorrect in its use of a word, the causal theory does not allow for the reference of a word to be questioned in isolation. It is only when two communities that have disparate uses of the same word come into contact that the process of perceptual confrontation, contested semantic grounding and change in assertability conditions for that word can begin (at which point there is a sense that they are no longer two isolated communities). The reference of a word cannot be questioned without the act of asking the question becoming part of the causal process at work.

It might seem plausible to suggest that determinate reference is incompatible with the sceptical solution, but this would only be the case if reference were taken to be identical in nature to Kripke’s (1982) conception of meaning. The meaning of a word might be taken by Kripke to be infinite in extension, but reference does not need to be. The problem for so many ‘straight’ solutions revolves around words being applied in never-before-encountered situations. Does the word ‘tree’ mean the same thing that it did yesterday, or if a new tree is encountered? Does it mean the same thing in an infinite number of different circumstances? Do we mean tree if it is under the Eiffel Tower or growing in an airtight dome on the far side of the moon? Of course, meaning as initially construed by Kripke (1982) struggles to achieve the task set for it. And reference, were it asked to do the same, might likewise find itself in difficulty. If asked to specify the infinity of circumstances under which a word refers to a particular thing, not only could this information not be held in the head of one speaker, but it could not be held in the heads of even a large number of speakers. I take this fact to be more evidence that reference, like meaning, ‘ain’t all in the head’, as Putnam would say (1975, p. 227). Luckily, the causal theory of reference does not need to separately specify and determine every circumstance under which a word would refer to a particular object or class
of objects. Speakers do not need to hold the whole causal history of the use of a word in their minds. In the case of proper names, if a unique object is the same unique object, and thus the same causal relationship obtains, its name will still refer. Likewise with classes, if an object has the same internal structure as others of that kind and the associated causal chain, the name of that class will still refer. In both cases, the process of perceptual confrontation can cause reference change. Where the problematic conception of meaning is construed to be infinite in extension by Kripke (1982), reference, as described by a causal theory, inherently does not seem to be. It grounds what words refer to in the present, but it does not tell us that the word ‘cat’ will still refer to the same kind of thing in the distant future, any more than the conditions of acceptable use in the present predict acceptable use in that same distant time. It can be said that, under this theory, our knowledge of perceptual confrontations, semantic grounding and changes in assertability conditions provide knowledge of the circumstances under which changes in reference occur.

As Kripke’s (1982) formulation of the sceptical problem was regarding a novel case, the issue of how reference works in circumstances that we have never encountered before must (obviously) be dealt with. The answer is in some ways startlimly common sense. When we encounter the aforementioned individual ‘N’ for the first time on a new day, the Sceptic might try to cast doubt on the meaning of that word, and if Kripke’s argument is to be accepted, they would be successful. But of course, we do not change our use of the word unless the assertability conditions of the word have changed. Likewise, ‘N’ still refers to that individual unless the patterns of semantic groundings that lead to reference change have occurred. A similar account applies when a new example of a tree is encountered. If the assertability conditions allow speakers to use the word ‘tree’ in that context, speakers will use the word accordingly, even though there is nothing that specifies that word’s infinite extension into the future. Similarly, if the encounter with the new tree does not produce any confrontations that could cause a different semantic grounding, the word ‘tree’ refers accordingly. It might be that, in practice, an investigation would occur to ensure that this new tree fits into the class—that is, that it has the same ‘internal structure’ as previous
samples. But this is consistent with both the sceptical solution and the causal theory of reference. Objections on the grounds that this object has been assigned to a class that refers only on the basis of finite samples have already been dealt with.

7.1.3 The Qua-Problem

It is this context that the ‘qua-problem’, as described by Devitt and Sterelny (1987), is relevant. The qua-problem is a problem relating to the fixing of reference by grounding. Devitt and Sterelny describe it as ‘the problem of discovering in virtue of what a term is grounded in the cause of a perceptual experience qua-one-kind and not qua-another’ (1987, p. 254). The example they use is that of a cat named ‘Nana’. The use of that name was grounded in virtue of perceptual contact with that individual cat (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 64). That is, the name refers to that individual in virtue of a baptiser having had perceptual contact with them. However, the contact is not with that entire particular cat, either spatially or across time (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 64). In time, the contact with Nana is finite for any one grounding—a ‘time-slice’ of the referent individual (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 64). Similarly, some contact with Nana is with an un-detached part of her—perhaps as she peers around a corner (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 64). The question that the qua-problem poses in this case is why ‘Nana’ refers to the whole individual and not an individual time-slice or un-detached part (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 64).

The solution that Devitt (1997) proposes to the qua-problem is to introduce a descriptive element into the act of baptising. That is, speakers would need to have some idea—some mental content—about what kind of thing they are dubbing or ‘baptising’. This would cause potential problems in answering the Sceptic, because the requirement that the baptiser have some idea of what kind of thing they are naming introduces an intentional element that the Sceptic can potentially exploit. At the risk of pre-empting my later discussion of McGinn (1984), the example used by Kusch (2006) with regard to McGinn’s causal solution is worth considering, even though at this point, the larger claim regarding meaning has yet to be realised. In this case, the Sceptic questions the meaning of words
involved in the act of baptising the individual ‘Kripke’ (2006, pp. 134–135). Specifically, the
Sceptic suggests that ‘Kripke’ refers to Kripnam, where Kripnam is Kripke before 2006 or
Putnam after 2006 (Kusch, 2006, p. 134). Kusch indicates that McGinn would argue that
Putnam is causally isolated from the baptism of Kripke, and hence that ‘Kripke’ cannot mean
(or refer to) Kripnam (2006, p. 134). The obvious retort, according to Kusch, is that the
words or thoughts of the baptiser in the process of baptism are open to sceptical
interpretation (2006, p. 135). Thus, if the baptiser thinks ‘I hereby baptise you Kripke’, the
Sceptic could suggest an interpretation of those words that is compatible with ‘Kripke’
referring to Kripnam. Any effort to explain why the conventional interpretation is to be
preferred will encounter similar difficulties. If we were to say that names refer to individuals
in a particular way, the Sceptic could suggest that by ‘individual’ we mean quinindividua, 
where that word applies to an entity spread over the time-slices of two people (2006, p. 135).
The defence of a causal theory of reference could appear to be stuck at this point. If the
descriptions the baptiser uses are taken out, there will be no way of answering the qua-
problem. If they are included, the Sceptic can exploit them to render reference indeterminate.

Kusch cites Maddy (1984) as suggesting that there is a way to solve this type of
problem without appealing to descriptions or intentional states (2006, p. 136). Maddy’s
approach to showing that reference is determinate is causal, but it drills down to the
neurological level, specifically to ‘cell assemblies’ (1984, p. 465), which are below the level
of descriptions and mental content. Under this account, certain cell assemblies are formed
through causal contact with samples of a class such as triangles or gold, or (presumably)
with individuals such as the cat known as ‘Fauve’ (Maddy, 1984, p. 465). The idea here is
that, regardless of the mental content of the speaker, these cell assemblies, which were
formed through causal contact with a particular kind, will be stimulated when the speaker
has contact with samples of this kind in the future. The cell assemblies, having only had
causal contact with a particular individual or kind, will only respond to certain stimuli. Thus, 
if the Sceptic were to ask for a fact to rule out the possibility that a baptiser had contact with
a ‘space–time worm’ that started with gold and ended with Tom Watson, Maddy could point
to the fact that the cell assemblies associated with gold would not respond to Tom Watson (1984, pp. 465–466). Maddy admits that these cell assemblies could misfire (1984, p. 470), or that a perceptual limitation might cause the assemblies to respond to things that were not members of the kind to which the reference is fixed (1984, pp. 470–471). The cell assembly is a fallible detector of phenomenal similarity, and phenomenal similarity is a fallible indicator of membership of a class or kind (Maddy, 1984, p. 471). Maddy maintains that this does not alter the fact that reference is to the kind, of the initial samples, that the speaker had causal contact with (1984, p. 471).

Kusch criticises this answer to the qua-problem on the grounds that Maddy (1984) does not specify the nature of the relation between these brain events and mental states (2006, p. 136). The two possible options that Kusch considers are broadly reductionist or eliminativist, and he judges both as being problematic. The eliminativist option is seen by Kusch as being too extreme, and too difficult to coherently state, to be a viable candidate. Kusch claims that if the mental states of thinking about certain descriptions of classes can be reduced to events in the brain, it is plausible to suggest that all intentional states can be reduced to events in the brain (2006, p. 136). If this is the case, Kusch argues that Maddy is then committed to saying that a speaker means a certain thing by a certain word, provided only that the speaker’s brain is in a certain state (2006, p. 136). Kusch is correct to point out that this takes the account back into dangerous territory. If a speaker means something in virtue of a certain brain state, a resemblance to dispositional accounts, and their shortcomings, reappears. Specifically, if quaddition diverges from addition only at a point that is beyond the capacity of a speaker to compute, a question of whether that speaker means addition by ‘+’ will be settled by talk of what the speaker would do if his brain were capable of computing such large numbers (Kusch, 2006, p. 136). If such a characterisation is correct, Kusch is right to conclude that this leads back to the problems of _ceteris paribus_ idealisations, as discussed in Section 4.3. This general criticism seems to be reasonable in that a focus on the brain-state of an individual can potentially lead to questions regarding idealisation. This is not to necessarily endorse Kusch’s criticism, but to acknowledge that
more work, possibly including an alternative characterisation, is needed before Maddy’s argument can be considered a solution to the \textit{qua}-problem.

However, there is another answer to the \textit{qua}-problem. According to the sceptical solution, the reason why there is little or no doubt in the minds of speakers regarding how these words are to be used or what they refer to is simply because of their assertability conditions. The solution to the \textit{qua}-problem that is relevant to my argument lies in the fact that all of the words that a baptiser might think are constrained by their causal history, and the resulting conditions under which certain meanings of them can be asserted. For example, the assertability conditions for tokens that act as proper names do not allow for the Kripke-to-Putnam transfer described by Kusch (2006). Likewise, the word ‘individual’ can be used in certain ways under the assertability conditions; the assertion that we mean ‘\textit{quindividua}l’ and its peculiar spread over the time-slices of two people will not be accepted, and it will turn out that the causal account plays a role in why this is the case. This is not to say that the assertability conditions entail that ‘individual’ means a certain thing. The conditions under which a word can be used a certain way are a result of the causal history of that word. What is important is that these assertability conditions constrain and guide the behaviour of speakers, including any words used in the act of baptising an individual. Thus, the Sceptic’s challenges over what we might mean are to no avail. Even if forced to accept that there is no such thing as meaning anything by ‘individual’, we can still point to clear conditions regarding how the word can be acceptably used. These conditions will rule out the bizarre uses that the Sceptic puts forward. If the sceptical solution is accepted and assertability conditions are seen as resulting from determinate causal relations, the \textit{qua}-problem largely evaporates.

\textbf{7.1.4 Twin Earth and Other Complications}

The Twin Earth question is also relevant here, not because the Sceptic might ask about it (although there is no reason why they should not), but because it is important that the solution to that problem is compatible with the account I am putting forward. If it were
the case that the Twin Earth thought experiment had implications for a causal theory of
reference that were incompatible with the sceptical solution, this would be a major setback
for my argument that they are in fact compatible. Putnam (1975) presents the Twin Earth
thought experiment as a vehicle to discuss reference. In this example, Putnam specifies that
‘Twin Earth’ is a planet that is very similar to Earth. People there speak the same languages,
and there may even be doppelgängers of individuals who exist on Earth (Putnam, 1975, p.
223). The key difference between Earth and Twin Earth, for the purpose of this discussion at
least, is regarding water. On Twin Earth, the liquid called ‘water’ is not H$_2$O, but a different
liquid whose chemical formula can be abbreviated to XYZ (Putnam, 1975). This chemical
behaves identically to water on Earth—making up oceans and so on. If a spaceship from
Earth visited Twin Earth, its crew might suppose at first that ‘water’ has the same meaning
as on Earth. But the differing chemistry will be discovered, causing the crew to report that
‘On Twin Earth the word “water” means XYZ’ (Putnam, 1975, p. 223). Similarly, if a
spaceship were to travel from Twin Earth to Earth, the supposition would be that ‘water’ has
the same meaning on Twin Earth as Earth. Once this assumption is investigated and
corrected, the Twin Earthian spaceship would report that ‘On Earth the word “water” means
H$_2$O’ (Putnam, 1975, p. 224). While the space travellers can ascertain the difference between
H$_2$O and XYZ, on both planets in 1750, chemistry was not sufficiently developed to make
this distinction. An individual named Oscar, living on Earth in 1750, will have the same
psychological state as his Twin Earth counterpart, Twin Oscar, with regard to what they both
respectively term ‘water’. This is despite the fact that for the two of them, ‘water’ refers to
different substances. Putnam takes this as evidence that the extension of a term, and its
meaning, are not a function of the psychological state of the speaker by itself (1975, p. 224).
Independent of the use Putnam (1975) makes of this argument, it seems important that a
causal theory of reference operating under a requirement of accepting the sceptical solution
should be able to cope with the implications of Putnam’s work.

If we assume that both a causal theory of reference and the sceptical solution are
ture, it will be the case that Oscar in 1750 refers to H$_2$O when he says ‘water’, and Twin
Oscar refers to XYZ when he says the same. This is because the causal chains for each speaker go back to different substances, despite the fact that their psychological states are identical. Likewise, it is assertable for Oscar and Twin Oscar to use the word ‘water’ in their respective ways. When speakers on Earth use the word ‘water’, in 1750 or at any other time, there is no danger that they might be referring to XYZ. The same principle also applies for speakers on Twin Earth; there is no chance that speakers there are referring to H$_2$O. All that has happened is that in one linguistic community, ‘water’ has been attached to H$_2$O, and in another, it has been attached to XYZ. There is no contradiction in this, as assertability conditions are, by their nature, embedded in their particular linguistic communities and their causal relations. Only if the two communities come into contact, or when the Twin Earthlings discover that XYZ is not the same as H$_2$O, would a confrontation occur concerning how the word refers (and how speakers should use it).

One further possible objection to the idea that a causal theory of reference is compatible with the sceptical solution is the case in which the assertability conditions governing how a word is used, and its causally determined relation of reference, do not match. Could it be that the acceptable applications for the word ‘tree’ were somehow out of line with the class of objects that it refers to? The short answer is that, under this account, it would not happen, as the conditions under which the use of the word is acceptable supervene upon the causal history of the use of that word. This causal history of how a word has been used is necessarily the same as the causal chain, including the perceptual confrontations and semantic groundings that lead back to the initial dubbing or baptism. Reference change and ‘acceptable use’ change are caused by the same physical events ‘out in the world’, as it were.

Thus, a causal theory of reference, such as that defended by Devitt (1997) and Putnam (1975), which covers how proper names, class names (e.g., natural kinds) and arguably even artefacts refer, is compatible with meaning scepticism to the extent that the Sceptic has no real ability to object to any part of it. Likewise, this theory of reference is compatible with the sceptical solution. Clearly, if this is the case, the implications are worth
discussing. But before that can happen, there are a number of further difficulties to overcome.

### 7.1.5 Non-Referring Terms

The cases of reference considered so far have been those that are (arguably) relatively unproblematic. The limits of reference will reflect the limits of Correspondence Truth (x) and hence the limits of semantic realism, as Devitt (1997) would phrase it, which can be justified. In some cases, the limits of the causal theory of reference are the same, regardless of whether it is employed in the context of the sceptical solution, which is made clear when examining Kripke’s (1982) original arithmetical problem. However, once the focus moves way from objects in the world, the assertion that a causal theory applies becomes less clear. This brief discussion of non-referring terms is a slight digression from the consideration of reference *per se*, but it is worth including at this stage if only to show that the limits of a causal theory of reference do not undermine the overall project.

In cases where it is not clear that a word refers in a causal sense (or in fact does not refer to a physical object at all), it is still the case that the conditions of assertability constrain its use. In the example, ‘Cats are mammals’, the *copula* ‘are’ does not necessarily refer to anything in the world as such, and if it did, it would clearly not be in the same way as for proper names or names of kinds. The use that speakers make of this word is resistant to the Sceptic because of the role these conditions play in their lives. For an operator such as this, is it enough that speakers agree to use it in one way and not another to reach the overall goal of allowing at least some sentences to have correspondence truth conditions? Assuming that, in the context of this example, the legitimate use of ‘are’ is generally limited to expressing membership of a class or subset, the sentence is still presumably expressing some proposition. Clearly, not all expressions that have assertability conditions—that play a role in the lives of speakers—actually refer. This is consistent with other accounts of language. The task will be to show that, in a sentence, the non-referring terms function in such a way within a sentence that a correspondence theory of truth (or something like it) can still obtain.
There are many words that speakers would say are meaningful that do not seem to refer in any manner—causal or otherwise. It is interesting that the use of non-referring terms (or terms that do not refer causally at least) still happens in a similar way. There may not be a real physical object back at the start of a causal-historical chain, but there will still be a causal chain that tracks the circumstances under which a word has been used, and those uses accepted, or not accepted in the case of unsuccessful sematic challenge. Presumably, this chain would stretch back to when a word was first used, and in some cases back to the earliest beginnings of language itself. If such a chain of events were determinate in nature, this would suggest a different interpretation of Kripke’s (1982) solution, which will be expanded upon later in this chapter. For current purposes, the following points are central to the idea that reference can coexist with meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution. Under a causal theory of reference, certain words refer to certain objects in a determinate manner. Given the suggestion that the assertability conditions of a referring term supervene upon the same events, it would be the case that these assertability conditions are also determinate in nature. If there is nothing special about the causal chain of use of a referring term as opposed to a non-referring term, other than the beginning of that chain (obviously), this would suggest that the acceptable use of non-referring terms is (at least somewhat) determinate in nature as well.

Imagine again that the Sceptic challenges a speaker (sadly, not for the last time) by suggesting that ‘Cats are mammals’ is false, not because we are wrong about the nature of those classes or how ‘cat’ or ‘mammal’ refer and so on, but on the grounds that we were mistaken about what ‘are’ means—that a quas-like equivalent obtains. The Sceptic would suggest that there is no such fact that we meant ‘are’ and not ‘quare’. And still assuming that Kripke (1982) is right in his initial sceptical conclusion, they would be correct. In response, the sceptical solution ostensibly allows speakers to say that they mean ‘are’, and not something else, because of the assertability conditions for that word. But the relationship goes much deeper; it is much more significant than that seemingly glib response suggests. That speakers use the word ‘are’ in a certain way is complex in nature, but both potentially
specifiable and determinate. The assertability conditions of that word in the present day are the culmination of a long chain of use in the linguistic community that is causal in nature. It seems to complicate matters that a speaker could have used that word in a way that was not in line with the assertability conditions of that word, either deliberately or by being mistaken. It is a more difficult task to show that the actual use of a word is determinate for reasons that proponents of dispositional-type straight answers should be familiar with. However, the conditions under which the use of a word will be accepted in a given linguistic context should be specifiable, and therefore determinate, at least in theory. If, in addition to this, the relevant psychological theories were up to the task of determining when individual speakers were mistaken or deliberately misusing a word, perhaps the overall task of showing that the use of a word was determinate could be achieved.

We may not be able to say that ‘are’ means such and such—at least not at this point in the discussion—but speakers have very good reasons for using it the way they do, and for having confidence in that use. Admittedly, since ‘are’ is not a referring term, such facts are not about reference as such. However, it foreshadows the final approach to the overall problem of meaning scepticism that will be considered in Section 7.2.

The other kind of non-referring term that is worth mentioning is, of course, the kind that Kripke (1982, pp. 7–55) uses in his initial argument—the ‘+’ sign and the numbers themselves. It is safe to suggest that such an expression may not have a relationship of reference, and if it does, it is not to a physical object. It is also apparent that such a relation may not be causal in nature. Even if a version of platonism—perhaps even a ‘robust’ one such as that suggested by Feldman (1986)—were allowed, it is not clear whether we can say that ‘+’ refers to a certain platonic entity. Moreover, even if platonic entities existed, it would not necessarily be the case that any relation of reference would follow the causal pattern described above for proper names and kinds.

The full implications of this limitation will be discussed later, but it must be acknowledged that they will affect what sentences can be correspondence-true.
7.1.6 Other Accounts of Reference

What of other forms of reference? If a causal theory is compatible with meaning scepticism, maybe other theories of reference are as well. This discussion is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is a brief sketch of the problems that may occur for other models of reference.

As proposed by Marcus (1961) and Kripke (1980), direct reference is, roughly, the theory that some words, such as proper names, refer directly to their referent. The problem when confronting the Sceptic is to show that a speaker is not mistaken with regard to what a word is referring directly to. This is similar to the problem for Feldman’s (1986) robust platonism, where a speaker grasps a concept directly because of an unmediated relation with, for example, sepia. Similar or not, the problem remains that it seems to be difficult for the defender of this theory to show that their words are referring directly to certain things and not to the quus-like alternatives. Admittedly, Kripke’s (1982) solution would show why speakers have confidence in how they are using these words, but problems remain. If the acceptable use of a word has conditions of assertability, does direct reference come before or after this, or is there no connection? If the assertability conditions of a word were to change, the reference would have to change as well to maintain the compatibility between the sceptical solution and this account of reference. It seems unlikely that the relationship would be such that a change in reference causes a change in assertability conditions. If the change in assertability conditions causes the change in direct reference, compatibility is maintained. But this is starting to sound less like direct reference. A resolution of the issues between the sceptical solution and direct reference may be possible, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Theories of reference—where reference goes to a description—are also problematic. This is because any description will contain words that the Sceptic will question the meaning of, thus invoking the ‘rule for interpreting a rule’ difficulty. The sceptical solution allows that the initial word and the words in the description it is referring to should be used without worry of quus-like permutations. But the chain of explanation never goes beyond what is
assertable. Working under this theory, a word might refer to a description, but unless what is assertable is grounded in something other than other assertable terms, this theory of reference will not be a defence against global anti-realism. This difficulty with descriptive theories of reference leads me to be cautious about introducing too much of a descriptive element into a causal theory.

7.1.7 How Assertability Conditions Relate to Causal Reference

It has been argued that the causal theory of reference is compatible with the sceptical conclusion and sceptical solution to the point where definite similarities are apparent. An important question is how to characterise the relationship between what is described by the causal theory of reference and the sceptical solution.

The causal chain in virtue of which a word refers to a particular thing or class of things, and the conditions under which that same word can be acceptably used, seem to supervene upon the same events, although the relationship is undoubtedly a complex and dynamic one. A clue is to examine the process of reference change within the causal theory. If the conditions change under which a word can be legitimately used, the reference of that word will also change. Ultimately, it seems that initial reference fixing happens first. Consider the case of a proper name.

Suppose that an individual was initially baptised ‘N’, which fixed the reference, and from there the reference was passed on from one speaker to the next. After the initial naming, that word had conditions under which it could be legitimately used. These conditions might change, and similarly, the semantic grounding of ‘N’ might be challenged. But the initial baptism had to occur first.

For classes of things, the story is slightly more complex, but largely similar. A class is named based on the perception of a sample of its members. It seems fair to say that the challenges to the semantic grounding of this reference could begin very quickly—particularly in a scientific context. Again though, the reference is passed on to others. The conditions of acceptable use may change over time, although as Pagel, Atkinson, Calude and
Meade (2013) have suggested for certain words, this may be a very long time. And these changes would indicate that enough challenges and semantically grounding events had occurred for the reference to have changed. But an initial reference fixing has to occur first, even if that initial reference turns out to only be provisional in nature.

This order of occurrences is compatible with the sceptical solution. Whatever else it might say about the mechanics of how words are used, it has little to say about how those words first come to be used by speakers about particular things. This should not be surprising; it is hardly a radical concept that, when confronted by a new object or individual or a new class of objects, speakers will give them a name.

Devitt (1997) and others suggest that the relationship of reference between a word and the world is the causal chain that stretches from a speaker in the present day back to the initial baptism of an individual thing or class of things. The assertability conditions of that word are the outcome or effect of that causal chain\(^{14}\) on a speaker in the present day. If this is the case, even assuming meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution, some words refer to the world in a determinate manner.

### 7.1.8 The Sceptical Solution and Correspondence Truth

Now that it has been established that a relation of reference between at least some words and objects can still exist, even assuming meaning scepticism, the next task is to assess whether correspondence truth is possible under these same circumstances.

In the most basic sense, a correspondence theory of truth is the idea that a sentence is true only if (and only if) it corresponds to some fact (or, depending on the formulation, to some state of affairs that obtains). A more contemporary (and arguably defendable) version of this idea can be taken from Devitt (1997). Sentences of type \(x\) are true or false in virtue of their structure; the referential relations between their parts and reality, and the objective and mind-independent nature of that reality (Devitt, 1997, p. 29).

\[^{14}\] I say ‘causal’ and not ‘causal-historical’ because what is a historical chain if not causal?
Taking Devitt’s (1997) definition, it seems that at least some sentences can be correspondence-true. As previously stated, this discussion operates under the assumption that purely metaphysical—that is, non-semantic—questions are more or less settled. This is not to defend the idea that reality is necessarily objective and mind-independent; rather, it is to confine the discussion to semantic matters. It seems reasonable to include, as Devitt (1991, p. 47) does, the requirement of the objective independent existence of reality as being essential to correspondence truth, although again, this is only because such matters have little to do with Kripke’s (1982) arguments. There is certainly nothing in meaning scepticism or the sceptical solution that would rule this out, as Kripke has little to say about metaphysics. Nor is it obvious that the sceptical solution has anything important to say about the syntactical structure of sentences that would cause difficulty in this endeavour.

If the argument for the compatibility of the sceptical position and the causal theory of reference is successful, referential relations between individual terms and reality obtain. If this is the case, some sentences at least will be eligible to be correspondence-true. It is worth noting that another option that could open the way back to correspondence truth is provided by Young (1995). He argues that whole sentences can correspond (or not) to a state of affairs in a way that is not dependent upon reference between the individual parts (i.e., words) and objects (Young, 1995, p. 33).

The sentence, ‘Cats are mammals’, will either correspond to reality or it will not. It has been established that even Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic will have difficulty in refuting that ‘Cats’ and ‘Mammals’ refer in a causal, and therefore determinate, manner to classes of things. It has also been argued that the non-referring word ‘are’ has constraints on its use by speakers that may also be determinate in nature. Even if that last conclusion is not the case, the sceptical solution allows speakers to confidently use words in such a way that non-standard interpretations are ruled out. Meaning scepticism may conclude that none of the words in ‘Cats are Mammals’ actually ‘mean’ anything. But the referring terms are causally connected to reality, and the sceptical solution allows for little ambiguity over how the *copula* ‘are’ is being used. That relation of reference, and that Kripke’s account leaves...
neither speaker nor audience in much doubt over what is actually being expressed, leaves limited room for objection, at least from the Sceptic. On these grounds, I argue that ‘Cats are Mammals’ is the kind of sentence that will be correspondence-true or not.

Correspondence truth requires some sort of correlation between a sentence and reality, but it is difficult to see what kind of correlation is ruled out purely on the basis of meaning scepticism. If it is admitted that the sceptical solution allows for the expression of propositions, and that these propositions can correspond or not to facts or states of affairs that obtain, if there is a problem for correspondence truth, the sceptical solution is not the cause. Since the sceptical solution does not rule out the existence of facts, propositions or relations of correspondence between the two, the conclusion that it is hostile towards the correspondence theory of truth must be false.

If reference is taken as being established, whether the correspondence theory of truth stands or falls seems largely independent of any theory of meaning or any scepticism about meaning. There are limits of course. This is why the version of correspondence being defended is ‘Correspondence Truth x’ (Devitt, 1997). Not all sentences are apt to be correspondence-true, but this is not a major issue in and of itself. It seems allowable to be a moral anti-realist and at the same time a strong scientific realist, for example. There are undoubtedly many words that do not refer and, as such, the judging of sentences that contain them as being correspondence-true will be, to varying degrees, problematic. For a causal theory, proper names and natural kind terms seem to be on the safest ground, followed by artefact kind terms. Fictitious characters, moral terms and other abstract terms will be more difficult in terms of reference, which seems to be well accepted. Without going into the exhaustive (and impossible) task of specifying everything that does not refer under a causal theory, the most relevant example to examine to illustrate the limits is Kripke’s (1982) ‘$68 + 57 = 125$’. It will be difficult for the numerals and arithmetic operators to refer—at best, it seems safe to say that they are not going to refer in a causal manner. Leaving aside the possibility of another relation of reference for the moment, it seems that the causal theory, no matter how strong it may be, will struggle to make that mathematical expression
correspondence-true. But for the other examples that Kripke uses, albeit briefly, such as tabair v. table (1982, p. 19), if the word ‘table’ refers in a specific and causal way, the sentence ‘There is a table under the Eiffel Tower’ will be the kind that can potentially be correspondence-true. If this is correct, the beginning of a picture emerges not unlike that sketched briefly by McGinn (1984). This is where the primary issue raised by Kripke is plausibly restricted to mathematics (McGinn, 1984, p. 166). The full implications of McGinn’s thoughts on how the causal theory of reference can form a response to the Sceptic will be discussed later in this chapter. For the moment, it is enough to acknowledge that there are undoubtedly some sentences that are never going to be candidates for being correspondence-true because of the problematic or non-existent relation of reference that their constituent words have with the world. However, there are sentences where reference is grounded in a relevant causal relation with reality and are therefore good candidates for being correspondence-true (as much as anything is).

The conclusion that at least some sentences can have truth conditions undermines the idea that meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution lead to global anti-realism. Specifically, it undermines Millikan’s (1990) view that Kripke’s (1982) argument necessarily attacks a realist notion of truth. Millikan argued that Kripke’s account must ‘assign assertability conditions to sentences, rather than “realist rules” that assign correspondence truth conditions’ (1990, p. 323). If determinate reference can exist and sentences can have relations of correspondence with reality, even in the context of meaning scepticism, Millikan must be somehow incorrect. The possibility that determinate reference and the sceptical solution can co-exist suggests that there are further implications worthy of investigation.

### 7.1.9 Whole-Sentence Meaning

Given what has been suggested—that some words can still refer and that some sentences can still have correspondence truth conditions—it is understandable that the next step will be to examine the meaning of whole sentences. If a sentence has conditions of truth,
to say that it has no meaning would seem odd. Before this is established, there are still some complications to sort out.

Boghossian (1989) argues in *The Rule-Following Considerations* that non-factualism about meaning implies non-factualism about all sentences, which is included as part of the discussion of global anti-realism in Chapter 3. If the move is not allowable, the truth conditions of at least some sentences will be intact, consistent with prior arguments. The discussion also raises important issues with regard to the meaning of sentences. Boghossian’s argument is as follows.

A meaning-declarative sentence has no truth conditions—that is, it is not truth-conditional (Boghossian, 1989, p. 524)—which is consistent with Kripke’s (1982) formulation of the problem and solution. Since the truth condition of a sentence is at least part of a function of its meaning, it follows that non-factualism about meaning will entail non-factualism about truth conditions (Boghossian, 1989, p. 524). If there are no such things as truth conditions, it follows that no sentence could have them. It is on this basis that Boghossian founds his claim that if there is no such thing as meaning, no sentence has truth conditions.

The key here seems to be the premise that the truth conditions of a sentence must somehow depend on the sentence’s meaning, as opposed to anything else. As with Millikan’s (1990) construal of the implications of the sceptical solution, this is based on the assumption that if words have no meaning, at least one of the following must be the case: that there is also no reference between words and objects, that syntactical structure does not obtain, or that there is no correspondence between whole sentences and states of affairs that obtain. If, as previously argued, the sceptical solution allows for talk of truth conditions for at least some sentences to remain, Boghossian’s conclusion ‘For any S: (S) is not truth-conditional’ (1989, p. 524) cannot follow.

This suggests that Boghossian’s (1989) argument regarding the treatment of meaning scepticism using error theory may also need to be revisited. His initial premise, ‘that for any sentence S: (S means p) is false’, may not be correct, or the weight it carries
may be overstated. The problem here is that the meaning of a word and the meaning of a whole sentence are not the same thing. The meaning of a sentence seems to be something different. What constitutes a *sentence* meaning something? Take, for example, ‘The cat is on the windowsill’. Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic might challenge us to justify that by ‘cat’ we actually mean cat, and not some quus-like example. If we accept Kripke’s arguments, we would answer that there is no such fact, but we would not worry because we are using ‘cat’ in a manner that is compatible with its assertability conditions, including the rules in the language game that constitute syntax. But what of the whole sentence? That the Sceptic has questioned the meaning of individual parts of the sentence is of no consequence, as we have already admitted defeat in this regard. If the ‘meaning’ (for want of a better word) of a sentence is constituted by its internal structure (syntax) and the relations of reference that apply to its constituent parts, as long as the sceptical solution allows for structure and reference, a whole sentence would have meaning. As a case for the compatibility of a causal theory of reference and the sceptical solution has been established, this would allow for some sentences to be meaningful. However, that the meaning of a sentence would be tied to the referential relations of its parts would be severely limiting. Many words that do not refer are meaningful and play a role in language, so such an explanation will not be entirely adequate.

If it is the case that saying sentences of the form ‘Word x means y’ are false does not entail that no sentence can have a meaning, the incoherence that Boghossian (1989, p. 523) indicates does not apply. It may be the case that there are good reasons for not considering an Error Conception/Theory response to the position that there is no such thing as meaning (e.g., not helpful, no explanatory power), but Boghossian’s argument as put forward in *The Rule-Following Considerations* is not one of them.

Alternatively, if it is not accepted that such definitions of ‘sentence meaning’ are adequate, it still stands that, as previously argued, a sentence can be truth-conditional. This could lead the discussion around in a somewhat circular fashion. If a whole sentence has truth conditions, for researchers such as Millikan (1990), this would suggest that such a sentence has meaning. However, under a causal theory of reference, this would entail that
only sentences that are apt for being correspondence-true could have meaning, which is unsatisfactory. This is relevant for Millikan’s position. Even under a ‘straight’ solution, not all sentences would have correspondence conditions or be governed by ‘realist rules’ (Millikan, 1990). A more charitable interpretation of her statement would be that she was more concerned with sentences that were apt to be correspondence-true. However, this is beside the point. At this stage, most of the issue of whole sentences having meaning will have to be left to one side. It is enough to show that at least some sentences can be correspondence-true, and to suggest that the meanings of whole sentences do not supervene upon the meanings of their constitutive words in a simplistic manner.

7.1.10 Sceptic-Proof Reference

As I argued in Section 3.2, the concerns regarding realism that are entailed by meaning scepticism involve the relationship between language and the world rather than the questions of what exists in the world itself. The main concern was that all there was to language was that words have conditions of assertability. That is, there are conditions under which certain uses of words will be accepted by the linguistic community, whereas other uses of words will not be accepted, and that there is nothing more to be said on the whole matter. If this were the case, the sentences consisting of these words have only conditions of assertability and not conditions of truth. Specifically, meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution were thought by some, such as Millikan (1990), Boghossian (1989) and Kripke (1982), to be distinctly hostile to correspondence truth. If there was no robust way a sentence could be said to be true or not, even when it involved common everyday objects, the concern was that the solution entailed a kind of global anti-realism.

In response to these concerns, I have argued that a causal theory of reference that is similar to that proposed by Devitt (1997) is compatible with the sceptical solution. Not only are these accounts compatible, but it seems plausible to suggest that reference and assertability conditions are intimately connected via the same events. If determinate reference between at least some words and the world is possible, and assuming that there is
an independent world ‘out there’ to refer to, at least some sentences will be eligible to be correspondence-true. Sentences where the subjects refer causally to reality fall under this category. Proper names and ‘natural kind’ terms are the least controversial examples of this, though if a causal theory of reference can be extended to artefacts as per Putnam (1975), they can be included as well. Thus, when I say ‘Ash is a cat’, ‘Ash’ refers causally to a particular individual and ‘cat’ refers to a particular class in much the same way. That statement will be true or not, dependent on what these words refer to. If this is the case, any anti-realism entailed by the sceptical solution cannot be global in nature.

Words that do not refer, or appear to not refer to reality are more problematic. Under this model, only sentences about parts of reality that words can causally refer to are apt to be correspondence-true. Other kinds of sentences, such as Kripke’s (1982) example of arithmetic cannot be judged in this way. Thus, for the moment, this is the limit of semantic realism that can be plausibly justified.

In reaching this conclusion, the sceptical solution appears largely unchanged. It still holds that words have conditions under which they can be asserted to mean a certain thing and be accepted by the linguistic community. While the solution only needs these conditions to be roughly specifiable to function, it does not follow that they are necessarily unspecifiable. What is new to this account is that the mechanics of assertability and of causal reference appear to be intimately intertwined. The point is that even if meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution are largely accepted, so long as the causal theory of reference is compatible with this, at least some types of sentences are still potentially correspondence-true.

If a correspondence theory of truth is compatible with the sceptical conclusion and sceptical solution, many worries, such as those expressed by Millikan (1990), Boghossian (1989) and Kripke (1982), are largely dealt with. I would argue that at least one of the routes from the sceptical solution to global anti-realism, as detailed in Chapter 3, would be closed. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, if determinate reference can withstand Kripke’s
Sceptic, perhaps a similar account of meaning is possible. This is the possibility we now turn to.

7.2 MCGINN’S CAUSAL ACCOUNT AND THE ROAD BACK TO MEANING

The discussion of the causal theory of reference produced questions that are worth examining in more detail. The most relevant of these is whether a causal account could fully repudiate Kripke’s (1982) Sceptic. Can there be a satisfactory causal theory of meaning? This is not the first time such a solution has been suggested. McGinn briefly discusses the possibility of using a causal theory of reference as a ‘straight’ solution to the problem of meaning scepticism (1984, p. 164). It should be noted that he does so from the position of treating ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’ as interchangeable (McGinn, 1984, p. 143).

It has been the case that the discussion has so far, to some extent, held reference and meaning apart. And there are continuing good reasons for doing so in many circumstances—the most obvious being that not all words, terms, symbols and so on refer to objects or classes of objects out in the world. But the time might finally have come to attempt (however awkwardly) to get the rug that Kripke (1982) took from us back under our feet.

The discussion of the causal theory of reference in the prior section was concerned with the relation between certain words and certain parts of the world. Causal reference is thought by those who defend it, such as Devitt (1997), to be determinate. Now, if it is the case that a word could not refer to anything else and that the speaker using it intended to refer to the thing (or class of things) that is at the beginning of that causal chain, in what sense of the word ‘meaning’ can it be in doubt that the speaker ‘means’ anything else? For a referring term at least, the situation is as McGinn points out, nothing important would be lost if ‘referring’ were substituted for ‘meaning’ (McGinn, 1984, p. 143) and that normativity is implicit.

On this proviso it is relatively straightforward to apply McGinn’s (1984, p. 166) argument, that the causal chain is exactly the kind of fact that will answer the constitutive scepticism of Kripke’s (1982) interlocutor. Whether it carries the weight of normativity as,
McGinn implies (1984, p. 166), remains to be seen. His argument seems to take it as given that if there is a measure of correctness, normativity will follow. While this may not seem a satisfactory way to deal with the normative aspect of meaning, there are two solutions. One is to accept Hattiangadi’s (2006) argument that meaning is simply not normative—that describing the use of a word as correct (or not) is a descriptive act. The other is to look at how the sceptical solution provides normativity via feedback from the linguistic community and the role that this plays in our lives, which is to say, it is the potential for correction by the linguistic community that drives the normative aspect of this solution. The nature of these corrections is dependent on the assertability conditions in place at a given time, which themselves supervene upon the same causal chain of events as reference. Thus, by this model, our feeling that we have an obligation to go on a certain way depend (indirectly, at least) on the causal relations that sit at the core of the causal theory of reference.

Somewhat ironically, getting to a ‘straight’ solution involves taking on certain parts of Kripke’s (1982) sceptical solution. All other things considered equal, assume that it is true that there are conditions under which certain words can be used in certain ways and be accepted by the linguistic community. Note that this would be true regardless of what kind of solution was proposed either by the Sceptic or indeed any proponent of a straight solution. Let us also assume that the causal chain of reference and meaning (for referring terms) is determinate in nature. Given that the conditions of acceptable use for referring terms are going to supervene upon same events as reference, it follows that these conditions are also determinate in nature. If an individual speaker’s behaviour within the context of these conditions could be determinate, to the extent that uses of a particular word outside of what is acceptable (either due to a mistake or deliberate misapplication) are accounted for, the use of that word by that individual is itself determinate. For referring terms, it seems that the causal chain leading from the word back to the world is the kind of fact that should satisfy the Sceptic. As McGinn (1984, p. 165) points out, there are no aardvarks in the causal chain that leads to his present use of the word ‘tigers’. Likewise, when Devitt (1997) discusses the justification of ‘cat’ referring to a certain kind of mammal and ‘Nana’ referring to his late
cat, there are no dogs in the relevant causal chain and this would be as true of meaning as it is of reference. Further, the relevant relationship is causal and not causal* because only the causal relation plays a role in explaining and shaping our behaviour.

Any potential objections from the Sceptic are likely to be the same ones that were already considered with regard to reference but are worth examining nonetheless. Assume, for referring terms at least, it is the case that meaning is conferred at an initial dubbing and then carried forward from one speaker to the next. Speakers need only be part of that causal chain, and to intend to use the word in the same way as the ‘meaning lenders’, to be said to mean a certain thing by a certain word. When a speaker uses ‘tiger’ they mean particular felines (with the same internal structure) because the relevant causal relation goes back to those particular things and not some quus-like variant and because they intended to use the word in the same way as the person who lent them the meaning. Should the Sceptic run the line that ‘tiger’ means something else, a ready response is at hand. The lessons of the sceptical solution are of great use at this stage. For the conditions under which speakers can legitimately use the word ‘tiger’, supervene upon the same events that form the causal chain in virtue of which it both refers to and means those particular animals.

The reference of a term supervenes upon the causal chain of events that connects our use of that term with its referent (this is the whole point of a causal theory of reference). At any given time, assertability conditions supervene upon that very same causal chain of events. Consider the hypothetical situation where a different type of animal was baptised ‘tiger’ back at the start of the chain. If this were the case, the assertability conditions would necessarily be different to those we experience now. What is also true is that the assertability conditions in the immediate past determine the use of a word in the present in the sense that if the assertability conditions were different, the way the word was used by speakers would be different. This means that the causal chain of events is, at any one time, determined by the assertability conditions at that time. Thus, at T₁, reference and assertability conditions both supervene upon the causal chain of events. At T₂, the next event in the chain supervenes on the assertability conditions at T₁. Thus, we know that ‘tiger’ neither refers to nor means some
bizarre variant. We know this because if it did mean something different, the causal chain would have to be different. And if that was different, the assertability conditions would, necessarily, be different.

In the same way that the causal theory of reference does not incur the ‘rule for following a rule’ difficulty, so it will be with this account. This is because the causal model does not involve speakers giving themselves or each other explicit instructions regarding the causal nature of meaning.

An objection might be that the causal chain is only finite and that any one speaker’s understanding of it is even more limited. How then could it justify an infinitely ongoing extension of the meaning of a word under an infinite number of variations (next week, in a millennia, under the Eiffel Tower etc.)? Still, with regard to referring terms, it seems this need not be a problem. The causal chain does not have to justify an infinite extension of the meaning of a word, because by this argument, that is simply not how meaning works. The causal chain grounds what words mean in the present, but does not tell us that ‘tiger’ will still mean the same kind of thing in the distant future. Or if it does, it will only be to the extent that the conditions of acceptable use in the present predict acceptable use in that same distant time. In the same way that a reference can change, so can meaning. What can be said is that our knowledge of perceptual confrontations, semantic grounding and changes in assertability conditions would provide knowledge of the circumstances under which this change in meaning (and reference) is more likely to occur. Thus, it can be asserted with some level of certainty that ‘tiger’ will almost certainly mean the same thing in a week’s time or under the Eiffel Tower, but quite possibly not in one thousand years’ time.

The associated question—of how to specify if a speaker is mistaken—is relatively easily dealt with as well. The conditions under which ‘tiger’ can be acceptably used within a linguistic community are specifiable, although in reality such knowledge would not be exhaustive or perfect. Thus, even under the constraints of practicality, we can at least roughly say when a speaker is using a referring term incorrectly. With sufficient knowledge of relevant facts about the speaker, for example, their perceptual limitations, cognitive
abilities and sense of humour, we could even make informed judgements about why such a misuse occurred. From the more theoretical viewpoint of full epistemic disclosure that Kripke (1982) makes use of, a much more specific position can be taken. That the causal chain runs from the word ‘tiger’ to tigers and that, as McGinn (1984) might say, aardvarks are causally isolated, are objective facts that are ascertainable by God, if no-one else. Similarly, the connection between the ‘tiger’ causal chain and the conditions under which the linguistic community will accept the use of ‘tiger’ would be apparent under conditions of full epistemic disclosure.

Dealing with non-referring terms is not so simple. So far, we cannot appeal to anything at the causal origin of these words in quite the same way as McGinn (1984) has. This suggests that a different way of proceeding is required. One might be able to argue that there are different types of linguistic meaning, and that not all kinds of words will mean certain things in virtue of the same kinds of facts. Much of the discussion of the problem of meaning scepticism assumes that there is one answer—that is, there is one kind of fact in virtue of which a word means a certain thing. But there seems little reason to assume that it is the case. Thus, it may be that while there are some facts we know, others may elude us. If the previous discussion of referring terms is acceptable, but the proceeding discussion of non-referring terms is not, the causal account may not cover all uses of language. However, the goal is to aim for something more complete, and the arguments foreshadowed in the discussion in Section 7.1.5 suggest a possible way forward.

As discussed previously, a non-referring word will still have assertability conditions. Similarly, it will have a causal chain of use that the current assertability conditions supervene upon. Consider (again) the copula ‘are’ as in ‘Cats are mammals’. It does not refer to any physical object or class. It is arguable whether it refers to anything. However, it has conditions of acceptable use within a linguistic community, and it has a chain of use that is causal (but not causal*) in nature. In the same way that the meanings of referring terms are passed from one person to the next, so the meanings of non-referring terms such as ‘are’ are passed. If, as previously discussed, causal chains of reference are thought to be determinate
in nature and it is the same chain that produces assertability conditions and meaning, assertability conditions and meaning would be determinate also. Now, there is no reason to think that there is anything special that differentiates the nature of a causal chain of a referring term from a non-referring one other than how these chains originated. It is certainly apparent that the beginning of the chain for a referring term is much less complicated—someone discovers a thing, names it and then the name is passed on, although perceptual confrontation can alter the semantic grounding enough for reference to change. The causal chain of a non-referring term will go back to the very first uses of that word, and to say any more would be to indulge in unfounded speculation or at least to stray beyond the scope of this project. What is important is that this chain of events that produces current use and is produced into the future by current use is also determinate in nature. This is essentially the point made by Lycan (2006). He argues that even though the first ‘link’ in the causal chain that refers to a fictional character is the naming of the character, rather than the properties of the bearer of that name, it then spreads into the future as if it had been bestowed on a real individual (Lycan, 2006, p. 261). Further, he notes that this could be applied to other similar situations, including abstract objects such as numbers. When a speaker uses ‘are’ they mean are and not quare because the relevant causal relation does not include the bizarre variant and because they intended to use the word in the same way as the person who ‘lent’ them the meaning. Speakers would know if the causal chain included the bent variant as it would be necessarily reflected in the assertability conditions. It might even be allowable to say that the bizarre variation was causally isolated from speakers.

With regard to the normative requirement, it could be avoided by viewing meaning as descriptive only. But this seems incorrect, or at best incomplete. The following is my suggestion of what may be going on. The linguistic community provides feedback on the use of words but not only in a descriptive sense. It would seem plausible to suggest that the linguistic community will try to maintain consistent uses of words. A value is placed on consistency because if it were not, speakers might not try to maintain consistent use. Speakers of a language have to do this otherwise communication would very quickly break
down. Put that way, it would seem unlikely that a language could exist without this aspect being involved in some form. It might be that there are pragmatic reasons for maintaining a certain level of consistency in word use. To that extent any normative aspect of meaning might simply be characterised as speakers wanting to use words in ways that others will understand, consider as being correct, or that will otherwise help achieve their goals. But this does not seem to be the experience of what being a speaker is like. It is not the ‘occurrent’ thought process at least. Speakers just seem to have a feeling that words should be used in a certain way, and what is normativity if not a feeling that one ‘should’ act a certain way?

Explanations of how and why humans have this feeling are best left to experts. Evolutionary psychology could provide plausible theories in this regard. It could be innate, biological or it could be something we are taught to feel (or some of both). Without further evidence it is difficult to determine exactly what is occurring. The significance of this phenomenon should not be exaggerated though. While it is part of language use, feeling that one should use a word a certain way is not what determines the correctness or not of how that word is used. None of this is to say that speakers always act in accordance with this feeling or that there are no other relevant psychological factors. Clearly the desire to create new words or to create new uses for existing words, thus provoking potential change in meaning, reference or both, is occurring in speakers as well.

How then to deal with ‘+’? The same solution as described above can be applied to an arithmetic symbol easily enough. A speaker means plus and not *quus* by the ‘+’ symbol because the bent variation is not part of the causal chain of use whereas the conventional version is, and because they intended to use ‘+’ in the same way as they had been taught. The causal chains, and how they affect assertability conditions, are definitely facts about the world that differentiate one meaning from another. The question of normativity can be dealt with by either of the arguments mentioned above. And yet, this explanation may not satisfy the Skeptic because the extension of the plus function is infinite. Remember though, the question is not about making an arithmetic mistake, it is about making a metalinguistic one (Kripke, 1982, pp. 8,13). It is not about whether the addition function has infinite extension
and how we might rationally deal with it if it did, although this is worth discussing elsewhere; rather, it is about whether a speaker is justified in their use of a particular symbol, ‘+’, to denote that particular function and not any another. The extension of the addition function has nothing to do with it, although the construction of Kripke’s (1982) discussion might make it seem that way. The metalinguistic question is about justifying present use and to that extent the Sceptic has been answered. It might be the case that the meaning of the ‘+’ sign will change over time and to the extent that there is knowledge of the conditions under which semantic ‘shifts’ can occur this could be predicted. But presumably there would be another sign or symbol used to denote the addition function. The point is that asking ‘does the ‘+’ symbol mean plus when it is sitting between two arbitrarily large numbers that we have never added before?’ and ‘does the addition function have the attribute of consistent infinite extension?’ are two distinct and very different questions. The first question is metalinguistic and the latter is not. Kripke arguably conflates these two issues. For example, asking that a speaker be able to give a ‘determinate answer to an arbitrarily large addition problem’ (Kripke, 1982, p. 53) is not unambiguously about what that speaker meant by their use of ‘+’. That this speaker uses that particular sign to denote addition rather than quaddition is causally determinate (and answers the metalinguistic question). Whether they correctly computed the addition of the two numbers is a matter for mathematicians. Why they could or could not do so is a matter for cognitive scientists and psychologists.

7.2.1 Finitude of the Causal Chain

Given that the justification of how the ‘+’ sign is used is being based on the finite uses of the speaker in question and the past uses of speakers in the causal chain, the Sceptic may still ask how we know that they have not made a mistake, as the causal chain to date is as consistent with plus as it is with quus. This is potentially a serious problem (which is not raised by Kusch (2006) in his discussion of McGinn’s (1984) proposal) and requires a serious response.
The Sceptic would argue that the causal chain, prior to reaching the ‘$68 + 57$’ problem, is just as consistent with meaning plus as quus. Similarly, they could point out that ‘tiger’ could, as I write this in 2014, just as easily refer to tigers as *taardvarks*—tigers up to 1 January 2015, but both tigers and aardvarks thereafter. There are two related responses to this problem.

The first response is that because reference is causal-determinate, ‘tiger’, as used in the present, cannot refer to aardvarks in the future unless it has in some way been connected with aardvarks in the past. Thus, ‘tiger’ cannot refer to *taardvarks* in 2015. As reference is causal, events in the future cannot reach back in time and alter the way reference is now. We do not generally expect *any* events from the future to reach back in time and exert causal influence on the present, and there is no reason to think that reference or meaning are exempt from this expectation. If the meaning of ‘$+$’ is similarly causal, it would be the case that ‘$+$’ could not mean quus, even in the case of a sum that has never been computed before, because quus is not part of the causal chain in the same way that plus is. The point is that a meaning that the Sceptic claims we will ‘discover’ in the future, such as the fact that we always meant quus (but did not know it because we had never added 68 and 57), cannot have any influence over what we mean, or how we should use ‘$+$’.

The Sceptic could reply that ‘tiger’ has always referred to both tigers and aardvarks in the future because that is simply the nature of the category or kind that we are using. If the difference between, or existence of, categories of things that are tigers and things that are aardvarks were sufficiently undermined, the Sceptic may be able to put forward an argument that is difficult to answer. However, this does not seem to be the case. While it might be plausible to suggest that Kripke (1982) has a criticism of natural kinds or objective difference in mind, there is no explicit argument against their existence in the sceptical position that he advocates. As mentioned in the discussion of Lewis (1983) in Section 5.1, Maddy (1984) takes the position that the Sceptic cannot legitimately assume against a position of scientific realism about the existence of natural kinds. All that is required to neutralise the sort of objection that the Sceptic is making here is for there to be an objective
difference between aardvarks and tigers. The word ‘tiger’ can only be referring to tigers because they are what the causal contact has been with (and in virtue of which the semantic grounding occurs). The only way that aardvarks—either now or in the future—can be referred to by ‘tiger’ would be if we were wrong about there being an objective difference between the two classes of animals. The Sceptic simply does not have an argument that supports this claim.

The other possible way of dealing with this problem is to examine how the *qua*-problem was resolved in Section 7.1.3. Devitt and Sterelny (1987) note that the *qua*-problem can arise for natural kind terms in that a term is applied to a *qua* member of one particular natural kind. Since any sample of a natural kind is probably a member of multiple natural kinds, the question arises: In virtue of what is the grounding of that term in *qua* member of one natural kind and not another (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987, p. 73)? For a tiger, why is the relevant underlying nature responsible for the sample being a tiger the one relevant to reference rather than the underlying nature responsible for it being a mammal or animal?

Devitt and Sterelny hold that the grounder of a natural kind term associates, consciously or not with that term, some description that classifies the term as a natural kind term and some descriptions that determine which nature of the sample is relevant to the reference of the term (1987, p. 74).

As before, the Sceptic could attack any of the descriptive content that is central to how a kind is baptised in order to render the reference and meaning indeterminate. For example, if someone thinks ‘This is a sample of the class known as tiger’, the Sceptic could suggest that by ‘sample’ we mean *quample*, where the term applies to a kind spread over the time-slices of two species (i.e., the *taardvark*). The resolution to this is essentially the same as I proposed for proper names in Section 7.1.3. How words like ‘sample’ are used is constrained by the causal history of these words and the resulting conditions under which certain meanings of them can be asserted. The assertion that we mean *quample* when categorising tigers will not be accepted. Thus, the solution to the *qua*-problem applies in this type of case as well. The point is that the assertability conditions that constrain how we use...
words when participating in the grounding of natural kind terms also causes us to not accept that the same species relation holds between tigers and aardvark. This will be the case regardless of the finite nature of our causal contact with these animals.

My preference is to solve this particular problem using the first suggestion, which relies on objective difference, or at least the inability of the Sceptic to attack objective difference. This is informed, at least in part, by my lack of nominalist leanings, but mainly because the Sceptic lacks grounds to attack the notion of objective difference in a way that is independent from semantic considerations. Addressing the problem by examining how assertability conditions solve the qua-problem is offered here as an alternative that does not rely on objective difference in quite the same way.

Either way, it is not enough for the causal chain to be consistent with quus or taardvark; it has to either include them already, or a change needs to occur to include them. In the former case, speakers would know because the assertability conditions would reflect the inclusion of quus in the causal chain. In the latter case, speakers would also know because the meaning cannot change without changes in the causal chain and assertability conditions. The meaning of a word can change, but it cannot be accepted that such changes can occur out of nowhere. This illustrates a vitally important point. The quus-like variations that the Sceptic advances are not simply unlikely to occur; rather, they cannot occur because that is not how meaning works.

Of course, the Sceptic was not talking about meaning changing; rather, they had claimed that we were mistaken in our use of ‘+’ all along. But this does their cause no good. If it were the case that the entire community—both linguistic and mathematical—were simply wrong about the objective nature of adding arbitrarily large numbers, we would then have made an arithmetic mistake, and one that we could be made aware of by our own mathematicians in the future, or perhaps through contact with some hypothetical community of arithmetically gifted, big-brained aliens. That is the only possibility, because the metalinguistic error has already been addressed. Thus, unless our arithmetic understanding of the addition function is incorrect, we can feel confident that 68 + 57 is in fact 125.

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7.2.2 Private Language, Dispositions and Possible Complications

Any discussion of a solution to the puzzle of meaning scepticism would be incomplete without at least some discussion of private language. Kripke’s (1982) discussion of this theme had the aim, to some extent, of highlighting the social nature of language—that there cannot be a linguistic community of one. By his account, language is necessarily public, as it is only feedback, or potential feedback at least, from others that allows a speaker to be sure that they are using a word in an acceptable way. More specifically, it is that it is impossible for there to be a private rule follower (Kripke, 1982, p. 110), as only in the context of a community can rule-following be reasonably analysed. Much has been written about this, and the task here is not to unpack and assess these discussions. Rather, it is worth asking if a causal account of meaning allows for private language and private rule-following. The answer is that it will not, though it depends on how the individual is considered to be isolated. As with Kripke’s example, Robinson Crusoe might be physically isolated, but this does not matter as long as he is considered part of the wider linguistic community (Kripke, 1982, p. 110). An individual, considered in isolation, is a different matter. Consider an individual who is isolated from all linguistic communities. They must be considered in isolation because as soon as we interact with them, they are potentially brought into our wider linguistic community. Thus isolated, there is nothing to ground their use of particular words in particular ways, no one to provide perceptual confrontation or semantic challenge and no one to provide conditions of assertability. This applies even if this person was a member of a linguistic community—that is, they spoke the language. If they are considered in isolation in a way that includes being considered in isolation from the causal effects that come from the linguistic community, no sense can be made of any use of their language. Since, by this account, reference and meaning are causally linked to other speakers, considering an individual in isolation from these causal factors cannot produce any reasonable results. Meaning, like reference, is not all in one speaker’s head. Thus, this account does not radically alter Kripke’s conclusion regarding private language.
It is worth comparing this account to the popular dispositional answers that have been given to the Sceptic over the years. Clearly, this is not the same as the simple individualistic dispositional account previously discussed in Section 2.2.2. An individual speaker is disposed to use a certain word a certain way, but it is the causal chain that led to their having that disposition that is the fact in virtue of which they mean plus rather than quus and so on.

A better comparison is to a community-wide dispositional account. In that account the correct answer is that which most of the community are disposed to give when asked. Now it might be that, in the context of the causal theory of meaning, the majority of speakers are disposed to use the word ‘tiger’ to refer to tigers or mean tiger. But this is not the fact in virtue of which ‘tiger’ refers to tigers and not aardvarks (or taardvarks). The word refers to the particular class of objects because of the causal relation between the word and that class. That a majority of speakers are inclined to use a word in a certain way is a result of this, not a cause. Likewise, it is not widely agreed that ‘+’ means plus rather than quus that is the fact that differentiates one meaning from another. Rather, it is the fact that one meaning has a particular causal history that the other does not. That a majority of a community is disposed to use a word in a certain way is at best a possible indicator of the causal chains of meaning running from those speakers back to a common origin, and that the speakers have similar attitudes to the feeling that they should use words a certain way.

That a community or an individual has a disposition to act a certain way in response to certain stimuli is not a complete answer. The reasons for the community or individual having these dispositions are important and it is very easy to illustrate that this is the case. Imagine two dispositional accounts of meaning. For one account, an individual is disposed to use words in a certain way because of determinate causal factors. For the other, an individual is disposed to use words in a certain way because of this speaker’s immediate but somehow non-causal relationship with non-physical platonic entities. These are two very different accounts and any discussion of the fact that the individual has a disposition is much less interesting and important than why they have it. It is also important to note the possible
similarities with Searle’s (2002) first answer to the Sceptic. In this, he points to facts that the scope of the Sceptic’s question rules out—things such as the fact that he was taught to do addition and not quaddition (Searle, 2002, p. 254). While it is the case that the Searle does not extend the scope of this answer adequately and has faced some criticism from Kusch (2007) for lacking explanatory power, it points to possible criticisms of a causal-type solution to meaning scepticism.

The answer being given to the Sceptic is thus: A speaker means a particular thing by a particular word in virtue of the particular causal chain associated with that word, regardless of whether that chain leads back to an object in the world. Conditions of acceptable use— that is, assertability conditions within the linguistic community—supervene upon the same causal chain of events as meaning and reference. The effects of these conditions of acceptable use on a community of speakers propagate the causal chain into the future. Knowledge of these assertability conditions allows speakers to feel justified in their present use of a word. The feeling that words should be used a certain way provides normative force to the phenomena of meaning, regardless of whether speakers have this feeling innately or are taught to hold this value. It is also apparent that this solution is not a dispositional answer, community-wide or otherwise.

Whether this solution would be acceptable, and to what extent, hinges on a few issues. A causal theory of reference would need to be acceptable, and criticisms of such a theory of reference might be applicable to a causal theory of meaning.

The link between the causal chain and the conditions of assertability would also have to be allowed. It is hard to see how it would be ruled out though, as that has severe implications. If the past use of a word has no influence on the present use of a word, or its influence is indeterminate in nature, trying to make sense of language becomes fraught with difficulty. On one hand we would be asked to accept that language was essentially chaotic and that its seeming consistency was an extended coincidence. On the other, that some other agency or force keeps our use consistent. Neither option seems like a particularly good
choice when compared to the idea that there is a link between the causal chain of use and conditions of assertability of a word.

More sensibly, it might be that this account is limited in scope to the extent that the justifications for applying it to non-referring terms hold true. If a causal theory of reference is acceptable, it is not much of a leap to apply it to the meaning of referring terms. For non-referring terms, this account is only sound so long as it is recognised that, regardless of its origins, the causal chain of use of a word is determinate in nature and therefore so are the present conditions of its acceptable use. It would follow that its actual use is determinate in nature, and this is what allows it to meet Kripke’s (1982) challenge. If the causal chains of non-referring terms were sufficiently different in nature to those of referring terms, this account would at least partially fail. Similarly, if the beginning of the causal chain was thought to be important, it is possible that the nature of this event could influence how valid the ascription of meaning could be. Both these possibilities seem unlikely though.

The treatment of cases such as ‘+’ provides further evidence of where this account of meaning may encounter difficulty. When dealing with terms that have potentially infinite extension, justifying a certain interpretation on the basis of finite previous uses will be based on certain arguments. If the idea that Kripke (1982) has conflated metalinguistic and arithmetic questions is rejected, this account would at least be inapplicable to examples of this kind.

The final controversial feature of this account of meaning is the proposed solution to the *qua*-problem that was necessary to maintain the determinacy of reference. Some way of dealing with this problem is needed for any sort of causal theory of reference to work. While the details may vary, the overall solution is to allow for descriptive mental content that deals with the problem of fixing reference to *qua*-one-kind rather than *qua*-another-kind. The challenge in this context is to find a way of doing so without causing vulnerability to the attacks of the Sceptic. In seeking to make use of conditions of assertability, I suggest that there is little that the Sceptic can object to. All that is required is that the words the baptiser uses when naming something are constrained by these assertability conditions and that these
conditions are themselves causally determinate in nature. If this can be accepted, the account stands. If this solution to the *qua*-problem fails, or is otherwise prone to sceptical attack, the overall account will also fail.

### 7.3 CAUSAL CONCLUSION

If the causal theory of reference can withstand the sceptical challenge, a causal theory of meaning is possible. This account would allow speakers to have confidence in how they use and interpret words, which gives justification for choosing one meaning over another. A question that remains is whether such a solution can be considered ‘straight’ in that it has denied one of the Sceptic’s premises or shows that they have overlooked some fact regarding meaning. In this case, the argument would be that the sceptical position has overlooked the causal-historical nature of how we use language, and that alternative meanings like *quus* cannot simply appear out of thin air because of the causal nature of meaning. Mathematical mistakes about the nature of a function are possible, but mistakes that involve meanings that are from outside the causal domain of a linguistic community are not. Hence, this is a straight solution. Despite this, the causal approach is largely compatible with accepting the sceptical solution, provided that the differentiation between meaning and reference is maintained. Thus, even if this is not ultimately successful as a straight solution, the nature of truth conditions under a sceptical solution may not be as catastrophic as some have argued.

A causal account of meaning has much to recommend it, but it relies on key arguments that may or may not hold true—not least the proposed solution to the *qua*-problem. Overall, it seems to be a viable candidate as a straight solution. Even if all that it achieves is to show that notions of correspondence truth are not necessarily extinguished by meaning scepticism and the sceptical solution, this is both worthwhile and significant.
Chapter 8: Conclusions, Implications and Future Directions

Finally, the time has come to draw together the common threads of what has been discussed so far. I presented Kripke’s (1982) arguments against the existence of meaning in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I presented the sceptical solution and detailed how it could entail a sort of global anti-realism. In Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, I discussed straight solutions—both dispositional and otherwise—and concluded that they were all largely unsatisfactory. I also attempted to adapt existing arguments to provide novel straight solutions. In Chapter 6, I judged the accounts that I argued for to be unsuccessful. In contrast, the causal account of reference and meaning that I argued for in Chapter 7 was, at least, a qualified success.

Some of the common factors in unsuccessful straight solutions to the problem of meaning scepticism are examined in Section 8.1. Likewise, in Section 8.2, I will discuss the more successful accounts to show how the question of justifying the existence and mechanics of meaning might be better addressed in the future. The broader implications of these potential solutions will be discussed in Section 8.3. In Section 8.4, I will suggest possible areas of further research that might flow from this work.

8.1 FACTORS COMMON TO UNSATISFACTORY SOLUTIONS

Accounts of meaning that seek to answer the challenge of the Sceptic, and to avoid the perceived problems of the sceptical solution by using the dispositions of either individual speakers or whole communities, have numerous proponents. In Chapter 4, I argued that all of the existing solutions of this type fail to address the attacks of the Sceptic and cannot function as adequate accounts of meaning. The reasons why all of these accounts are unsatisfactory are largely similar.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, unsophisticated dispositional accounts were shown by Kripke (1982) to fail because they cannot differentiate between meaning one thing and
another without illegitimately presuming the correct meaning and thereby begging the question. Dispositional accounts of a more sophisticated nature were intended to overcome this problem, but they were largely unsuccessful.

Soames (1997) attempted to show that meaning facts necessarily supervene globally on non-intentional facts. The difficulty with this account is that global supervenience casts too wide a net, as both correct and incorrect answers are necessarily determined by global non-intentional facts. This commits Soames to the position of equating performance with correctness.

The linguistic dispositions of speakers will, in reality, lead to words being used incorrectly, thereby undermining the validity of dispositional solutions. Fodor (1990) and Kowalenko (2009) seek to overcome this problem by proposing an idealised disposition that the correctness of non-ideal speakers can be measured against. Fodor’s argument appears to hinge on being able to treat an idealised law regarding the correct use of words in a similar way to other idealised laws found in science. Kusch (2006) argues that such a law is not similar enough to other idealised laws in science to warrant the same treatment. However, this is not the main shortcoming of this dispositional type of account. There are two possible ways that the relevant disposition can be characterised. First, it can be arithmetic in nature; that is, the idealised speaker is disposed to always correctly compute the addition function. Alternatively, the disposition can be metalinguistic; that is, the idealised speaker is disposed to always correctly use the ‘+’ symbol to mean plus. The arithmetic disposition cannot answer the Sceptic because the challenge is not to show that a particular arithmetic function has infinite extension under idealised conditions. The metalinguistic disposition begs the question against the Sceptic because it is the metalinguistic distinction between meaning plus and quus that is in question. Fodor’s equivocation of the arithmetic and metalinguistic issues disguises this feature, but it is the case nonetheless. An idealised ‘correct’ answer is of little help if the existence of a correct answer is in question in the first place. Equating performance with correctness is still an illegitimate move, even if the subject is an idealised speaker.
Coates (1997) makes a similar error in his suggestion that there are additional second-order dispositions that maintain the consistency of speakers’ first-order dispositions to use words in particular ways. The challenge that Kripke’s Sceptic sets is not to show that speakers in fact use words consistently, or to explain the mechanism by which they do so. The social sciences and linguistics are better avenues for approaching those questions. In the context of Coates’s approach, the challenge that meaning scepticism poses is whether there is any sense in which speakers are correct and justified in their consistent use of words. Again, the conflation of performance and correctness is behind the failure of this account.

Moving the focus of the investigation to the collective dispositions of a whole community produces similar, if not more destructive, results. Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990) put forward similar suggestions and fail for identical reasons. The hope that a communal account could deal with the tendency for individual speakers to be disposed to make errors turns out to be unfounded. If individuals can be disposed to use words incorrectly, it is possible that whole communities can be systematically disordered in the same way. If a community is fallible, there is no reason to accept that its disposition to use a word a certain way has any force against the Sceptic. If a community is infallible, whatever the collective disposition entails is, by definition, correct. However, as Boghossian (1989) has shown, this results in a situation where the account is forced to accept that the meanings of words are radically disjunctive. This disjunction severely undermines notions of communication and our intuitive understanding of language use. In this case, the equivocation of the performance of the whole community with the correctness of its collective response is particularly problematic.

The existing accounts of meaning that seek to answer the Sceptic through non-dispositional mechanisms were discussed in Chapter 5. These responses to the Sceptic suffer from some additional shortcomings that are distinct from those suffered by dispositional accounts.

Lewis (1983) suggests that there must be an *a priori* charitable presumption of eligible content in order to solve the problem of indeterminate translation. The most natural
content is to be considered more eligible. For example, meaning ‘plus’ is more natural than meaning ‘quus’, as plus is objectively more natural. Wright (2012) proposes different ways that this suggestion can be characterised. All of these versions of Lewis’s argument either fail or are subject to sceptical attack. Lewis offers no compelling reasons why we must accept his account of reference over any alternate account that the Sceptic could put forward. As Wright observes, any assumption that Lewis’s account should be accepted because it would deliver the correct extensions to the speaker’s words would constitute begging the question against the Sceptic.

Delancey’s (2007) expansion of Lewis (1983) does little better, despite its noteworthy efforts to describe ‘naturalness’ in terms of informational complexity. His argument—that speakers should choose the least complex interpretation of an utterance—fails in multiple key areas. First, this account offers no additional evidence that speakers should choose the most natural interpretation. Secondly, it relies on a ceteris paribus idealisation. The other key flaw in Delancey’s argument is that even if these other problems could be overcome, it relies on a questionable premise—that humans want the most accurate interpretation of utterances.

Feldman (1986) suggests that Kripke (1982) was wrong to dismiss an answer based on objectively existing platonic entities. Feldman’s solution, for example, was that a speaker meant sepia (and not quepia) by the word ‘sepia’ because they had grasped the concept of sepia in an unmediated and direct manner. Apart from any objections to the existence to such platonic entities, many problems remain with this account. The notion of unmediated grasping remains mysterious in nature, and Feldman does not articulate how the question of exactly which concept a speaker had grasped could be resolved without begging the question.

Millikan (1990) argues for an account of meaning that seems teleological in nature by virtue of its appeal to ‘biological purpose’. She asserts that rule-following is the expression of following biological purposes. She argues that there is a biological purpose in humans to react to and be guided by our representations in certain ways but not in others.
Her solution was that what speakers intend to do when they read or use a particular word has been determined by the experience of the speaker in combination with their evolutionary design. For example, I mean plus rather than quus by the ‘+’ sign because underlying the explicit intention to mean plus is a non-occurrent biological purpose, whereas to mean quus has no such biological purpose underlying it; hence, quus is not a viable interpretation.

While Millikan is clear that the expression of a biological competence is not equivalent to a disposition, this account is vulnerable to criticism in similar ways to many of the dispositional accounts discussed in Chapter 4. Without a prior assumption of ‘+’ correctly meaning plus, there is no way to attribute the expression of biological purpose one way or another. This being the case, there is no way to differentiate between the ‘+’ sign meaning one thing or another. Further variations on Millikan’s account do not extricate it from this difficulty. Rather, they serve to reinforce the similarity with dispositional accounts, as they either fail to determine meaning or beg the question against the Sceptic.

The only formulation of Millikan’s solution that does not fail is a version where biological purposes do not entail meaning. While it may be satisfactory, it is no longer a ‘straight’ solution in the sense that it no longer refutes the sceptical position that there is no such thing as meaning.

Searle (2002) puts forward multiple arguments against meaning scepticism. Of particular interest is his argument that ‘Background’ facts determine meaning. Exactly what this solution entails is left unsaid by Searle. One interpretation is that it is similar to the global supervenience proposed by Soames (1997), in which case it fails to equate performance and correctness. Kusch (2007) makes the observation that this solution can be interpreted in such a way that it is more sceptical than ‘straight’. One way this may be possible is if notions of there being a uniquely correct way to go on in an arithmetic series are discarded.

In addition to revisiting existing straight solutions, I put forward three potential solutions of my own, which were based on the existing work of others. The first made use of Hattiangadi (2006), the second Young (1995) and the third Devitt (1997) and McGinn
To varying degrees, these solutions make use of arguments that may not be in line with the original intentions of their authors. Although two of the three solutions were unsatisfactory, the reasons for their failure add depth to the discussion of this problem. The solution based on Devitt and McGinn was, at least, a qualified success, and this suggests areas where further consideration is needed.

Hattiangadi (2006) argues that meaning is not prescriptive in a way that causes problematic normative considerations. Rather, to say that a speaker means something is simply to describe them as meeting a standard (or not). Hattiangadi (2006) leaves the exact details of a solution unstated, satisfied that the possibility of a straight solution negate s any a priori status that Kripke’s (1982) argument may have had. I attempted to develop Hattiangadi’s notion of Correctness into a viable solution. This was ultimately unsuccessful, as the only formulation of Correctness that was not open to sceptical attack did not entail the existence of meaning. Hattiangadi (2006) gives a novel account of how meaning does not entail that a speaker should use a word a particular way, and this initially seemed to be successful. However, there were difficulties in showing how a speaker meeting a standard of correct use or not, as entailed by Correctness, could be derived from non-intentional facts without begging the question against the Sceptic.

Young (1995) develops a series of arguments supporting the idea of global anti-realism. Central to this project is the idea that the truth of a sentence is not captured by its correspondence to certain facts. Rather, it is determined by how well it coheres with other sentences that individuals in a community hold to be true. Kripke (1982) relies on correspondence truth to drive home the consequences of his dilemma. In this context, I considered the possibility that a different account of truth might produce a different outcome to the argument in favour of meaning scepticism. In one sense, Young’s account is successful. If the truth of meaning-declarative sentences, such as ‘I mean plus by the “+” sign’, is entailed by their coherence with other sentences, rather than by corresponding with a non-semantic fact, it follows that there are grounds for preferring one interpretation of ‘+’ over another. However, it is at least plausible that this account of truth renders the
community infallible. Young does not consider systematic errors of the type discussed by Boghossian (1989). Thus, the possibility of having to accept wildly disjunctive meanings is entailed by this account unless Boghossian’s concerns can be addressed or be shown to not apply.

Patterns of factors that are common to all of these unsatisfactory solutions are apparent. Soames (1997), Fodor (1990), Kowalenko (2009), Coates (1997), Bloor (1997) and Horwich (1990) are all ultimately committed to positions where they have to equate performance with correctness, albeit in slightly different ways and with slightly different results. Even accounts that are not ostensibly dispositional in nature, such as that of Millikan (1990), can have this feature. In individuals, this equivocation produces a situation where meaning is underdetermined. That is, if whatever a speaker is disposed to do is correct, the notion of what is correct is undermined to the extent that it is no longer determinate. If this equivocation is presumed at a community level, and the possibility of the community being infallible cannot be ruled out, the results are particularly poor. This is the case with Bloor and Horwich. Although the prospective solution based on Young’s (1995) account of truth did not rely on dispositions, the infallibility of the community is entailed nonetheless.

The flip side of equating what a speaker does with what a speaker should do is that it begs the question against the Sceptic. A disposition to do something can only entail correctness if the presumption of the possibility of a correct answer and a particular correct answer are presumed. In the context of constitutive or ontological scepticism about meaning, such presumptions are illegitimate.

Lewis (1983) and Feldman (1986) share common ground in that they both appeal to the supposedly objective existence of mathematical entities or natural categories. With both of these accounts, there is no particular issue with the existence of mind-independent types or functions. The core of the failure in both cases is an inability to show why a particular word should be or is connected to a particular concept. Such a connection cannot be made without a prior presumption. Lewis makes this presumption explicit, while Feldman does
not. In both cases, it is difficult to formulate interpretations of these accounts where such presumptions do not constitute begging the question.

8.2 POSSIBLE SUCCESS—WHAT WORKED?

The solution in this thesis that comes the closest to being satisfactory is the hybrid causal account, which I developed and discussed in Chapter 7, based on the work of both Devitt (1997) and McGinn (1984). This solution accepts some of the conclusions of Kripke’s (1982) argument, but it shows that reference, and perhaps meaning, are determinate in nature. Under this account, reference and meaning are entailed by the causal chain of how a word has been used. For referring terms, little modification is needed. For non-referring terms, the chain of use, rather than the beginning of it, is the important factor. The conditions under which a certain word can be asserted to mean (or refer to) a certain thing are determined by the effect that the causal history of the use of that word has on the speaker. In short, the answer to the Sceptic is that Kripke meant plus and not quus by the ‘+’ sign because the causal chain of how ‘+’ has been used allows for plus. That Kripke, or indeed any other speaker, meant quus would only be possible if the word being used that way had some causal basis in previous usage. This is not to say that it is not logically possible for a speaker to mean quus. But they can only do so if such use already exists historically or is introduced into the causal chain by a confrontation that produces a lexical shift. Assertability conditions are determined by the causal chain, and we can detect these conditions (roughly, at least). This allows speakers a measure of confidence in the current use of language. The upshot of this is that the Sceptic cannot claim that we always meant quus without us knowing it. This is not the same as claiming that meaning is reduced to assertability conditions. The conditions under which speakers can assert that a word means a certain thing are an effect of the fact that there is causally determinate meaning, not the cause of it.

It is also worth noting that the link between assertability conditions and the causal chain of use for a word cannot be broken or thrown into question without dire consequences for Kripke’s (1982) sceptical solution. The Sceptic cannot deny that the past use of a word
has a causal influence on the current use. For one thing, this is simply implausible. More importantly, if assertability conditions do not function in a predicably causal way, the system of use and potential community correction described by the sceptical solution breaks down.

The mechanics of a causal theory of reference are not especially troubled by scepticism about meaning, with one exception: that an individual or class of things given a particular name to denote them is not particularly controversial. As has been shown, the causal relationship that follows as the use of a term propagates causally from one speaker to subsequent speakers has to exist in some form lest even the sceptical solution fail to coherently describe language use. The main problem that meaning scepticism poses for a causal theory of reference, and hence a causal theory of meaning, is captured by the qua-problem. Devitt (1997) argues that a theory of reference could not be a purely causal relation between referent and referee, as the individual who ‘baptises’ the object in question never has a causal relationship with the whole object in space and time. This would open the possibility that reference, instead of going to a whole individual, might be going to a particular time-slice of them or only to the visibly un-detached parts. To overcome this problem, Devitt allows for ‘descriptive content’ in the mind of the baptiser—they have an idea that they are naming a whole individual, for example, rather than an odd time-slice of them. This means that there must be some content in the mind of the speaker that details what kind of thing they are baptising.

As Kusch (2006) points out, this inclusion of intentional content leaves an opening for the Sceptic to exploit. If the speaker, who is dubbing an individual, thinks ‘I’m going to name you Kripke’, the words they have used are open to sceptical attack. For example, did the speaker mean name or quame? And so on. If this is allowed, the quus-like options render reference indeterminate. Kusch (2006) argues that, despite Maddy’s (1984) efforts, this feature renders the causal project a failure.

However, if the mechanics of the sceptical solution are accepted, this need not be the case. Under this causal account, the meanings of words are causally determined. Even if this is not totally accepted, the sceptical solution entails that there are constraints on the
meanings of words that can be acceptably asserted. If this is the case, the sceptical solution would entail that we need not entertain the Sceptic’s suggestion that the words we use in the process of baptising have quus-like meanings. As previously argued, assertability conditions constrain and guide the behaviour of speakers. Thus, the words the baptiser uses when naming something are constrained by these assertability conditions, which are causally determinate in nature.

Acceptance of this account as a straight solution to the problem of meaning scepticism requires accepting at least a few key premises and arguments, and these form the ways in which the conclusion might be qualified. Obviously, any significant objection to Devitt’s (1997) causal account will present problems. While the argument in favour of meaning scepticism, as Kripke (1982) presents it, does not contain a knock-down argument against the existence of objective classes or kinds, such an argument would present problems for this account. If two classes of things—for example, tigers and aardvarks—are not objectively different, arguing that ‘tiger’ refers in one way and not another, on the basis of causal contact with tigers, will not carry much weight. That said, I argue that the Sceptic has no license to make such claims against a realist conception of classes or natural kinds.

Likewise, the application of the sceptical solution to the qua-problem must be accepted for the account to even minimally succeed. If these two arguments can be accepted, at a minimum, it has been shown that determinate reference, in the barest sense of ‘aboutness’, exists. The acceptance of this causal account as extending to meaning is conditional on the success of the argument that, for non-referring terms, the composition of the causal chain is more relevant than how it actually began. This perhaps takes the argument onto less safe ground. But all that is really required is acceptance that speakers’ linguistic intentions are necessarily constrained by the causal chains of language use that they are part of. I argue that it is implausible that the way that speakers use words, and the intentional content involved in this use, are not causally determined through their interaction with other speakers.
Some might object by saying that whatever this is, it is not meaning. This account shows that a speaker is constrained in how they use a word in a causally determinate way, and this constraint entails an objectively existing difference between them intending to use a word one way and intending to use it another way. Not only is this difference objective, but it also gives rise to the detectable phenomena of assertability conditions. (And they must be detectable in order to answer the *qua*-problem if nothing else.) I argue that such facts allow us to conclude that there is such a thing as meaning.

The normative aspect in this solution is harder to grasp. There are clear constraints on what can be labelled as ‘correct’ or not. I suggest that the feeling that speakers have—that they should use certain words in certain ways—arises much in the way that the sceptical solution describes—that is, it is due to the correction or potential correction of the linguistic community. What is important is that it is *not* the feeling that one should use a word in a certain way that determines the correctness of this use. That can only come from the causally determinate chain of use.

If a sophisticated causal theory of reference is acceptable—particularly one such as Devitt’s (1997)—a theory of meaning that is resistant, if not immune, to sceptical attack is a possibility.

### 8.3 IMPLICATIONS AND SPECULATIONS

The conclusions above have broader implications both within philosophy of language and for other areas.

Beginning with an area close to the original question, a ‘causal theory of meaning’ produces certain results for some of the matters that Kripke (1982) considers. First and foremost, as discussed in Section 7.2.2, even though there is such a thing as meaning, there is no such thing as private language. An individual, when considered in isolation from the causal chains of reference and meaning that determine how they use words, cannot have their use of language analysed in any reasonable way. This would not mean that a physically isolated Crusoe could not be considered. Rather, it is to acknowledge that since meaning
does not reside within an individual, it must follow that considering them in isolation will at least produce no useful results with regard to language.

There will be limitations on being able to attribute meaning in any absolute and independent way. Two linguistic communities with their own causal chains of use, which have given rise to unique and independent assertability conditions, cannot be compared if they are causally isolated from each other. As the causal chain of use determines meaning, where there is no causal relationship, there can be no assessment of meaning. For example, there are two linguistic communities that have no causal interaction, and they each use a particular word in a divergent manner. If there is no causal interaction between them, there is nothing to be said about which community is using the word the ‘right’ way. This is, of course, hypothetical. In reality, as soon as two communities have even the slightest awareness of each other, a causal relationship, however subtle, has begun. If two distinct linguistic communities have enough contact, the competitions of ideas, perceptual confrontations and relations of power that can lead to changes in reference and meaning can occur. Thus, even though causally isolated communities must be considered in isolation, in reality, distinct linguistic communities are not, because once one community is aware of the other, they are not causally isolated any more. This is (or should be) reasonably uncontroversial.

However, there are more interesting implications of this idea. First, there cannot be a uniquely correct meaning for a word. If causally isolated linguistic communities are (hypothetically) considered, there can be no way of saying that one community is using a word any more correctly than the other. I use ‘causally isolated’ in a very strong sense here. An example of this is two linguistic communities on different planets that are outside of each other’s light cones. That is, these two communities are so distant from each other that not even light travelling in a vacuum from one has reached (or maybe, will ever reach) the other. Second, the only way that linguistic communities that are isolated in time and space, to the extent that they would normally be considered to have no causal interaction, could be considered together would be if there were some other mechanism, which we are unaware
of, whereby they were causally connected. Such a discussion would move into areas of metaphysics that are well beyond the scope of this work. There is no need to go into detail as to what might constitute such a mysterious causal connection, although contact with an omnipotent being, or with some sort of platonic realm, might be candidates. If all linguistic communities in space and time were somehow mysteriously causally connected to the extent that they all used a certain word a certain way, it would not disprove that there is no uniquely correct meaning for a word. That said, if two previously isolated linguistic communities come into contact and they exhibit linguistic similarities beyond what can be attributed to happenstance, this account of meaning would suggest that there is a common causal factor or relationship.

One final related implication is that even within a community, there can be no attribution of correct use of a word in isolation from its causal history, because that is what determines meaning. There is no sense in which a word ‘really’ means anything independent from its causal chain of use. To claim that it does would be similar to claiming that a particular word ‘really’ referred to a particular object independent from the causal chain that runs from the object through to the speaker.

The effects that adoption of a causal account would have on issues of realism and the correspondence theory of truth should be reasonably apparent by now, but they are worth summing up nonetheless. Even if only a causal theory of reference in conjunction with the sceptical solution is allowable, a situation where an account of meaning supports the idea that sentences can be considered true or false in virtue of their correspondence to reality is much closer. This implies that Kripke (1982) is, by one reading, at least partially wrong. The notion of ‘correspondence-to-facts’ does not need to be cleared away unless it is impossible for reference to be compatible with scepticism about meaning and the sceptical solution. It should be noted that the best that this account can entail is something like Devitt’s ‘Correspondence Truth (x)’, because not all words refer to anything (determinately or otherwise). In this case, the price of maintaining correspondence truth and escaping global anti-realism is acceptance of the causal theory.
Other potential exchanges, which are made for the sake of rescuing meaning, may be less palatable. If the potential solution based on Young’s (1995) account of truth were successful, different trade-offs would have to be made. Adopting a coherence-based account of truth would have allowed for notions of meaning to be salvaged. This would have meant adopting Young’s global anti-realism. But as the sceptical solution already entails a version of global anti-realism that is arguably stronger than Young’s, such a trade might be seen as acceptable. As it turns out, coherence truth, as I interpreted Young’s formulation of it at least, also entails the toxic form of community infallibility, so the question is largely hypothetical. This discussion suggests that other accounts of truth might be worth investigating to determine whether they also produce different outcomes when interacting with Kripke’s (1982) argument. How useful this might be will in part depend on the overall aims of such a project. If the aim was to save meaning, perhaps this would be worthwhile. If the overall aim was not just that, but to save correspondence truth, as Millikan (1990) was aiming to do, such a project would make little sense.

The adoption of a causal theory of meaning would have repercussions for some of the examples of possible implications of meaning scepticism considered in Chapter 2. Examining how these examples might be treated helps flesh out how such an account would work across a range of situations.

The upshot of adopting a causal theory of meaning is more or less as expected for relatively simple uses of language and symbols. If there is such a thing as meaning, clearly the Sceptic cannot trouble budding mathematicians attempting to add a new combination of numbers for the first time. Nor do Cheng (2002) and Boghossian (1989) need to worry about whether we can hope that it does not rain tomorrow. However, this account of meaning entails certain limits regarding what we can claim in terms of meaning. As previously discussed, there is no sense in which the use of a word is correct or not, independent of the causal chain of use.

The situation for more complicated uses of language is no worse off than before, but at least worries about whether words such as ‘ethics’, ‘morals’ and ‘justice’ have any
meaning can be discarded. The example of ‘marriage’ is interesting to consider. If a causal account of meaning is accepted, it will be a fact that ‘marriage’ means something in virtue of its causal chain of use within a linguistic community, as passed from one speaker to another. However, two observations must be made here. First, there is no sense in which the meaning of the word can be said to have any existence independent of its causal history and how it influences current speakers. Thus, to say that a word ‘really’ means a certain thing, and to imply that this is independent of how speakers (and voters) use the word, is not valid at a philosophical, if not political, level. Second, legislating that a word means a certain thing is part of the causal chain itself. A word could mean something different in its past compared to its current use, and factors such as societal change, popular movements, religious influence and government legislation can exert an influence on the causal chain of use from which conditions of acceptable use arise. The particular use of words that is acceptable at any one time is determinate, and if we know enough about an individual speaker, their use of words is determinate. But the causal theory inherently includes the possibility that the use of words can change over time, as there is no ‘metaphysical glue’ that sticks a particular word, such as ‘marriage’, to a particular arrangement, such as one man and one woman.

The question of what a causal account of meaning can say about the problem of using a rule for interpreting another rule is more difficult to address. In one sense, the dilemma still has some traction, but only in cases where rules need justification. To return to the example Goldberg (2007) uses, a judge still needs to provide justification as to why they might use a certain principle, such as textualism, to interpret some legislative instrument rather than some other principle. They do not have to provide justification that the words that define the principle of textualism have meaning. Similarly, whatever other arguments might be deployed against the AIA, they will not be metalinguistic in nature.

Returning to matters that are more philosophical in nature, it should now be clear that a causal theory of meaning is compatible with a physicalist position, although it does nothing to support a physicalist account of mind, subjective experience or consciousness one way or another.
In adopting a causal account of meaning and reference, we will have adopted some of what Kripke (1982) advocates in his sceptical solution. There would be no such thing as private language, and the conditions under which a particular meaning can be asserted play a key role in showing how meaning and reference are determinate in nature. In formulating the sceptical solution, Kripke left assertability conditions as a primitive, claiming that there was no point in analysing them any further. The key difference is that a causal account makes use of the facts that underlie the more readily apparent assertability conditions.

I maintain that the success of a causal account of meaning hinges on acceptance of the ability to overcome the *qua*-problem in the context of the Sceptic’s challenge. I suggest that this can be achieved by allowing assertability conditions to constrain the language use of baptisers. If this is enough to rule out the Sceptic undermining the descriptive intentional content needed to solve the *qua*-problem, the overall causal account should stand. If assertability conditions do not influence a speaker’s behaviour, categorising these conditions as those that govern assertions seems contradictory at best. Given this, I argue that the assertability conditions must constrain the behaviour and intentions of speakers to some extent. The question is whether they do so in the way I have suggested.

If the causal account of meaning fails altogether, the situation is less than satisfactory. It relies so heavily on core premises of the sceptical solution that even this attempt by Kripke (1982) to salvage communication might fail along with it. On balance, there is sufficient evidence that the causal account can, at least potentially, avoid this situation.

If assertability conditions can hold the Sceptic at bay, and these conditions arise from causally determinate interactions, we can answer Kripke’s (1982) challenge in a way that is more constitutive—that is, more ‘straight’ than sceptical. In using the idea of assertability conditions, it might appear that the distinction between straight and sceptical solutions is blurred, but given the strength of the conclusion against the Sceptic, I contend that this is not the case. Regardless of this, the results strongly suggest that an approach that
takes into account the causal history of how words are used, and how conditions of
assertability arise from these causal factors, is the best solution currently available.

In this thesis, I have explored the problem of meaning scepticism as argued by
Kripke (1982). His conclusion—that there is no such thing as meaning anything by any
word—if true, has implications both within and without academic philosophy. His proposed
sceptical solution may try to preserve language use and communication despite this, but
many problematic aspects remain. Not least of these is the prospect of a strong form of
global anti-realism. Both the radical nature of Kripke’s conclusions and the flow-on effects
lead to a profusion of solutions to the problem his work poses. While not exhaustive, the
straight solutions considered in this thesis are indicative of the types of solutions put forward
to overcome meaning scepticism in a constitutive sense at least.

8.4 FUTURE RESEARCH

The conclusions reached in this work suggest that there are areas that would benefit
from further investigation. In a specific sense, the viability of assertability conditions as
enabling a determinate solution to the *qua*-problem requires further research. How Maddy’s
(1984) approach to a causal account relates to the work of Devitt (1997) is a question that
deserves more consideration and would, in my opinion, produce interesting results. More
generally, how theories of reference interact with Kripke’s (1982) conclusions regarding the
non-existence of meaning and the function of assertability conditions is a direction that
seems to have received relatively little attention. This might have been because it has been
accepted that the non-existence of meaning would necessarily entail a similar lack of
reference—determinate or otherwise. The interactions between the sceptical solution and a
causal theory of reference, which I explored in Chapter 7, suggest that this does not need to
be the case.

This is closely aligned with the need for closer scrutiny of the mechanics of the
sceptical solution. Kripke (1982) claims that there was no need or point to analysing the
system of assertability conditions any further, and that they were a primitive part of the
language game. The discussion of the causal account indicates that such assertability conditions are not the end point of analysis. If the conditions under which a certain word can acceptably be used a certain way are determinate, defenders of the sceptical solution should be on notice. Even if it were the case that meaning did not exist in a classical or pre-theoretic sense, whatever is happening and however language works deserves a better explanation.

Likewise, the interactions of different theories of truth with the arguments supporting meaning scepticism and the sceptical conclusion generate multiple lines of enquiry that are worth pursuing further. Kripke (1982) draws attention to the incompatibility between correspondence truth and solving the paradox. The solution that I suggested in Chapter 6, based on Young’s (1995) coherence truth, ultimately failed. The reason for this failure—namely, the arguments of Boghossian (1989)—suggests that Young’s account of truth may not adequately address the possibility of systematic community error. This in itself is an issue that deserves further careful consideration. That aside, had this solution been successful, the adoption of Young’s theory of truth would have significantly altered Kripke’s ability to draw his conclusions. If the problem of meaning scepticism is seen as intractable, some may see this as evidence of deeper issues with the correspondence theory of truth. There is no reason to think that different conceptions of truth would necessarily allow Kripke to run his argument against the existence of meaning so successfully.

8.5 final conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented Kripke’s (1982) argument in favour of scepticism about the existence of meaning—the paradox of meaning scepticism. I have also presented his proposed sceptical solution to this paradox. I have argued that Kripke’s scepticism and his solution to it both have profound implications for philosophers and non-philosophers alike. I have argued that most straight solutions—that is, solutions that seek to disprove the sceptical position—fail to address Kripke’s arguments in a satisfactory way. Not only was this true of the existing proposed solutions that I considered, but I would argue that it is also true of some of the more novel straight solutions that I put forward. There were some
common factors in these failures, and these were described earlier in this chapter. In
detailing the problematic implications of the sceptical solution and the common problems of
straight solutions, I hope that future accounts of meaning can avoid some of these pitfalls.

In contrast to these unsatisfactory accounts, I have argued that a causal theory of
both reference and meaning is possible, and that it can, with a few key qualifications,
withstand Kripke’s (1982) arguments. If this account is satisfactory, not only does it solve
the dilemma that Kripke first advanced, but it does so in a way that acknowledges the
connection between human language and the world we describe when using it. This account
may not have all of the qualities that some would demand of it. Meaning is context-
dependant; therefore, individuals cannot be considered in isolation from their linguistic
communities. But for all that, I would argue that the causal account shows that meaning is
determinate in a very real sense and has an existence of a kind that silences those who would
claim that there is no such thing as meaning anything by any word.


doi:10.1111/j.0268-1064.2006.00312.x


doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199219025.003.0003


doi:10.1177/0306312704044168


