Summary

Two counterarguments, given by Scott Soames and José Zalabardo, to Saul Kripke’s Wittgenstein-inspired ‘normativity’ argument against dispositional theories of meaning are evaluated. Both counterarguments proceed by distinguishing two different readings of Kripke’s argumentation, an ‘epistemological’ and a ‘metaphysical’ reading. Two results are established. First, Kripke intended the latter, metaphysical, reading. Second, the counterarguments presented by Soames and Zalabardo against the metaphysical reading of the argument are both unsuccessful.

1. Introduction

In his influential *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982), Saul Kripke presents a powerful argument against theories which attempt to reduce meanings to the dispositions of individual speakers and thinkers. He claims that such theories fail because they cannot account for the normativity of meaning. In two rather recent papers (Soames 1998; Zalabardo 1997)¹ Scott Soames and José Zalabardo have claimed that this so-called ‘normativity’ argument is flawed or, at best, incomplete. Their arguments against Kripke’s Wittgenstein² (henceforth KW) are not identical, but there is a very deep similarity between them: both distinguish between two possible readings of KW and present objections to each reading in turn. The two readings give two different arguments, which can be called ‘metaphysical’ and ‘epistemological’.

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¹ All page references to Soames and Zalabardo are to these two articles; all page references to Kripke are to his 1982.

² Like Soames and Zalabardo, I will avoid the question of whether the actual Wittgenstein would have agreed with Kripke’s Wittgenstein.
Zalabardo argues that KW’s argument should be understood as the epistemological version (contrary to most commentators), while Soames claims that KW’s argument is unsound because Kripke fails to distinguish between the two readings and equivocates on a central term.

In this paper, I will take a critical look at these articles. I have two central goals. First, I will argue that there is only one argument to be found in Kripke, the metaphysical one. It is true that Kripke’s presentation is not always as clear as one could hope: the same issues are presented again and again, often in somewhat different terms. But I believe a single core argument can be found. My second, and perhaps more important goal is to show that Soames’ and Zalabardo’s objections against the metaphysical argument are misdirected, and that KW does present a genuine—and, in my opinion, insurmountable—problem for certain influential theories of meaning and content. A detailed analysis of their arguments will also help us get clear on how, exactly, “normativity of meaning” should be understood.

2. Dispositions and The Metaphysical Argument

Kripke (Chapter 2) presents his argument with the help of an imaginary sceptic, who disputes our claim that we mean a particular function, addition, by ‘+’ (and not another function, quaddition, which diverges from addition only in yet unencountered cases). I will not rehash the sceptical dialectic here—an abundance of good clarifications and resumés of it exists, and the sceptic is merely a rhetorical device in any case. The real problem is that of pointing out a (kind of) non-intentional fact, or a set of such facts, which determines (or could, in principle, determine) a meaning or content for a given expression (or an intentional mental state). In short, we can view KW’s sceptical challenge as the demand for meaning-determinants.

3. In fact, Soames gives one of the clearest presentations available (212–6).
4. The sceptical problem can be stated for mental contents as well as for meanings of linguistic expressions, regardless of one’s view on the relation between language and thought. The problem arises from the notion of intentional content, not from any particular view of the structure or nature of the content-bearer. Cf. Boghossian (1989, 509–11), Miller (1998, 178–81). I will mostly consider meanings in this paper, but the argumentation will directly transfer to mental contents.