

## Meaning Relativism and Subjective Idealism\*

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In Kripke's (1981) reading, the gist of the *pars destruens* of Wittgenstein's (1953) remarks on rule-following is that no "truth conditions" or "corresponding facts" in the world exist that make a meaning ascription, a statement like "Jones means addition by '+'", true. Such a view sounds, no doubt, quite puzzling. For one thing, it sounds pragmatically self-refuting: at least *prima facie*, saying that no truth conditions exist that make a meaning ascription true is saying that there are no meaning facts, no such things as Jones' meaning addition by "+" or the fact that "Es regnet" means *It rains*, and (usually) one cannot use the sentence "There are no meaning facts" to make a true assertion – since a sentence can be used to make an assertion only if it has a meaning, or so it would seem.<sup>1</sup> It should therefore come as no surprise that, in Kripke's reading, Wittgenstein himself tried to make his view less unpalatable. This attempt is, in my view, largely on the right track.<sup>2</sup> Against it, however, a host of objections have been raised. In this paper, I want to answer one of these objections, which McDowell (1984, p. 222) phrases as follows:

The idea at risk is the idea of things being thus and so anyway, whether or not we choose to investigate the matter in question, and whatever the outcome of any such investigation. That idea requires the conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway – whatever, if anything, we in fact go on to say about the matter; and this notion of correctness can only be the notion of how the pattern of application that we grasp, when we come to understand the concept in question, extends, independently of the actual

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<sup>1</sup> Note that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, saying that there are no meaning facts is not *necessarily* pragmatically self-refuting in Kölbel's (2011, pp. 12-13) sense. According to Kölbel's definition, a sentence is necessarily pragmatically self-refuting if and only if one can *never* use it to make a true assertion; and there are certain non-standard contexts, e.g. when I am talking about another possible world, in which "There are no meaning facts" (and, for that matter, also Kölbel's example, "I am not saying anything") *can* be used to make a true assertion.

<sup>2</sup> I want to stress, however, that I think there is at least one other absolutely legitimate way to deal with Kripkenstein's thesis, namely substituting (what I believe is) the common-sense, in some sense normative, notion of meaning with a purely descriptive one.

outcome of any investigation, to the relevant case. So if the notion of investigation-independent patterns of application is to be discarded, then so is the idea that things are, at least sometimes, thus and so anyway, independently of our ratifying the judgment that that is how they are. It seems fair to describe this extremely radical consequence as a kind of idealism.<sup>3,4</sup>

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 is devoted to giving a clear enough presentation of McDowell's objection. In particular, I try to make clear, first, what seems to support the contention that in Kripkenstein's view there is no room for "a notion of how the pattern of application that we grasp extends independently of the actual outcome of any investigation" and, therefore, no room for "a conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway" and, second, the exact nature of the transition from this thesis to the notion that Kripkenstein is committed to a form of subjective idealism – I stress "subjective" because McDowell regards himself as an objective idealist, *à la Hegel*. In section 2 I turn to the task of sketching the theoretical apparatus needed to answer McDowell's objection in the best possible way. Introducing this apparatus, however, will also give me the opportunity, first, to further clarify both Kripkenstein's view of meaning ascriptions and its consequences for language in general and, second, to build a bridge between the rule-following literature and the contemporary debate on relativism. Finally, in section 3 I explain why Kripkenstein's conception of meaning talk does not entail any kind of subjective idealism, thereby answering McDowell's argument.

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<sup>3</sup> McDowell's primary target in this passage is the interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks put forward in Wright 1980; however, the way McDowell introduces Kripke's reading later in the paper suggests that he thinks that the objection applies to Kripkenstein's case, too. If I read the relevant passage correctly, basically the same objection is raised also in Wright 1987, p. 122. That being said, whether Wright's objection is really McDowell's is secondary. In fact, it is secondary also whether Kripkenstein is really one of the targets of McDowell's objection. What matters is that it is rather natural to think that McDowell's objection is a problem for Kripkenstein's position; and, in fact, this is an objection which, while discussing Kripke's reading, I have heard countless times.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell also argues that a view such as Kripkenstein's implies that "for the community itself there is no possibility of error"; for my answer to this objection see Guardo 2012a, pp. 382-383; for a parallel answer to a parallel objection see MacFarlane 2014, § 2.1.3.

## 1. Relativism and Idealism

According to the received view, the truth value of the proposition expressed by an utterance of, say, “Jones means addition by “+”” depends on the ontological status of the corresponding state of affairs, which Kripke (see, e.g., 1981, p. 8) sometimes describes as a “grasping”, on Jones’ part, of the rule of addition in such a way that, although Jones has computed only finitely many sums in the past, the rule determines his answer for indefinitely many new sums that he has never previously considered. If this state of affairs holds, if it is a fact,<sup>5</sup> the proposition is true. If it does not, the proposition is false. The negative part of Kripkenstein’s argument questions this common wisdom and culminates with the conclusion that no state of affairs corresponds to an utterance of a meaning ascription. Focusing on the positive case: “[...] no “truth conditions” or “corresponding facts” in the world exist that make a statement like “Jones, like many of us, means addition by “+”” true” (Kripke 1981, p. 86). Therefore, it seems that – unless we are willing, unlike Kripkenstein, to get rid of the idea that the content of a meaning ascription is truth evaluable – we must accept that the truth values of the propositions in question depend on something other than “truth conditions”. The question is: on what?

Kripkenstein’s answer is nicely summarized in the following passage:

*Jones* is entitled, subject to correction by others, provisionally to say “I mean addition by “+”” whenever he has the feeling of confidence – “now I can go on!” – that he can give “correct” responses in new cases; and *he* is entitled, again provisionally and subject to correction by others, to judge a new response to be “correct” simply because it is the response he is inclined to give. These inclinations [...] are to be regarded as primitive. They are not to be justified in terms of Jones’s ability to interpret his own intentions or anything else. But *Smith* need *not* accept Jones’s authority on these matters: *Smith* will judge Jones to mean addition by “+” only if he judges that Jones’s answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give, or, if they occasionally disagree, he can interpret Jones as at least following the proper procedure [...] (Kripke 1981, pp. 90-91).

Some might want to object that in this passage Kripke is not explaining when P is *true*, but just when one is entitled to assert it. This is, after all, the language employed in the passage. And, so the objection goes, this is the reading most con-

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<sup>5</sup> The distinction between facts and states of affairs (according to which a state of affairs is a fact if and only if it holds) is, I think, a useful one. In what follows, however, I will sometimes employ Kripke’s terminology and use “fact” in the more general sense of *state of affairs*.

sistent with the claim that “[...] Wittgenstein proposes a picture of language based, not on *truth conditions*, but on *assertability conditions* or *justification conditions* [...]” (Kripke 1981, p. 74). This is, I think, a misreading of these passages. Kripkenstein rejects a picture of language based on truth conditions only in the sense that he rejects the notion that linguistic meaning can be accounted for in terms of “corresponding states of affairs” on whose ontological status the truth value of (the proposition expressed by an utterance of) a sentence depends. In Kripke’s sense, truth conditions are just these states of affairs. In a passage I have already quoted, for example, he writes: “[...] no “truth conditions” or “corresponding facts” in the world exist that make a statement like “Jones, like many of us, means addition by “+” true” (Kripke 1981, p. 86).<sup>6</sup> This is in no sense rejecting the notion of truth. At most, it is rejecting a particular account of this notion. In fact, it is well known – and Kripke himself stresses it – that, far from rejecting truth talk, Wittgenstein (see, e.g., 1953, § 136) thought that the concept of truth is perfectly unproblematic. Hence, when Kripke says that Wittgenstein proposes a picture of language based on assertability conditions, what he means is not that *truth* has no place in Wittgenstein’s metaseantics; all he means is that *truth conditions* play no role in Wittgenstein’s view of language. Likewise, the fact that, in the passage I quoted, Kripke frames his discussion in terms of what one is entitled to assert does not mean that his point has nothing to do with truth; Kripke’s choice of words should rather be seen as a way to stress that things like Jones’ having the feeling of confidence that he can give “correct” responses in new cases are not to be conceived as truth conditions in the sense defined above.

If this is correct, it seems apt to describe Kripkenstein’s views about meaning ascriptions as a form of “non-factualism”, in the sense that (the proposition expressed by an utterance of) a meaning ascription is not made true (false) by the occurrence (non-occurrence) of the corresponding state of affairs.<sup>7</sup> The notion that Kripkenstein is a non-factualist in something like this sense, however, is not uncontroversial; for example, George Wilson (1998), criticizing McDowell’s render-

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<sup>6</sup> See also what Kripke (1981, p. 87) says about necessary and sufficient conditions and straight solutions.

<sup>7</sup> This is not, of course, the sense of “non-factualism” used by some of Kripke’s commentators. For example, Kusch (2006, p. 148), following Boghossian (see, e.g., 1989, § 16), defines non-factualism by saying that “A non-factualist about a certain class of declarative sentences denies that they are “truth-apt” or “fact-apt”: he denies that for any sentence *s* of this class we can infer “*s* is true” or “It is a fact that *s*” from *s*”, while in my sense of the word there is no inconsistency in maintaining that a certain class of declarative sentences, though non-factual, still are truth-apt. For a criticism of the idea that Kripkenstein is a non-factualist in the Boghossian-Kusch sense see Soames 1998, §§ 4 and 5.

ing of Kripkenstein's position, has argued that what Kripkenstein rejects is not that meaning ascriptions are made true by the occurrence of the corresponding states of affairs, but just a certain picture of these states of affairs: the picture whereby, to stick to Kripke's example, the state of affairs which corresponds to "Jones means addition by '+'" is a "grasping", on Jones' part, of the rule of addition in such a way that the rule determines his answer for indefinitely many new sums that he has never previously considered (see also Byrne 1996, p. 342).

The difference between the non-factualist interpretation and Wilson's can be made clear by focusing on the different roles that the two readings give to the agreement between Jones's answers to particular addition problems and Smith's. On the one hand, Wilson is committed to the thesis that Kripkenstein takes this agreement to be the fact that corresponds to the proposition Smith expresses when he utters the words "Jones means addition by '+'" and on whose ontological status the truth value of this meaning ascription depends. On the other hand, on the non-factualist interpretation this agreement cannot even be said to be the fact that corresponds to the proposition in question. First, the fact that Jones's answers to particular addition problems agree with those Smith is inclined to give ("F", for short) is not, as it were, "represented" by the proposition Smith expresses when he utters the words "Jones means addition by '+'" ("P", for short); F does not *constitute* Jones' meaning addition by "+" – on the non-factualist interpretation, nothing does. Second, even if F could be said to be represented by P, it would still be false that F is *the* fact that P represents; after all, when it is Williams who utters the words "Jones means addition by '+'", thereby expressing P, F's role is played by another state of affairs, namely the fact that Jones's answers to particular addition problems agree with those *Williams* is inclined to give.

Both the non-factualist and the factualist interpretation find at least some support in what Kripke says. Here I will not try to adjudicate the debate; in what follows I assume the non-factualist reading mainly because that is the reading on which McDowell's objection relies, and I think I can show that even if we grant McDowell this assumption his argument does not go through. That being said, I think that the non-factualist interpretation is far more plausible than the factualist one, and it will be useful to say something more about this issue; before doing that, however, we must discuss a couple of consequences of the non-factualist reading.

As a general rule, non-factualism goes hand in hand with deflationism about truth and relativism (see, e.g., Azzouni and Bueno 2008, pp. 757-758 and Kölbel 2008, pp. 375-376). It should therefore come as no surprise that, on the non-factualist reading, Kripkenstein is also committed to a form of relativism about meaning ascriptions, as well as to a deflationist conception of truth. As for deflationism, Kripke himself (1981, p. 86) is quite explicit: "[...] Wittgenstein ac-

cepts the “redundancy” theory of truth: to affirm that a statement is true (or presumably, to precede it with “It is a fact that...”) is simply to affirm the statement itself, and to say it is not true is to deny it [...]”.<sup>8</sup> As for relativism, the issue is a bit more complicated, but not that much. As I have already noted, Wilson is committed to the thesis that Kripkenstein takes the agreement between Jones and Smith to be the fact that corresponds to the proposition Smith expresses when he utters the words “Jones means addition by ‘+’”. But, *mutatis mutandis*, the same has to hold for the agreement between Jones and *Williams*, which must be the fact that corresponds to the proposition *Williams* expresses when she utters the words “Jones means addition by ‘+’”. This shows that Wilson is also committed to the – no doubt revisionist – thesis that, in Kripkenstein’s view, the proposition Smith expresses when he utters the sentence “Jones means addition by ‘+’” is not the one *Williams* expresses when she utters those same words. Not so for the advocates of the non-factualist reading, who can stick to the notion that when they utter the words “Jones means addition by ‘+’” Smith and *Williams* express the same proposition, P. Let us now suppose, however, that while the answers to particular addition problems Smith is inclined to give agree with Jones’, *Williams*’ do not. What we have, then, is that P is true relative to Smith and false relative to *Williams*; and this is definitely a form of relativism, at least in a rather broad sense of the word.

Note, however, that such a relativism can take one of either two forms. According to the strong version, P is true relative to Smith and false relative to *Williams*, *with neither perspective having any claim to being the “correct” one*. According to the weak version, P is – again – true relative to Smith and false relative to *Williams*, but when P is evaluated *qua* expressed by Smith the relevant perspective is his, while when P is evaluated *qua* expressed by *Williams* the relevant perspective is hers. The weak version would come out as a form of relativism on some accounts of the notion (e.g. Kölbel 2004’s), but not on others (e.g. MacFarlane 2014’s); however, I take it to be clear that, on a broad enough understanding of the concept, both the strong and the weak version deserve the label “relativism”. The weak version has been ascribed to Wittgenstein by Voltolini (2010); as for *Kripke’s* Wittgenstein, I take both readings to be reasonable, even though I favor the strong one; that being said, in the remainder of the paper I will not take a stand

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<sup>8</sup> For a criticism of Kripke’s reading see Putnam 1994, pp. 66-69. Kripke’s Wittgenstein is a deflationist about truth in general; however, it is worth stressing that, just as non-factualism and relativism, deflationism can be a local matter – see, e.g., Kölbel 2008, §§ 1-3. To borrow Azzouni’s (2010, p. 79) turn of phrase: “true” can be argued to be “[...] *neutral* between *ontically relevant* and *ontically irrelevant* usages” – see also Azzouni 2007, pp. 204-205.

on this issue; what matters is just that Kripkenstein can be viewed as a relativist in one of these two senses.

But can he? One might be skeptical. Consider, for instance, the two following passages, the first of which almost immediately follows the one I quoted at the beginning of this section:

[...] if we were reduced to a babble of disagreement, with Smith and Jones asserting of each other that they are following the rule wrongly, while others disagreed with both and with each other, there would be little point to the practice just described. In fact, our actual community is (roughly) uniform in its practices with respect to addition. Any individual who claims to have mastered the concept of addition will be judged by the community to have done so if his particular responses agree with those of the community in enough cases [...] (Kripke 1981, pp. 91-92).

The entire “game” we have described – that the community attributes a concept to an individual so long as he exhibits sufficient conformity, under test circumstances, to the behavior of the community – would lose its point outside a community that generally agrees in its practices. [...] On Wittgenstein’s conception, such agreement is essential for our game of ascribing rules and concepts to each other [...] (Kripke 1981, p. 96).

Such passages show, first, that my discussion of the Jones-Smith-Williams case should be slightly modified to take into account the role that Kripkenstein gives to the community. So let us do that and provide both Smith and Williams with a community that agrees with their respective judgments about Jones, and let us rephrase accordingly the relativist upshot of the non-factualist reading of Kripkenstein’s view: if the answers to particular addition problems that Smith’s community is inclined to give agree with Jones’, and those of Williams’ community do not, then the proposition *Jones means addition by “+”* is true relative to Smith’s community and false relative to Williams’. So far, so good. However, one might try to argue that the above passages show something more and that, in fact, they are inconsistent with the non-factualist reading and the relativism it leads to. One might try to argue, more precisely, that such passages suggest that when we assess the proposition in question for truth or falsity only one community is relevant, namely Jones’ – which, of course, may be identical with Smith’s, or with Williams’, but not with both. The fact that Jones’ answers to particular addition

problems agree with his community's just *is* the fact that he means addition by "+".<sup>9</sup>

Well, let us say that such passages actually suggest what the objection in question has them suggesting. That would be evidence for some factualist interpretation of Kripkenstein's view and, *ipso facto*, against the non-factualist/relativist reading. There is, however, also plenty of evidence for the non-factualist/relativist reading and against factualist interpretations. Here I will focus on two points. First, consider the passage that follows:

Wittgenstein's theory should not be confused with a theory that, for any  $m$  and  $n$ , the value of the function we mean by "plus", *is* (by definition) the value that (nearly) all the linguistic community would give as the answer. [...] The theory would assert that 125 is the value of the function meant for given arguments, if and only if "125" is the response nearly everyone would give, given these arguments. Thus the theory would be a social, or community-wide, version of the dispositional theory, and would be open to at least some of the same criticisms as the original form. I take Wittgenstein to deny that he holds such a view [...] (Kripke 1981, p. 111).

Here Kripke explicitly denies that Wittgenstein's view was that the (alleged) fact that the function Jones means by "+" takes the value 125 for the arguments 68 and 57 can be identified with the fact that "125" is the answer most of the members of Jones' community would give to the problem "68 + 57", which immediately entails a commitment by Kripke to denying that Wittgenstein's view was that the (alleged) fact that Jones means addition by "+" can be identified with facts about his community's (and his) linguistic behavior. I do not see how this can be made

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<sup>9</sup> [Readers might prefer to come back to this footnote after having read section 2 and the first paragraph of section 3] Such a view of meaning ascriptions is neither a form of nonindexical contextualism nor a form of truth-value relativism – in fact, it is none of the six views I describe in section 3. It resembles nonindexical contextualism and truth-value relativism in that it holds that the *circumstances of evaluation* relative to which the proposition expressed by a meaning ascription should be assessed for truth or falsity vary with context; however, here the relevant context is neither the context in which the meaning ascription (e.g. "The meaning of Jones' utterance of "68 + 57 = 125" is M") was uttered nor that in which it is assessed, but – rather – that in which *the utterance the meaning ascription makes reference to* (e.g. Jones' utterance of "68 + 57 = 125") was produced – the view is therefore akin to Stanley's (2005) interest-relative invariantism about knowledge and Street's (2008) constructivism about practical reasons. Note, however, that this position entails – not for meaning ascriptions but for language in general – a view which I do describe in section 3, namely the ambiguity theory.

consistent with the factualist reading sketched above. Second, remember what Kripke says about the case of Robinson Crusoe:

What is [...] denied is what might be called the “private model” of rule following, that the notion of a person following a given rule is to be analyzed simply in terms of facts about the rule follower and the rule follower alone, without reference to his membership in a wider community. [...] Does this mean that Robinson Crusoe, isolated on an island, cannot be said to follow any rules, no matter what he does? I do not see that this follows. What does follow is that *if* we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him. The falsity of the private model need not mean that a *physically isolated* individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather that an individual, *considered in isolation* [...], cannot be said to do so (Kripke 1981, pp. 109-110).

Here Kripke comes very close to saying explicitly that when we assess propositions such as *Crusoe follows the rule of addition* and *Crusoe means addition* for truth or falsity Crusoe’s community does not have any privileged role; after all, Crusoe can even lack a community! I do not see how this can be made consistent with the factualist reading sketched above. Moreover, the idea that what matters is that “we are taking Crusoe into our community” strongly suggests that when we assess such propositions for truth or falsity all communities are on a par; after all, any community can take Crusoe into itself. And this is exactly the point of the non-factualist/relativist reading.

To be clear, I am not saying that such remarks provide conclusive reasons for embracing the non-factualist/relativist interpretation or that they should convince everyone – even though they did convince *me*. The goal was just that of showing that the non-factualist/relativist interpretation is a plausible one and, therefore, McDowell’s objection – which presupposes it – cannot be dismissed out of hand.<sup>10, 11</sup> Let us now turn to this objection.

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<sup>10</sup> The question I started with was whether Kripkenstein can be viewed as a relativist – in one of the two senses I described above. Since the notion that Kripkenstein is a relativist was a straightforward consequence of the non-factualist reading, I answered the question by providing evidence in support of that reading. As I see it, the evidence I provided outweighs any evidence for the factualist reading; however – lest some reader be distracted by what, after all, is a side issue – let me remind you of the dialectic. McDowell takes Kripkenstein to be a non-factualist about meaning (in fact, McDowell is the primary target of Wilson’s polemic against the non-factualist interpretation) and his argument presupposes such a reading. My goal is to show that even if we grant McDowell this assumption, his argument does not go through. Therefore, I do not have to prove that the

The relativism Kripkenstein is committed to if he is really a non-factualist is clearly a local one: the propositions whose truth values are claimed to be relative are just those expressed by meaning ascriptions and related constructions. However, if McDowell is right, this local relativism entails a global one, which in turn entails a form of subjective idealism. I will start with a regimentation of what I take to be McDowell's argument; afterwards, I will say something to help the reader see McDowell's original version of the argument (the one I quoted at the beginning of the paper) through mine. Here is my regimentation:

First premise: Kripkenstein maintains that the proposition expressed by an utterance of a meaning ascription (e.g. a sentence of the form "*Utterance U has meaning M*") is true only relative to, say, a perspective.

Second premise: the proposition that p is true if and only if p.

First lemma: Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that an utterance has a given meaning only relative to a perspective.

Third premise: an utterance's correctness depends, at least in part, on its meaning.

Second lemma: Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective.

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non-factualist reading is correct; all I have to show is that it is a plausible interpretation of Kripke's remarks – and that, therefore, McDowell's argument cannot be ignored.

<sup>11</sup> An anonymous reviewer for this journal noted that the factualism I described above (according to which when we assess the proposition *Jones means addition by "+"* for truth or falsity the only relevant community is *Jones*) is much more intuitive than the non-factualism of McDowell's Kripkenstein. This is, I think, correct. Consider, e.g., the word "prima" – which, I am told, means *excellent* in German and a number of things (e.g. *before*), but never *excellent*, in Italian – and suppose that the proposition we are assessing for truth or falsity is *By "prima", Üter means excellent*. Saying that, since Üter is German, this proposition is true is definitely more intuitive (or at least less counterintuitive) than saying that it is true relative to the community of the German speakers and false relative to that of the Italian speakers. So far, so good. What I deny (and, to be fair, I am not sure that the reviewer in question would disagree with me on this) is that this shows that the factualist interpretation of Kripke's essay is more plausible than the non-factualist one. Granted, Kripke (1981, e.g. pp. 63-65) stresses that Wittgenstein did not regard himself as a skeptic, but he also makes it clear that he does not think that Wittgenstein's self-assessment should be taken too seriously (1981, esp. pp. 65-66). I therefore doubt that the move from *View X is more intuitive than view Y* to *View X is more likely to be Kripkenstein's than view Y* is a valid one. If anything, the fact that a given view does not constitute too much of a departure from common sense should, I think, make us wary of ascribing it to Kripke's Wittgenstein.

Fourth premise: an utterance of a declarative sentence is correct if and only if the proposition it expresses is true.

Third lemma: Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that a proposition is true only relative to a perspective.

Fifth premise: a state of affairs obtains if and only if the corresponding proposition is true.<sup>12</sup>

Conclusion: Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that a state of affairs obtains only relative to a perspective.

The argument's first premise is a formulation of the conclusion about Kripkenstein's local relativism which I drew above, while the lemma that straightforwardly follows from this premise is my version of the first step of McDowell's own formulation of the argument, namely the claim that in Kripkenstein's view there is no room for "a notion of how the pattern of application that we grasp extends independently of the actual outcome of any investigation". One might find the latter point a little puzzling, since – at least on the face of it – in the relevant passage McDowell does not mention either *meanings* or *relativity to a perspective*. Therefore, let me say something more about the way I read the passage in question.

First, meaning. Saying that in Kripkenstein's view there is no room for "a notion of how the pattern of application that we grasp extends independently of the actual outcome of any investigation" is saying that in Kripkenstein's view there is no room for a robust, objective notion of how a word should be used – given how it has been used in the past. But what determines how a word should be used is its meaning. Therefore, it seems clear to me that McDowell's point here can be put in terms of meaning.

As for relativity to a perspective, I take the phrase "independently of the actual outcome of any investigation" to suggest that here McDowell is trying to describe what he thinks is a form of relativism: the pattern of application that we grasp does not extend independently of the actual outcome of any investigation, *but only relative to such an outcome*. This is also how I read qualifications like "whatever, if anything, we in fact go on to say about the matter" and the use of the notion of investigation, or ratification, dependency: a given way to extend a certain pattern of application is correct *only relative to a ratification*.

The following passage is, I think, pretty helpful in this connection:

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<sup>12</sup> Note that I am assuming that for every state of affairs there is a corresponding proposition, but not that for every proposition there is a corresponding state of affairs: there are, of course, propositions that are non-factual.

His [i.e. Wright's] claim is that Wittgenstein seems *almost* to want to deny all substance to the "pattern" idea; what he attributes to Wittgenstein is not an outright abandonment of the idea but a reinterpretation of it. Wright's view is that the intuitive contractual picture of meaning and understanding can be rendered innocuous – purged of the seductive misconception – by discarding the thought that the patterns are independent of our ratification (McDowell 1984, p. 223).

Here McDowell seems to want to make clear that the view of Wright's Wittgenstein – which, as I have already mentioned, is the primary target of McDowell's argument – is not that there is absolutely no substance to the idea that words should be used in a certain way, but just that the way a word should be used depends on our ratification. And saying that the way a word should be used *depends* on our ratification is just saying that it is *relative* to it.<sup>13</sup>

The rest of the argument does not raise any (new) exegetical problems. The second step of McDowell's original version of the argument is the claim that in Kripkenstein's view there is no room for "a conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway"; the corresponding step in my version is the third lemma.<sup>14</sup> McDowell seems to believe that the transition from the non-objectivity of how the pattern of application that we grasp extends to the non-objectivity of how things could correctly be said to be is unproblematic. I do not think it is and so I made explicit what I believe were that derivation's intermediate steps. Finally, my version's conclusion is my gloss of McDowell's claim that Kripkenstein is committed to a form of subjective idealism.

So much for the exegetical part of the paper. In section 3 I will explain what is wrong with McDowell's argument, but before doing that we need a suitable theo-

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<sup>13</sup> [Readers unfamiliar with the distinction between contexts of use and contexts of assessment might find this footnote more helpful after having read section 2 – and maybe section 3, too] Strictly speaking, saying that the way a word should be used depends on X is not yet embracing a form of relativism (at least in MacFarlane's sense of the word), since X might be a feature of the context of *use*. That being said, there are three reasons to believe that, in this case, X is a feature of the context of *assessment*. First, this is what is suggested by the word "ratification". Second, this seems to be the reading most consistent with the general tenor of Wright's book. Third, as we have seen, McDowell believes both that his argument applies also to Kripkenstein's case and that Kripkenstein is a non-factualist about meaning, and – as Azzouni and Bueno have shown – non-factualism and relativism usually go hand in hand.

<sup>14</sup> Some might want to argue that the second step of McDowell's original version of the argument should be identified with my regimentation's *second* lemma. That might be. Anyway, nothing of importance hinges on this point.

retical apparatus, which is the topic of the next section. Besides allowing me to explain clearly why McDowell's argument fails, the machinery in question will prove itself useful in two other respects, too. First, it will help me explain how radical Kripkenstein's view of language in general is, as well as the difference between the strong and the weak version of the relativism McDowell ascribes to him. Second, it will allow me to build a bridge between the rule-following debate and the contemporary literature on context sensitivity, and show that Kripkenstein's view of language in general fills a gap in the logical space of this latter literature.

## **2. A Suitable Theoretical Apparatus**

I will start my discussion of McDowell's argument by sketching a suitable theoretical apparatus, basically equivalent to MacFarlane's (2014) recent development of Kaplan's (1989b) semantic framework.<sup>15</sup> I will then focus on the argument's second lemma. This lemma is the conclusion of the first half of the argument, but also the first step of the argument's second half. However, the second lemma is ambiguous, and I will show that the reading that makes the argument's first half sound makes the second one unsound, and *vice versa*. Either way, the argument fails.

Let a logical form be a lexically and structurally disambiguated sentence (see, e.g., Stanley 2000, p. 393).<sup>16</sup> To each logical form (and, indirectly, to each utterance<sup>17</sup> of a logical form) is associated a character, a function from contexts<sup>18</sup> to *t*-distributions, which in turn are functions from circumstances of evaluation to truth values. A circumstance of evaluation is an *n*-tuple of relevant features: possible worlds, times, standards of taste, and so on; in the simplest case a circumstance of

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<sup>15</sup> For a useful complement to MacFarlane's own defense of his system see Predelli 2012.

<sup>16</sup> "Logical form" might, of course, be a tad misleading. Another term used in the literature is "clause" – see, e.g., Predelli 2005, pp. 14-17.

<sup>17</sup> I speak of utterances only for the sake of simplicity, since I must confess that I sympathize with the Kaplanian idea that, as far as semantic theorizing is concerned, all talk of utterances should be replaced by talk of, say, logical forms in context – see, e.g., Predelli 2005, chapter 3, §§ 3-4, which develops the strategy suggested by Kaplan 1989a, part 2, § 1. Note that even if it entails a switch from (uses of) tokens to types, such a view is not platonistic in nature – for one thing, it is consistent with the metaphysics of words outlined in Kaplan 1990.

<sup>18</sup> The relevant notion of context is a rather technical one – see, e.g., the remarks on contexts and indexes in Predelli 2005, pp. 17-18. A quite interesting consequence of the adoption of this notion is that the circumstance against which a given logical form in context must be evaluated can be "non-standard" – see, e.g., Predelli 2005, chapter 2, § 5 and chapter 3, § 6.

evaluation is just a world and the t-distributions are the familiar truth conditions<sup>19</sup>,<sup>20</sup> – while we can think of character as the theoretical counterpart of meaning, we can think of t-distributions as the theoretical counterparts of propositions.<sup>21</sup>

As for context, there are three roles it can play. First, context can help us identify the relevant character and thereby disambiguate the sentence at issue. Second, context is sometimes needed to identify the relevant t-distribution. Third, context determines the relevant circumstances of evaluation (see, e.g., Kaplan 1989b, p. 522). There are two kinds of context, the context of use and the context of assessment. The notion of a context of use is pretty standard. This is not so for the notion of a context of assessment. However, I do not think that there is any reason to be suspicious of this concept:

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<sup>19</sup> For an influential argument against the idea that the values of a character are not always truth conditions see Stanley 2000 and 2002. For a by now classic example of a character and its arguments (allegedly) falling short of determining truth conditions see Travis 1997, §§ 1-3 – in the remainder of the paper Travis draws from his analysis conclusions concerning several issues, e.g. Grice’s (see, e.g., 1989) criticism of certain distinctively philosophical uses of “what we would not say”; for a sensible analysis of Travis’ example see Predelli 2005, chapter 4, §§ 1-5, to which I owe my use of the distinction t-distributions-truth conditions. For other Travis-friendly examples see Lewis 1979.

<sup>20</sup> It should be clear that this sense of “truth conditions” is not Kripke’s. For one, while Kripke’s truth conditions are facts, truth conditions in the sense at issue here are functions. That being said, the two notions are not unrelated. If there are no truth conditions in Kripke’s sense which correspond to a given kind of declarative sentences, then the relevant utterances have no truth conditions in the “functional” sense, and *vice versa*. By the way, this correspondence shows that just as there are two senses in which the utterances of a declarative sentence can be said not to have “functional” truth conditions in a robust sense (either because their t-distributions are not truth conditions or because which truth conditions they express depends on the context of assessment – see below for the lingo), there are two senses in which one can say that, strictly speaking, there are no Kripkean truth conditions which correspond to a given kind of sentences: either because the facts in question do not exist or because which facts correspond to the sentences in question is a relative matter. As the next section should make clear, I believe that – if Kripkenstein is right – while meaning ascriptions and related constructions lack Kripkean truth conditions also in the first – stronger – sense, all the other kinds of sentences lack Kripkean truth conditions only in the second – weaker – sense.

<sup>21</sup> If you want, you can reserve the word “proposition” for the counterparts of truth conditions and say that t-distributions that are not truth conditions are the theoretical counterparts of propositional radicals – in Bach’s (1994) sense. The distinction between propositions and propositional radicals is basically Recanati’s (2007, p. 5) distinction between complete and explicit content.

We are already comfortable with the notion of a “context of use”, understood as a possible situation in which a sentence might be used. So we ought to be able to make good sense of the notion of a “context of assessment” – a possible situation in which a use of a sentence might be *assessed*. There shouldn’t be anything controversial about contexts of assessment: if there can be assessments of uses of sentences, then surely we can talk of the contexts in which these assessments would occur (MacFarlane 2014, p. 60).

That being said, there is a difference between contexts of use and contexts of assessment that is worth stressing here:

A particular use of a sentence may be assessed from indefinitely many possible contexts. Thus, although we may talk of “*the* context of use” for such a use, we may not talk in the same way of “*the* context of assessment”. [...] It is important that the context of assessment is not fixed in any way by facts about the context of use, including the speaker’s intentions; there is no “correct” context from which to assess a particular speech act (MacFarlane 2014, pp. 61-62).

I will come back to this difference between contexts of use and contexts of assessment in the next section, for it is necessary to fully understand how radical the view of language the non-factualist version of Kripkenstein is committed to is. Note, however, that this difference can also help us elucidate a distinction we have already met, namely the one between the strong and the weak version of the relativism to which, according to the non-factualist reading, Kripkenstein is committed to.

According to the strong version of this position, if the answers to particular addition problems Smith’s community is inclined to give agree with Jones’, while those of Williams’ community do not, then the proposition *Jones means addition by “+”* is true relative to Smith’s community and false relative to Williams’, with neither perspective having any claim to being the “correct” one. The weak version agrees that in such a situation the proposition in question is true relative to Smith’s community and false relative to Williams’, but it has that when this proposition is evaluated *qua* expressed by Smith the relevant perspective is that of his community, while when it is evaluated *qua* expressed by Williams the relevant perspective is that of hers. Now, with our theoretical apparatus in place, and keeping in mind the difference between contexts of use and contexts of assessment stressed above, it is clear that, even though both versions of the position have that there is a dependency of the circumstances of evaluation on the relevant perspec-

tive,<sup>22</sup> the weak one thinks of this perspective as a feature of the context of use (the relevant perspective is that of the community of the speaker), while the strong one thinks of it as a feature of the context of assessment – there is no fact of the matter as to which perspective is the relevant one.

The weak version of the relativism the non-factualist's Kripkenstein is committed to is what is usually called “nonindexical contextualism”, while the strong version is what MacFarlane (2014, p. 73) calls “truth-value relativism”. I prefer “reality relativism” to “truth-value relativism” (even though I admit that it does not sound that good) because the dependence of a proposition's truth value on the context of assessment is just a by-product of the dependence on such a context of the circumstances of evaluation relevant to its assessment, and we can think of circumstances of evaluation as the theoretical counterpart of “reality” – that against which we evaluate our claims.

### 3. Relativism without Idealism

Let us now take our argument's second lemma. The apparatus I sketched allows us to distinguish six different ways to read it:

Ambiguity theoretic reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *character* is associated to it (i.e., which logical form it is an utterance of) depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *use*.

Indexical contextualist reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *t-distributions* it expresses depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *use*.

Nonindexical contextualist reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *circumstances of evaluation* are relevant to its assessment depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *use*.

Meaning relativist reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *character* is associated to it depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *assessment*.

Proposition relativist reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *t-distributions* it expresses depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *assessment* – this is what MacFarlane (2014, p. 73) calls “content relativism”.

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<sup>22</sup> The dependency of the truth value of a proposition(al radical) on a certain parameter is, of course, represented in our system by a dependency of the argument of the corresponding t-distribution on that parameter, and the argument of a t-distribution is a circumstance of evaluation.

Reality relativist reading: an utterance is correct only relative to a perspective because which *circumstances of evaluation* are relevant to its assessment depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of *assessment*.

The following table should help the reader see how these six options are related to each other:

	Character	T-distributions	Circumstances of evaluation
Context of use	Ambiguity theoretic reading	Indexical contextualist reading	Nonindexical contextualist reading
Context of assessment	Meaning relativist reading	Proposition relativist reading	Reality relativist reading

And now let me ask a question: which, among these six readings, make the second half of my regimentation of McDowell’s argument (from the second lemma onwards) sound? Well, take the meaning relativist reading. What this reading entails, together with the fourth premise, is that sometimes an utterance  $U$  has meaning  $M_1$ , and hence expresses the true proposition  $P_1$ , relative to context  $C_1$  and has meaning  $M_2$ , and hence expresses the false proposition  $P_2$ , relative to context  $C_2$ . But this is not what the third lemma says. What this lemma says is that sometimes *one and the same* proposition is true relative to one context and false relative to another. Therefore, the meaning relativist reading renders the transition from the second to the third lemma, and *a fortiori* the argument’s second half, unsound.

*Mutatis mutandis*, more or less the same holds for the other readings in the character and the t-distributions columns of the table above. Not so, however, for the nonindexical contextualist and the reality relativist readings, since these readings do entail that sometimes one and the same proposition is true relative to a context and false relative to another. The answer to my question, therefore, is that the second half of my regimentation of McDowell’s argument is sound only if the non-factualist’s Kripkenstein is committed to either nonindexical contextualism or reality relativism not just with respect to meaning ascriptions but also with respect to language *in general*. And so the question now is: is either of these two readings the one we derived in the argument’s first half?

The answer is, clearly enough, no. The second lemma, which is the conclusion of our argument’s first half, was derived – with the help of the third premise – from the first lemma, which ascribes to Kripkenstein the idea that an utterance has

a given *meaning* only relative to a perspective. And since, in our system, the theoretical counterpart of the concept of meaning is the notion of character, the only readings consistent with this fact are the ones in the character column of our table.

This would be enough to show that McDowell's argument fails. Its second half is sound only if we read the second lemma along the lines of either the nonindexical contextualist or the reality relativist reading; its first half is sound only if we read that lemma along the lines of either the ambiguity theoretic or the meaning relativist reading; hence, the argument as a whole is never sound. That being said, some other things are, I think, worth noting.

First, the hypothesis that the view of language in general to which the non-factualist version of Kripkenstein is committed is an ambiguity theory can, in fact, be ruled out. To see why, let us start with the hypothesis that Kripkenstein is a nonindexical contextualist about meaning ascriptions. On this hypothesis, Kripkenstein thinks that the truth value of the proposition *The meaning of Jones' utterance of "68 + 57 = 125" is M* ("P", for short) depends on the perspective of the utterer of the utterance expressing P – let us call this utterance " $U_{\text{meaning}}$ ". But the proposition that p is true if and only if p. Therefore, Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that whether the meaning of Jones' utterance of "68 + 57 = 125" (" $U_{\text{sum}}$ ", for short) is M or not depends on the perspective of the utterer of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$ . But, with respect to  $U_{\text{sum}}$ , the utterer of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$  plays the role of the assessor. Hence, Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that whether the meaning of  $U_{\text{sum}}$  is M or not depends on the perspective of the *assessor* of that utterance, and this is meaning relativism, not the ambiguity theory. And since, of course, we could have put any other utterance in place of  $U_{\text{sum}}$ , this means that if he is a nonindexical contextualist about meaning ascriptions, then Kripkenstein must be a meaning relativist about language in general – meaning ascriptions included.

Let us now turn to the hypothesis that Kripkenstein is a reality relativist about meaning ascriptions. On this hypothesis, Kripkenstein thinks that the truth value of P depends on the perspective of the assessor of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$ . But the proposition that p is true if and only if p. Therefore, Kripkenstein is committed to the idea that whether the meaning of  $U_{\text{sum}}$  is M or not depends on the perspective of the assessor of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$ . But if Williams is interested in assessing the truth value of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$ , she is *ipso facto* interested in assessing the meaning of  $U_{\text{sum}}$  – after all, the meaning of  $U_{\text{sum}}$  is what  $U_{\text{meaning}}$  talks about; therefore, an assessor of  $U_{\text{meaning}}$  plays the role of the assessor with respect to  $U_{\text{sum}}$ , too. Hence, Kripkenstein is once again committed to the idea that whether the meaning of  $U_{\text{sum}}$  is M or not depends on the perspective of the *assessor* of that utterance: meaning relativism, not the ambiguity theory. Therefore, Kripkenstein must be a meaning relativist about language in general also on the assumption that he is a reality relativist about meaning ascriptions. But (the non-factualist version of) Kripkenstein must be either a

nonindexical contextualist or a reality relativist about meaning ascriptions. Hence, he must be a meaning relativist about language in general.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> And so, on the non-factualist/relativist reading Kripkenstein holds (or at least is committed to) the idea that (1) which character is associated to an utterance depends on the value of the perspective parameter in the context of assessment. But is this not inconsistent with the very notion that Kripkenstein maintains that (2) there is no fact of the matter as to what a given utterance means? Is not saying that an utterance's character depends on the context of assessment just saying that meaning facts have, as it were, more structure than we thought, rather than flat out denying that they exist? The answer is that no, it is not, since – as I have already stressed in section 2 – there is no “correct” context from which to assess a particular speech act. Saying that an utterance's character depends on the context of assessment is not saying just that meaning facts have more structure than we thought; it is saying that, where we thought there were facts, there really are only opinions. That being said, a somewhat related objection deserves a more careful answer. The objection is that even though (1) and (2) are in principle consistent, maybe one (or more than one) of the arguments that support (2) can be adapted to refute (1). So far, I have tried to be as non-committal as possible about the details of the notion of a perspective; however, it is impossible to discuss this second objection without making this concept a little bit more precise. Let us therefore identify a perspective with a set of dispositions, which, in this context, strikes me as the most natural way to cash out the notion of a perspective. After all, when I first introduced the notion that Kripkenstein is a (reality) relativist about meaning ascriptions the idea was that the ground for saying that the proposition *Jones means addition by “+”* is true relative to Smith's perspective and false relative to Williams' is that while the answers to particular addition problems Smith is inclined to give agree with Jones', Williams' do not. And it is quite natural to take the answers Smith is inclined to give to be those he is *disposed* to give. This would make Kripkenstein's view a form of dispositionalism; however, it is worth stressing that the relevant dispositions would be the assessor's, which would make Kripkenstein's brand of dispositionalism utterly different not only from classic semantic dispositionalism, but also from views such as McDowell's – for the role of dispositions in McDowell's view see McDowell 2009, p. 95; *mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for McDowell's remarks concerning the role of the linguistic community, for which see, e.g., McDowell 1991, p. 315. Anyway, if we identify perspectives with sets of dispositions, the objection becomes that maybe one of the arguments that refute less idiosyncratic varieties of semantic dispositionalism can be adapted to refute (1), too. Well, as far as I can see, the main arguments against semantic dispositionalism one finds in the literature are (I) Kripke's Argument from Finitude and Mistake, (II) what we may call “the Ought Argument” (i.e. Kripke's Normativity Argument as rendered in, e.g., Glüer and Wikforss 2009), (III) what we may call “the Non-Inferential Knowledge Argument” (i.e. Kripke's Normativity Argument as rendered in, e.g., Zalabardo 1997 and Guardo 2014), and, finally, (IV) the Privileging Problem (for which see, e.g., Bird and Handfield 2008 and Guardo 2012b, pp. 206-207). Now, my view on the matter is that (I) fails against ideal-condition dispositional analyses (since I no longer accept the argument I gave in Guardo 2012b, § 3), while (II)

Second, note that – since t-distributions are the values of characters – meaning relativism entails proposition relativism. Therefore, if Kripkenstein is a global meaning relativist, he must be a global proposition relativist, too – even though, as it were, only derivatively. Taken together with what I said about the relation between nonindexical contextualism about meaning ascriptions and meaning relativism about language in general, this means that nonindexical contextualism about meaning ascriptions entails proposition relativism about language in general – and so, *a fortiori*, that these two views are compatible. On this point, I suspect I disagree with MacFarlane (2014, pp. 73-74), who seems to think that a global proposition (or content) relativism would entail truth-value (or reality) relativism about meaning ascriptions and, therefore, that global proposition relativism is incompatible with nonindexical contextualism about these constructions.

Finally, a methodological remark. If the non-factualist reading is correct, Kripke's Wittgenstein is either a nonindexical contextualist or a reality relativist about meaning ascriptions. This might seem to entail that Kripkenstein is committed to either an unrestricted reality relativism or a global nonindexical contextualism and, therefore, to some form of subjective idealism. However, I have shown that this is not the case: the general view about language Kripkenstein is committed to is what I called "meaning relativism", the idea that which meaning is to be assigned to a given utterance depends on the context of assessment. Now, nobody doubts that ambiguity and indexicality are widespread phenomena; nonindexical contextualism and reality relativism have been advocated with regard to predicates of personal taste, knowledge attributions, epistemic modals, etc; and even proposition relativism has found some supporters (see, e.g., Sweeney 2014). On the other hand, meaning relativism, not to say an unrestricted meaning relativism such as (the non-factualist's) Kripkenstein's, at least to my knowledge,

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is at the very least invalid (see Guardo 2012a, pp. 374-375); as for (III), the point of this argument is that if we analyze meaning in terms of dispositions we make a mystery of our non-inferential knowledge of what we mean, and (1) is not an attempt to analyze meaning in terms of dispositions: the idea is, rather, that there is no fact of the matter as to what we mean; finally, the point of (IV) is that there is no principled, non-question-begging reason to identify what I mean by "+" with my disposition to give certain answers in conditions X rather than with my disposition to give certain other answers in conditions Y – and such a problem does not even arise with regard to (1), for according to (1) any set of dispositions (mine or someone else's) is as good as any other. (Note that while in the case of (I) and (II) my answer is that I am skeptical that these arguments can really refute classic semantic dispositionalism and so I do not see any reason to think that they can refute meaning relativism, in the case of (III) and (IV) my point is just that they cannot be adapted to refute meaning relativism, which is not to say that they do not work against classic semantic dispositionalism – and, in fact, I suspect they both do).

has never been either advocated or discussed in the technical and empirically oriented literature, which might give rise to suspicions about the theoretical respectability of such a position.

I think that such suspicions are uncalled for. Context-dependency is visible only when the relevant parameter takes different values. The context-dependency of “I” is visible only because there are plenty of speakers. But all human beings have pretty much the same linguistic dispositions – and, from an evolutionary point of view, this is far from strange, since such an agreement is clearly a precondition of communication (see, e.g., Guardo forthcoming). The answers Smith is inclined to give to particular addition problems pretty much agree with Jones’, and when they disagree Smith and Jones can at least be interpreted as following the same procedure. What I dubbed the “perspective” parameter rarely, if ever, takes different values. The context-dependency isolated by Kripkenstein is, therefore, almost perfectly invisible. And if this context-dependency is invisible, it is not strange that it is ignored in the empirically oriented literature.

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