

Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	Bootstrapping conceptual normativity?
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/35297/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12299
Date	2021
Citation	Thornton, Tim (2021) Bootstrapping conceptual normativity? <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , 44 (2). pp. 189-205. ISSN 0190-0536
Creators	Thornton, Tim

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12299>

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>

Bootstrapping conceptual normativity?

Abstract

Both anti-reductionist and reductionist accounts of linguistic meaning and mental content face challenges accounting for acquiring concepts as part of learning a first language. Anti-reductionists cannot account for a transition from the pre-conceptual to conceptual without threatening to reduce the latter to the former. Reductionists of a representationalist variety face the challenge of Fodor's argument that language learning is impossible.

This paper examines whether Ginsborg's account of 'primitive normativity' might provide some resources for addressing these issues. I argue that primitive normativity can be understood in either of two ways: a 'no conception' version and a 'local conception' version. Rejecting the 'no conception' account of normativity in favour of a 'local conception' of a rule expressed in context-dependent demonstrations and examples provides one response to Fodor's argument. It also provides anti-reductionism with at least one stepping stone to learning full-blown linguistically articulated concepts based on a more primitive local form of normativity.

The problem of concept learning

One of the challenges for an anti-reductionist account of linguistic meaning and mental content is making space for an account of concept learning. If, following John McDowell for example, one takes the 'space of reasons' to answer to a distinct constitutive ideal from that of the 'realm of law', it is hard to see how the route from the latter to the former can be described or articulated into steps.¹ Any such description of the steps taken would threaten to provide – what the anti-reductionist denies – a reduction of the concepts of the space of reasons to those of the realm of law.

McDowell himself suggests that Wittgenstein's phrase 'light dawns gradually over the whole' provides a natural metaphor for learning a first language 'for one's dealings with language to cease to be blind responses to stimuli: one comes to hear utterances as expressive of thoughts, and to make one's own utterances as expressive of thoughts'.² But he suggests that this process cannot be limited to a few sentences but involves working one's way 'into a conception of the world'. Suggestive though Wittgenstein's phrase is, it does little to shed light on how the process of language learning might come about so much as summarise, albeit neatly, the fact that some such process does come about.

Whilst anti-reductionists face a principled problem of shedding light on first language learning, the most striking recent philosophical argument about language learning comes from one of their reductionist opponents. In *LOT2: The language of thought revisited*, Jerry Fodor sets out a specific argument for the difficulty of accounting for concept acquisition.³ Or rather, he argues that such language learning must be impossible.

Fodor's argument has four steps:

1. Concept learning is a rational process.
2. The only plausible rational process is hypothesis formation and testing.
3. But that requires the conceptual representation of the hypothesis, which presupposes possession of the concept to be learnt.
4. So concept learning is impossible.

The first step contrasts learning as a rational process with any form of non-rational process of concept acquisition such as by surgical implantation, swallowing a pill or hitting one's head against a

¹ McDowell 1994

² McDowell 1998: 333

³ Fodor 2008

hard surface. Fodor then argues that the only plausible candidate for such a rational process is a 'process of projecting and confirming hypotheses about what the things that the concept applies to have in common'.⁴

The argument for the third step is couched in the terms of Fodor's 'Representational Theory of Mind' (RTM) and is, initially at least, restricted to primitive, that is non-definable, concepts.

Consider any concept that you're prepared to accept as primitive, the concept GREEN as it might be. Then ask 'What is the hypothesis the inductive confirmation of which constitutes the learning of that concept?' Well, to acquire a concept is at least to know what it's the concept of; that is, what's required of things that the concept applies to. So, maybe learning the concept GREEN is coming to believe that GREEN applies to (all and only) green things; it's surely plausible that coming to believe that is at least a necessary condition for acquiring GREEN. Notice, however, that (assuming RTM) a token of the concept GREEN is a constituent of the belief that the concept GREEN applies to all and only green things. A fortiori, nobody who lacked the concept GREEN could believe this; nobody who lacked the concept GREEN could so much as contemplate believing this. A fortiori, on pain of circularity, coming to believe this can't be the process by which GREEN is acquired.⁵

And hence, he argues, no primitive concepts can be learnt. He goes on to lift this restriction to merely primitive concepts and generalise to all concepts but I will ignore that further step of the argument here.

Fodor's Representational Theory of Mind is implicit in the way he sets out the third stage: that a *token* of the concept is a *constituent* of the belief about the extension of the concept. This reflects his idea that concept possession is explained by inner vehicles of content – mental representations – which have the same degree of internal structure as the content they carry. So complex thoughts are represented by complex mental representations or inner vehicles of content.

But even without RTM, it is possible to frame a version of Fodor's argument against concept learning. Given the idea, from step 2, that concept learning involves testing a hypothesis, one needs to be capable of entertaining, or thinking, that hypothesis. In this case it is the hypothesis that the concept GREEN applies to (all and only) green things. But even without any speculation – in accord with RTM – about how such a thought is represented by inner mental representations, this seems to raise a problem as holding the hypothesis needed to learn the concept presupposes already possessing the concept one was supposed to be learning. Thus the argument about concept learning floats free of Fodor's particular views of the nature of mind.

The principled problem of describing a process of concept learning from an anti-reductionist perspective and Fodor's specific argument that concept learning is impossible present a two-fold challenge. Can Fodor's argument be blocked and if so can the materials used to do that shed light on concept learning even from an anti-reductionist perspective? In the next section I will set out the ground rules for addressing this question and then set out the structure of the rest of this paper.

Ground rules

In what follows, I will make two substantial but related assumptions. First, that concept learning is normative or prescriptive. Second, that it is, in some sense, a rational process.

The assumption that concept learning is normative might be thought to flow from the prior assumption that concept use itself is normative. Such an assumption is shared by a number of philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein. John McDowell, for example, begins his paper 'Wittgenstein on following a rule' saying:

⁴ *ibid*: 132.

⁵ *ibid*: 137-8

We find it natural to think of meaning and understanding in, as it were, contractual terms. Our idea is that to learn the meaning of a word is to acquire an understanding that *obliges* us subsequently - if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question - to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to *obey the dictates* of the meaning we have grasped.⁶

Michael Luntley is even more explicit.

Meaning is normative. That is the starting point to our investigations. The normativity of meaning comes from the fact that the content of our utterance or thought is something assessed as true or false... Without adding anything further about the nature of the concept of truth, this basic fact about meaning forces the following constraint. For any utterance or thought to possess meaning its meaning must be such that it demarcates between those conditions that would render the utterance true and those that would render it a failure in aiming for truth... So, if I utter the words

(1) Grass is blue

with their conventional meaning I am *obliged*, on being presented with a grass sample, to withdraw my utterance. For in uttering (1) I am bound by the meaning of the utterance to acknowledge that there are conditions which would render the utterance correct and conditions that would render it incorrect. That is just what meaning something with our words is like. We take on obligations.⁷

This passage exemplifies an inference made in a number of normativist accounts of meaning. The meaning of any utterance distinguishes between cases where the utterance would be true and those where it would be false. From this distinction it is argued that meaning itself is normative and imposes prescriptions or obligations concerning word use or utterance.

This inference has, recently, been contested. Anti-normativists such as Anandi Hattiangadi agree that meaning is connected to a notion of correctness and incorrectness but deny that that implies meaning is a normative notion.⁸ Correctness itself is not normative. For example if R states a rule for the correct use of a term *t* which applies in virtue of features *f*

R (x)(*t* applies correctly to *x* ↔ *x* is *f*)

then, Hattiangadi argues, this 'simply states the correctness conditions of an expression; it does not tell me what to do'.⁹ A mere descriptive sorting of correct from incorrect uses or applications or true from false utterances implies no obligations or prescriptions for use. Correctness conditions do not prescribe that a true (or more broadly correct) use should be made unless also combined with a prescriptive norm that one ought to speak the truth (or more broadly correctly). And that additional norm seems – contra Luntley – too strong for specifically semantic normativity and more like a prudential or a moral norm.

Nevertheless, whether or not meaning is normative, a rational process of concept *acquisition* or learning does look to be normative. In this context, correctness conditions are not merely a neutral way of sorting subsequent utterances but rather constitute the aim or goal of *developing* linguistic competence, whether or not linguistic competence itself is thought to have correctness as a goal. If an anti-normativist were to argue that the relevant prescriptive ought applies to concept acquisition not directly in virtue of the rules of correctness of words themselves but an additional adoption of taking those rules as the *goal* of a distinct activity of concept learning, so be it.

⁶ McDowell 1984b: 325; 1998b: 221 italics added.

⁷ Luntley 1991: 171-172 original italics

⁸ Hattiangadi 2007

⁹ Hattiangadi 2007: 223

My second assumption is that concept learning is, in some sense, a rational process. McDowell calls the acquisition of a first language a matter of being 'cajoled'.¹⁰ It is possible that being the recipient of such cajoling is not so much a rational response as being brutally changed in such a way that one can become a rational subject and make subsequent rational responses. But I will assume that it is possible to say *something* about rationality of the proto-linguistic responses of a subject in such a position.

My stalking horse will be Hanna Ginsborg's account of 'primitive normativity'.¹¹ Since Ginsborg's account is developed as a response to Kripke's meaning scepticism, the next section will outline Kripke's argument. The following section will set out Ginsborg's strategy to block that argument and the role of primitive normativity in it. I will then argue that primitive normativity can be interpreted in either of two ways: a 'no conception' view and a 'local conception' view. But I will argue that Ginsborg seems to, and has to, subscribe to the former which, however, is flawed. But, as I will argue in the final section, a 'local conception' view sheds light on concept acquisition.

Kripke's sceptical argument

Ginsborg's account of primitive normativity is – like many of the *anti*-normativists she opposes - designed as a response to Saul Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein which Kripke presents as a sceptical argument concerning meaning. His argument aims to cast doubt on what appears, pre-philosophically, to be an everyday 'metalinguistic'¹² fact: the fact that one can mean something by a word. He considers the case of meaning *addition* by the word 'addition' and asks: what justifies the claim that answering '125' is the correct response to the question 'what does $68 + 57$ equal?'. Two simplifying assumptions are made:

- that 'correct' means in accordance with the standards of one's previous usage of the signs involved: what one *meant* by them; and,
- that one has never calculated that particular result before. In fact, Kripke assumes that one has 'added' no number larger than 57.

Normally if called upon to justify the answer '125' one might give either of two sorts of response.

Arithmetically, one might ensure that one had carried out the computation correctly.

Metalinguistically, one might assert: 'that "plus", as I intended to use that word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to the numbers I call "68" and "57", yields the value 125'.¹³

Kripke now introduces the sceptical hypothesis that in the past one might have followed or meant a different mathematical function, the *quus* function. On the assumption that one has never previously encountered numbers greater than 57, this is defined to agree with the plus function for all pairs of numbers smaller than 57. (Obviously, this number is arbitrary and inessential to the argument.) For numbers greater or equal to 57 the output is 5. Kripke now presses the question: what facts about one's past performance show that one was calculating in accordance with the plus function rather than the *quus* function, that one *meant* plus rather than *quus*?

Kripke imposes a further condition on any satisfactory answer to the question. It must show why it is *correct* to respond 125 rather than 5 and, in the dialectic at least, Kripke construes this as supporting normativism. (According to Martin Kusch this assumption is merely part of the reduction *ad absurdum*, an immanent critique of a package of ideas that includes normativism.¹⁴) A satisfactory answer should show why one *ought* to answer 125. This precludes citing facts about one's education or training which now *dispose* one to answer 125. It may be true that one has such a disposition, but

¹⁰ McDowell 1998: 333

¹¹ Ginsborg 2011.

¹² Kripke 1982.

¹³ Kripke 1982: 8

¹⁴ Kusch 2006

that will not show that one should answer 125. (One may equally be disposed to make mistakes when adding large columns of figures but that does not imply that one should, that that is what one meant to do.)

Kripke then deploys arguments based on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* paragraphs 139-239 to show, apparently, that no facts about one's past actions, utterances or dispositions can justify an answer.¹⁵ Anything one did or said in the past could equally be interpreted as following or meaning the quus rule. For example, perhaps one said allowed that one was adding the numbers and by adding one meant counting up to the first number and then continuing counting by as many steps along the line of integers as the second number. However, as Kripke points out, perhaps the word 'count' meant *quount* which is defined as the same as counting but only as far as the number 57.¹⁶ It appears that nothing that one said or did or thought to oneself can justify the claim that, now, answering '125' is going on correctly in the same way one was before, in accord with what one previously meant.

Ginsborg on primitive normativity

In response to Kripke's sceptical argument, Ginsborg denies the first of his simplifying assumptions. She denies that in order to claim that one ought, now, to say '125' one needs first to establish that one previously meant addition. She argues that the fact that one ought to say '125' is independent of any assumption about one's past meanings and depends instead on 'primitive normativity'.

I maintain that there is a sense in which you ought to say '125,' given the finite list of your previous uses, independent of what meaning, if any, those uses expressed. The sense of 'ought' I am invoking here expresses what I am going to call 'primitive normativity': very roughly, normativity which does not depend on conformity to an antecedently recognized rule.¹⁷

'Primitive normativity' is a basic form of normativity independent of, and prior to, grasp of meaning. Ginsborg suggests three possible interpretations of the example of a child who is able to recite numerals, has learnt to count up in twos and who, on reaching '40' continues with '42'.

A conceptual-normativist account of the child's saying '42' would be as follows:

[T]he child says '42' after '40' because she recognizes, although without being able to put that recognition into words, that she has been adding two and that 40 plus two is 42. Her sense of the appropriateness of what she is saying thus derives from her recognition that it fits the rule she was following: a rule which she grasps, even though she is unable to articulate it.¹⁸

On this higher level view, the correctness of the move – saying '42' – depends on grasping a rule or a concept governing it although lacking a linguistic label for that concept or rule. Primitive normativity involves less than that. But, at the same time, it involves more than thinking of the child's behaviour as akin to the reliable dispositional reactions of a suitably trained parrot. By contrast with such a comparison, Ginsborg argues that the child does not respond 'blindly' to her circumstances.

Even though she does not say '42' as a result of having grasped the add-two rule, nor a fortiori of having 'seen' that 40 plus two is 42, she nonetheless 'sees' her utterance of '42' as appropriate to, or fitting, her circumstances.¹⁹

¹⁵ Kripke 1982: 7-54, Wittgenstein 1953

¹⁶ *ibid*: 108.

¹⁷ Ginsborg 2011: 232-3

¹⁸ *ibid*: 238.

¹⁹ *ibid*: 237

So even though the child lacks full-blown conceptual mastery, Ginsborg claims that she has a sense of *appropriateness, fitting or belonging* which merits the label 'normativity'. The parrot lacks any such sense and hence is merely governed by dispositions not norms. I will return to the nature of this sense of appropriateness shortly in the contrast between 'no conception' and 'local conception' versions of primitive normativity.

Ginsborg gives a second example of the kind of middle level behaviour she has in mind. She describes a child sorting coloured objects but who has not yet acquired determinate colour concepts.

As she puts each green object in the designated box, it is plausible that she does so with a sense that this is the appropriate thing to do. She takes it that the green spoon 'belongs' in the box containing the previously sorted green things and that the blue spoon does not, just as the child in the previous example takes 42 and not 43 to 'belong' after 40 in the series of numerals. But her sense of the appropriateness of what she is doing does not, at least on the face of it, depend on her taking what she is doing to accord with a rule which she was following, for example, the rule that she is to put all the green things in the same box. For her grasp of such a rule would presuppose that she already possesses the concept *green*.²⁰

Again, like the child saying '42', Ginsborg's description is supposed to suggest the prima facie plausibility of a description which, unlike the dispositions of a trained parrot, is genuinely normative but which does not presuppose full conceptual mastery.

In addition to these examples, Ginsborg suggests two further general considerations in support of the idea of primitive normativity. The first concerns her specific dialectical context of responding to Kripke. Neither dispositions nor full-blown conceptual normativity answer Kripke's sceptical challenge. The former fails to sustain the normativity of meaning. The latter is specifically targeted by the possibility of alternative sceptical hypotheses of what was meant in the past. Primitive normativity, by contrast, promises a novel way to block the argument at the start. By denying that the justification of answering '125' to the question Kripke considers presupposes establishing what one previously meant, the sceptical argument is halted before it gets off the ground.

The second consideration concerns the acquisition of concepts and is thus of relevance to Fodor's argument described at the start of this paper. Invoking parrot-like dispositions as the basis for concept acquisition seems to leave too much of a gap still to cross to reach conceptual mastery. By contrast, invoking a prior understanding of concepts or rules to characterise the counting child is to provide no answer to the question how basic concepts can be learnt.

There are, however, two options for characterising primitive normativity based on two distinct things Ginsborg says, either of which might fit this second consideration. She says of the counting child both that:

1: 'she lacked *any conception* of what her saying "42" after "40" had in common with her having said "40" after "38"²¹

but also:

2: 'it seems plausible to imagine her insisting, with no less conviction than a child who was able to cite the add-two rule, that "42" was the right thing to say after "40": *that it "came next" in the series, or "belonged" after 40, or "fit" what she had been doing previously*'.²²

The former states that the counting child has *no conception* of what one move has in common with a previous move. The second allows for the possibility of *some* conception that the next move *fits* or

²⁰ *ibid*: 235.

²¹ *ibid*: 234 italics added.

²² *ibid*: 234 italics added.

belongs (ie does have something in common) with the previous one in context. The latter allows for a conception albeit a local one. Which does Ginsborg hold?

A 'no conception' view of primitive normativity

There is a general strategic reason and textual reasons to think that Ginsborg holds the more radical, minimal version of primitive normativity. I will begin with the textual evidence and return to the strategic reason at the end of this and the end of the next section.

One suggestive passage runs:

The utterance, from [the counting child's] point of view, is not appropriate to the context in virtue of its conforming to a general rule which the context imposed on her, for example, the add-two rule. Rather, she takes it to be appropriate to the context *simpliciter*, in a way which does not depend for its coherence on the idea of an antecedently applicable rule to which it conforms.²³

Now one way to interpret the phrase 'antecedently applicable rule' is as a context-independent general specification of a rule. In the case of a mathematical series, that is a plausible way of cashing out full-blown conceptual normativity. What one understands when one understands a series is a rule which is independent of any particular context. And, hence, if what Ginsborg precludes from her definition of primitive normativity is full-blown conceptual normativity this might still allow for a merely demonstratively specified *local* conception of the demands of a rule to count as primitive normativity. On this view, whilst the child does not have a general conception of what it is to add two, cannot grasp its relation to other aspects of arithmetic for example, she can, nevertheless, recognise in some particular context that saying '42' accords with what she has been doing.

But the phrase 'antecedently applicable rule' might equally be taken to mean, and hence to rule out, *any* conception of a rule. If so, the context imposes what move *belongs* with previous moves, or what next move is right, brutally, independently of any conception the child herself has of what she is doing. The way the quotation continues supports this latter impression:

This is not to deny that the normativity depends on any facts about the context, since the appropriateness of '42' depends on her having recited that particular sequence of number words. But it is to deny that her claim to the appropriateness of '42' depends on her recognition of a rule imposed by the context in virtue of the relevant facts, or a fortiori on her recognition of '42' as a correct application of the rule.²⁴

This suggests a picture according to which facts about the context external to the child's conception (if she has any) of her situation and what she is doing nevertheless make normative demands on her. The context of having counted up to 40 makes saying '42' appropriate independently of her conception of what she is doing. '42' *belongs* to what has gone before, is thus normatively connected to it, but she does not recognise that this is the demand that the rule, grasped in whatever way, makes in the context. I will call this the 'no conception' view of primitive normativity.

A second passage provides a distinct argument for this 'no conception' view on the assumption that even a local conception of what the next move is requires some grasp that this is relevantly the *same* as previous moves.

[T]he child's recognition of similarity is not sufficient to account for her taking herself to be going on appropriately. She must not merely take herself to be going on the same way; she must also take it that going on the same way is the appropriate thing to do in the context, which is to say that she must grasp a rule with a content like *go on the same way* or *do the*

²³ *ibid*: 234-5.

²⁴ *ibid*: 235.

same thing you were doing before. We are thus left with the problem of how to account for her grasp of this rule...²⁵

The argument here is that grasp of sameness is insufficient for knowing how to continue and so no local conception view based on just that idea would work. In addition to understanding what sameness amounts to, the child would also need to understand the further rule that she *should* go on in the *same* way, that this is what the relevant normative demand is.

There is something to this worry. There seems little prospect of factoring understanding the demands of following a rule into an understanding of what relevant sameness is and an additional realisation that sameness is what one ought to aim at. Wittgenstein stresses the fact that agreement is internal and relative to the particular rule.²⁶ Thus grasp of the rule, grasp of what agrees with it and hence what is relevantly the same in virtue of according with the rule, go hand in hand.

But this point applies equally to what Ginsborg thinks does occur to the child in her examples. The child thinks that the next number or coloured item, depending on the example, *fits*, *belongs* or is *appropriate* to the context. But those notions are also insufficient for going on correctly. Again, the child needs also to understand that fitting, belonging or being appropriate is the right characteristic of a 'move' in the game she is playing. After all, a rule could dictate that the next move should stand out from, rather than fitting, what has gone before. Thus whilst this passage suggests that Ginsborg favours the 'no conception' view, it does not succeed in supporting it.

There is a further reason to think that Ginsborg has to hold the 'no conception' rather than the 'local conception' view which results from the strategic role of primitive normativity in blocking Kripkean scepticism. The blocking move is the denial that the correctness of answering '125' now, in Kripke's example, depends on what one meant, the rule one conceived, in the past. The sceptical argument targets knowledge now of that past meaning or conception and hence dodging that argument requires denying that one needs accord with any prior conception. That also rules out a merely local conception. If primitively following a rule requires fidelity to a prior local conception of what one was doing, expressed in local demonstrations and examples, it would be just as vulnerable to Kripke's alternative sceptical hypotheses as a conception expressed in context-independent general terms. Thus to block the sceptical argument in the way Ginsborg advocates requires the adoption of a 'no conception' rather than a 'local conception' contrast to full-blown conceptual normativity.

In addition to these arguments, Ginsborg seems not to be alone in this view. In a passage in which she discusses how little may be necessary for rule following, Julia Tanney considers the conceptual possibility of rule following without the ability to cite higher level rules, or to repeat the performance or without training. She comments:

[I]f we agree with the thought that someone might be able to solve Rubik's Cube even if she had never been trained by anyone, then this gives us a reason to reject the idea that there must be an internal connection between the rules that govern an activity and the individual who makes the moves. We can say that it is sometimes enough to credit someone with playing the game if she acts in accordance with the rules. Knowledge (implicit or otherwise) has dropped out of the picture. To insist that someone cannot solve the puzzle unless she somehow conceives the rules (even if she cannot articulate them, even to herself) and acts in the light of her conception of the rules is simply dogmatic. What would justify such insistence? If this person were suddenly entered in a contest and produced the cube with the colours in the right places, we would not withhold the prize because she merely acted in accordance with, but did not follow, the rules. Acting in accordance with the rules *is* solving the puzzle in certain cases.²⁷

²⁵ *ibid*: 240.

²⁶ cf Wittgenstein 1953 §224.

²⁷ Tanney 2013: 85-6.

On this account, having rejected a number of potentially necessary substantial claims as in fact unnecessary for rule following, Tanney concludes that, in the right context, mere *accord* with a rule constitutes rule *following*. Further, this does not seem to be merely a claim about the epistemology of the ascription of rule following – where, indeed, in the right context, apparent accord warrants the further ascription of intentional rule following – since Tanney connects it to the rejection of an internal connection between rules and agent. An epistemological interpretation, by contrast, is consistent with maintaining that accord in performance is *evidence* for such a connection, amounting to the grasp of the rule by the agent. Instead, and in response to a number of bogus explanations of rule following which fail because they presuppose precisely the abilities they purport to explain, Tanney offers a kind of deflationary approach. The failure of cognitivist explanations of rule following leads to a rejection of cognition.

To insist that someone must conceive the rules *somehow* – even if what it would be for her to conceive these rules is inaccessible to us – is misguided; it fails to explain anything.²⁸

Despite this support, the ‘no conception’ version of primitive normativity faces a key objection. It severs the connection between even primitively rule-governed behaviour and intentional action and blurs the distinction between mere accord with a rule and intentionally following it. Unless the child thinks of her actions, whether uttering numbers or physically sorting colours, as expressive of some conception of what she is trying to do, and thus might fail to do, it is hard to see how this can count as even primitively normative. Furthermore, it opens up the possibility of deploying Kripkean arguments about the interpretation of the actual moves made. Without the possibility of invoking the rule – expressed in local demonstrations – that the child’s finite moves expressed there seems no possibility, short of simply imposing some external platonic standards of correctness which has nothing to do with the child’s view of things, for narrowing down the infinite possibility of divergent ways of going on but which happen to accord with the child’s actual moves so far. One needs at least some conception of the rule being followed to uphold the difference in principle between a merely dispositional parrot, whose behaviour may accord with a rule available to a third person description, and a human subject with some sense of her new moves fitting or belonging with what went before, some sense of normative correctness.

A ‘local conception’ view of primitive normativity

There is, however, no need to get into such difficulty if the aim is merely to fit an intuitive description of the phenomenology of the child’s early performance in, as *we* might say though *they* cannot, counting in twos or grouping by colour. The middle ground between dispositional accord with a rule and full-blown conceptual normativity is not the primitive normativity of someone with *no* conception of what she is doing but rather the primitive normativity of someone with a merely *local* conception. Such a conception is not tied to the local context of counting or sorting objects brutally or merely externally in virtue of an ascription of rule-accord by an observer. Rather, it is expressed by the demonstrative judgements of the child and her capacity to demonstrate and explain by example what fits with what she has been doing.

This idea runs counter to one of Ginsborg’s explicit claims: ‘I maintain that there is a sense in which you ought to say “125,” given the finite list of your previous uses, independent of what meaning, if any, those uses *expressed*’.²⁹ On the ‘local conception’ view, this is wrong. Correctness is tied via a local conception to what a speaker’s past utterances *expressed* even if the speaker is unable to offer a context-independent linguistic codification of her actions as instances of following the plus-two rule or the sorting of green objects. Her conceiving of her actions might not extend very far up the natural numbers (eg beyond 100) or to cover darker or lighter shades of green (by contrast with the vivid colours of children’s toys). So it is potentially doubly local: expressible only in some particular

²⁸ *ibid*: 86.

²⁹ *Ibid*: 232-3 italics added.

contexts of practical demonstration (by contrast with context-free linguistic codification) and covering only some particular instances and thus not actually extensionally equivalent to *our* concepts of plus two, or green but rather a primitive version of them.

I suggested that there is a further strategic reason why this view is unavailable to Ginsborg. She deploys the idea of primitive normativity as a novel response to Kripke's sceptical argument in contrast, for example, to McDowell's argument that Kripke's argument presupposes unargued reductionism.³⁰ Her aim is to sidestep the arguments Kripke deploys against any justification one can currently offer for knowing what one meant in the past by one's words which thus seem to undermine a standard of correctness for current use. Primitive normativity must, for those strategic purposes, be independent of any conceptual conception. A local conception is, however, a form of conceptual conception and its expression in a past finite pattern of examples is just as much subject to Kripke's argument as a full-blown linguistic concept. It cannot be part of a *new* defence of meaning against Kripke's argument. Thus a commitment of such a view is that more direct rebuttals of Kripke, such as McDowell's, can turn aside the sceptical argument without particular appeal to primitive normativity.

A 'local conception' view of primitive normativity and language learning

Primitive normativity guided by a local conception of what a speaker is doing promises a partial answer to the initial two-fold challenge of describing language learning. One aspect of Fodor's challenge was to sketch a rational mechanism for concept acquisition or learning. On the assumptions that a) the only plausible option is hypothesis formation and testing and b) hypothesis formation presupposes the very conceptual mastery in question, no rational mechanism seems possible.

Primitive normativity understood as involving a local – rather than no – conception of a rule or concept is a plausible intermediary between mere dispositional accord with rules and full-blown linguistic mastery. The intermediate stage involves testing the hypothesis that a new linguistic concept either expresses a content previously grasped in some local demonstrative manner or refines and extends it. As suggested above, the grasp of a full-blown linguistic concept may require the piecemeal extension of a more primitive, merely local conception of a rule. But there may be some gradations of understanding between having no and a first language.

Of course, the very idea of an essentially situation-dependent conceptual understanding does not fit within the basic idea of Fodor's representational theory of mind according to which content always has an inner vehicle. So no such middle ground is available to Fodor himself. Thus for anyone uneasy with Fodor's innatism, his argument against language learning remains a powerful *reductio ad absurdum* of his representationalism. But the idea does provide a way to begin, at least, to address the version of his argument against learning, mentioned at the start of this paper, framed in terms of prior concept possession but agnostic about Fodor's account of inner vehicles of content. Other people's use of the word 'green' – expressing in their case full-blown conceptual mastery – can be compared by the novice with their own prior local conception. Fodor's charge of circularity – that the same concept is both learnt and presupposed – can thus be avoided.

What of concept acquisition given an anti-reductionist view of meaning? A local conception offers only partial progress here. By contrast with Ginsborg's own account of primitive normativity, the idea that normativity always presupposes that the subject has some, albeit local, conception according to which she acts provides no middle ground between the 'space of reasons' and the 'realm of law' or the 'manifest image of man in the world' and the 'scientific image'. Even a local conception belongs in the space of reasons. So it cannot be part of a route into that space from outside. But it does help put a little flesh on the bones of the idea that 'light dawns gradually over the whole'.

³⁰ McDowell 1984.

'The whole' need not merely be understood to be the gradual acquiring of a world view, as Wittgenstein describes in *On Certainty* (from where the phrase comes).³¹ It can also include the piecemeal acquisition of particular primitive, albeit still conceptually structured, rules. Acquiring a new linguistic concept can be mediated through the grasp of normative rules picked out by only some instances. The sorting of green objects, in Ginsborg's example, may express a rule which governs only a subset of green objects leaving the learner baffled or undecided by very dark or light greens or clear green glass or green light. It would then be a further step to a full-blown linguistic concept of green construed, for example, as a property of objects. The primitive local conception would be consistent with a range of possible extensions and developments and serve as just a step, or part of the route, towards full-blown conceptual normativity. On the other hand, however, understanding primitive normativity as expressive of a local conception governing a local standard of correctness already places it within the conceptual realm or the space of reasons. It does not offer an account of how conceptual normativity can be bootstrapped from non-conceptual dispositions but does suggest how more complex and abstract concepts can be developed from more primitive local forms.

Conclusions

Ginsborg's account of primitive normativity promises both to underpin a novel response to Kripkean scepticism and also to suggest a halfway house for concept learning. In this paper, I have outlined two possible versions of primitive normativity: a 'no conception' and a 'local conception' version. Only the former could plausibly be thought to underpin a novel response to Kripkean scepticism but it fails to account for a key aspect of normativity. That is, that an agent acts intentionally under some conception of what he or she is doing. The alternative 'local conception' cannot form part of a novel response to Kripkean scepticism because it is as vulnerable to sceptical hypotheses concerning what one meant in the past, or the rule one was following, expressed in either general or context-independent terms. Of course, whether or not it is so vulnerable depends on whether such scepticism can be turned aside by other arguments.³² However, the local conception does suggest at least a partial response to the question of how concept acquisition or language learning is possible. An intermediate step to full-blown conceptual mastery is the acquisition of locally expressed concepts. These both require context-bound demonstrative expression and may, additionally, underdetermine the extension of subsequent linguistically codified concepts.

References

- Fodor, J. (2008) *LOT2: The language of thought revisited*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Ginsborg, H. (2011) 'Primitive Normativity and Skepticism about Rules' *The Journal of Philosophy* 108: 227-254
- Hattiangadi, A. (2006) *Oughts and Thoughts: Rule-Following and the Normativity of Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kripke, S. (1982) *Wittgenstein on rules and private language*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Kusch, M. (2006) *A Sceptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein*, Chesham: Acumen
- Luntley, M. (1991) 'The transcendental grounds of meaning and the place of silence' in Puhl, K. (ed) (1991) *Meaning Scepticism*, Berlin: de Gruyter: 170-188
- McDowell, J. (1984) 'Wittgenstein on following a rule' *Synthese* 58: 325-363
- McDowell, J. (1994) *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

³¹ Wittgenstein 1969 §141.

³² eg McDowell 1984.

McDowell, J. (1998) *Meaning knowledge and reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Taney, J. (2013) *Rules, Reason and Self Knowledge*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell

Wittgenstein, L. (1969) *On Certainty*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell