

# MINIMAL MEANING HOLISM

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## ***1. Fears, worries and hopes***

Holism is a multifarious doctrine, which pertains to language, thought, action, confirmation or hypothesis testing, and the nature of reality. Meaning holism is also a multifarious doctrine, which pertains to expressions, sentences, kinds of sentences, languages, meanings, and possibly all the rest of the various things just mentioned. Meaning holism is intricate, "interlocked", inextricable, and... holistic, a sort of glue or virus which invades everything it touches, or so it seems. There is here some sort of paradox. In their attempts to eradicate meaning holism, and holism *tout court* , from various areas in the philosophy of language and in the philosophy of mind the philosophers who wanted to oppose the doctrine have tended to treat it as a single, more or less unified doctrine answering certain basic assumptions, and they have attempted to destroy it by distinguishing various forms or versions of holism, various grades of holisticity. But once you distinguish various forms or degrees of holism, some of which being less dangerous, holism loses its *prima facie* unity, and hence its threatening character. So why was it so threatening in the first place, and why should the particular versions be frightening in themselves? The answer, for those who are afraid of meaning holism, must be: because the adoption of a seemingly innocuous version of holism leads you, by some form of gentle slippery slope, to the general, horrible, intricate *wholism* (holism all stars), the general syndrome of which the supposedly innocuous version is but a symptom. Examples of this strategy are provided by Dummett and by Fodor. Dummett first assimilates meaning holism to the doctrine which he calls "*radical*" "*orconstitutive* holism", that the meaning of a single sentence in a language cannot be understood unless one understands *all* the sentences in a language (he gives an analogy with a game of strategy where the significance of a single move cannot be understood without understanding all the rules and possible moves of the game). He then realizes that this constitutive form of

holism can be distinguished from a *methodological* form, according to which the *manifestation* of meaning is subject to an holistic constraint: an *interpreter* or an ascriber of meanings must presuppose that the meanings that he ascribes are related to *other* meanings and thoughts, without this implying that meanings in themselves are constitutively holistic. He sees nothing to object *per se* to this methodological form. But then he claims that the methodological doctrine *must* lead to the constitutive one (Dummett 1987). Fodor (Fodor and Le Pore 1992) too is cautious in distinguishing various degrees of holism. Seeing the root of holism in the doctrine of *anatomism* about properties in general, he differentiates a *strong* anatomism: *There are other propositions such that you can't believe P unless you believe them* which has disastrous consequences, from a *weak* anatomism: *You can't believe P unless there are other propositions that you believe*, which does not have the same consequences. But he claims that "strong anatomism is the only kind worth having" (1992,30) and proceeds to show its devastating consequences.

This suggests that if we restrict meaning holism to the weaker forms of the doctrine, and show that they do not imply the stronger ones, meaning holism might be a much more acceptable and less frightening doctrine than it is according to its critics. In this paper, however, I shall not try to start from the various characterizations of meaning holism given by Dummett and Fodor, and I shall not try to examine their various interconnexions, nor do I propose to draw a general map of the various forms of holism. Another possible strategy to defend holism is to show that the opposite doctrines of atomism and of molecularism are indefensible, but I shall not follow this (arduous) path. I shall try to formulate a *minimal* form of meaning holism, which, according to me, is a set of innocuous platitudes, comparable to the platitudes about truth which appear in the so-called deflationary or minimalist conception of truth. But I will not claim, like some deflationists about truth who say that these platitudes are *all there is* to truth, that the platitudes about holism are all there is to holism. I shall try to show that one has to go beyond the platitudes to a more *substantial* meaning holism, which, nevertheless is not as strong as to constitute the frightening radical doctrines which are the objects of current attacks against holism. In other words, it seems to me that a moderately strong form of the doctrine is acceptable and needed in the theory of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

## ***2. Resisting temptation: minimalist meaning holism***

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<sup>1</sup> The reader of Wright 1992 will find many affinities between my style of argument here and his about minimalism with respect to truth.

According to (the most current version of) what is called the "deflationary" or "minimalist" theory of truth<sup>2</sup>, the notion of truth is entirely captured by certain formal features of the truth predicate, and in particular the "disquotational principle":

(DS) "S" is true if and only if S

and when we have pointed out that "true" is a device of disquotation and of registering assertions, there is no more to be said to explain or to define the notion of truth. In particular there is no more to be said about the definition of truth in terms of correspondence, coherence, or warranted assertibility. All the supposedly "thick" metaphysical intuitions that we have about truth are captured by the (thin) platitudes expressed by the disquotational schema, and the metaphysical debates about the nature of truth do not make sense. Truth is expressed by the platitudes that to assert a sentence is to claim that it is true, that a true statement corresponds to the facts, that a statement which can be true has a negation which can be true, etc., and it is not necessary to go beyond these platitudes.

Some philosophers have recently been willing to be deflationist or minimalists not only about truth, but also about meaning. Here the versions differ, but one form of other of this view has been defended by McDowell (1987) with his "modest" theory of meaning, Schiffer's "defeatist" "no-theory theory of meaning", or Johnston's (1987) "minimalism", and Horwich's (1990) deflationism. According to the deflationary conception of meaning, all there is to meaning is encapsulated in the truth-conditional conception: the meaning of a sentence is constituted by its truth conditions. This conception is the consequence of a series of platitudes: understanding a statement is to know what it states; to know what it states is to know what kind of states of affairs are to obtain if it is true, to know what it states is to know how what the sentence says when it is asserted sincerely. Just as the deflationism about truth does not imply that one has to dig into a deeper notion of, say, correspondence, the deflationism about meaning does not imply that one has to dig into the deeper notion of a state of affairs which would transcend all possible verification, or into the conditions of verification themselves. A good statement of the view is given by Johnston (1987:38):

(1) Meaning has no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover. All we know and we

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<sup>2</sup> In the past the theory has been attributed to Ramsey, Wittgenstein, some logical positivists such as Ayer, and sometimes to Tarski. In the recent past, the theory has been explicitly endorsed by Field (1987), Williams (1987) and Horwich (1990). I do not consider here the differences between the "redundancy" and the "disquotationalist" theory. Wright (1992) also claims to be minimalist, but in an importantly different sense. See below.

need to know about meaning in general is given by a family of platitudes of the sort articulated

[ above<sup>3</sup>]

(2) Those platitudes taken together exhibit talk about the meaning of an expression as reifying talk

about the potential of the expression to be used to assert, command, ask about, etc. various

things.

(3) So understanding the meanings of expressions is not something that lies behind and is the

causal explanatory basis of the ability to use the expressions to assert, command, ask about,

etc. various things. Rather it is constituted by his ability.

(4) So a theory of meaning could be at most a statement of propositions knowledge of which would

enable us to come to acquire the practical ability. But in this regard a translation manual could

serve almost as well. Hence the interest of a theory of meaning is minimal and certainly no

interesting issue about objectivity, realism or the relation between mind and reality can be raised

by considering questions about the form of a theory of meaning.

Johnston here makes it clear, by his equation of a theory of meaning with a translation manual, that a minimalist theory in his sense will not have to get rid of meaning, but will use this very notion to state what are the meanings of expressions. This requirement is similar to the requirement of "modesty" which Mc Dowell adduces against Dummett's (1975) claim that a theory of meaning has to be "substantial" in the sense that it should not presuppose that a speaker knows the meaning of an expression to ascribe to him this a knowledge of meaning, as it were "from the outside".

The discussion about the deflationary theories of truth and of meaning bears on the question whether a) the alleged platitudes about truth and meaning *are* platitudes, and b) whether, if one grants that they are platitudes, one should try to go beyond them. For the time being I shall grant that they are platitudes, and that deflationism about truth and meaning is correct.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnston's platitudes are not exactly those above, but this does not matter here.

Can we extend meaning deflationism or meaning minimalism to other platitudes, *holistic* platitudes, and formulate a version of *minimalist meaning holism*? I seem that we can:

(a) *First platitude : meaning ascription* . No behaviour can be regarded as distinctive of a subject's knowledge of the meaning of a particular expression or sentence. One kind of behaviour can be related to many meanings, and one meaning can find its expression in many kinds of behaviour.

(b) *Second platitude : compositionality and systematicity* . The meaning of complex expressions or sentences is a function of the meanings of simpler parts or words. There are systematic links between expressions. In particular one can infer some sentences from others.

(c) *Third platitude: generality and productivity* . If you know the meaning of "Tibbles is on the mat", and if you know the meaning of "Fido", then presumably you will know the meaning of "Fido is on the mat" and the meaning of many sentences like this if you come to learn other proper names.

These are all claims about holistic properties, in Fodor and Le Pore's sense : a property such that if anything has it, lots of other things have it. So (a)-(c) defines what they call a form of "semantic atomism". The first platitude relates lots of meanings to behaviours, the second and the third relate lots of meanings to other meanings. But why should we say that these are platitudes? Can't one man's platitude can be another man's falsehood? I take (a) to be a platitude about meaning ascription. There may be some behaviorists who would deny it, but behaviorism has ceased to be common wisdom, if it ever was. There are some sophisticated thinkers and linguists (e.g. Schiffer 1987, Higginbotham 1986) who doubt that (b) is true, but the very fact that they have to produce complex arguments to doubt it shows that it is not *prima facie* evident that it is false. Moreover they do not contest that (b) is plitudinously true.<sup>4</sup> And (c) is also a platitude that most school teachers and linguists accept.

I do not deny that there may be *prima facie* counterexamples to (a), (b) and (c). Some thinkers are so unsophisticated that only one kind of behaviour could be the evidence that they mean something by a sign. There may be people whose language faculty is so impaired that they can't display the systematicity and simple inferences alluded to in (b) and (c). But then we would say that it is difficult to ascribe to them normal possession of a language, or knowledge of meanings. The minimal meaning

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<sup>4</sup> In fact Schiffer argues against the view that a compositional meaning-theory is needed to account for language understanding, and (b) does not claim this. I take it as a platitude in just the sense in which he says that is a platitude (the "Platitude") independently of the hypothesis that a compositional meaning-theory is needed to explain language understanding, that the platitude has to be explained and tries to explain it without this hypothesis (1987:212-216).

holist could reject these *prima facie* counterexamples just in the same way the minimalist about truth rejects such contexts as "Everything he says is true" as providing genuine counterexamples to the truth platitudes.

Now the case for minimalist or deflationary holism, the view according to which the platitudes (a)-(c) constitute "all there is to say" about meaning holism must rest on the claim that these platitudes can express our *stronger* intuitions about them, without implying that these intuitions can be justified. Just as the case for deflationism about truth rests upon the claim that our intuition about the property of correspondence can be expressed by such statements as

(d) "S" is true if and only if "P" corresponds to the facts  
or "S" is true because S

without implying that one needs to formulate a substantial theory of truth as correspondence (Horwich 1990: 111-112), the case for deflationism about meaning holism has to rest on the claim that our intuition that under the platitudes (a)-(c) there are *deeper* and more substantial truths about meaning and belief can be expressed by (a)-(c) without implying that these deeper truths are justified. And here Fodor and Le Pore's discussion of holism help us a lot. Defining anatomism about properties in the above sense, they proceed to argue that holism follows (by some form of slippery slope) from anatomism provided you accept that properties such as *having a meaning*, *being semantically evaluable*, *being a belief*, are *very* anatomic. They want to show that behind the innocent platitude (a), the holist infers some deep truths about the interlocking of belief and meaning, and that from the platitude that it is difficult, in the ascription of meanings to a speaker, to draw a principled line between meaning that *p* and meaning that *q* from one behaviour, one cannot infer that *meanings themselves* are so related. They want to show that from the "innocent" platitudes about the compositionality, systematicity, and generalization of meanings, the holist illegitimately infers deep and substantial truths about the interrelations of meanings and of beliefs. Let us accept with them that these inferences are illegitimate, and that there is no good argument for meaning holism, just as we could accept, with the deflationist about truth that the inference from (DS) and (c) to a deep claim about truth as correspondence is invalid. Then can't we say, in the same spirit, that the platitudes (a)-(c) about meaning holism are all there is to say about meaning holism? After all, Fodor and Le Pore, and other critics of holism, such as Dummett, accept the idea that there are weaker versions of holism which are acceptable. For instance, as I said above, Dummett sees nothing to object to methodological holism, the view that ascriptions of meanings and beliefs in an interpretative practice are holistic, and

Tennant (1987,1987a) attempts to show that not only methodological holism, but also meaning holism for the rest of a language is legitimate, although the logical constants are "separable" and subject to molecularist constraints leading to an intuitionist logic.<sup>5</sup> Why could we not restrict our holism to such weaker claims and recommend abstinence?

Presumably this is not a likely option for the anti-holist to take, first because, unlike the minimalist meaning holist that I have just described, he doubts that one can block the inferences from the platitudes to the more substantial forms of meaning holism, and second, because he wants to claim that the platitudes are not true in the first place. Fodor wants to defend semantic atomism, the view that meanings could be properties that expressions have in complete isolation, and that there can be "punctate" minds, who have only one belief. Dummett wants to defend semantic molecularism, the view that content could be given to individual words and sentences before one could give contents to more complex expressions or other sentences, and independently of them. Fodor is prepared to accept such platitudes as (a)-(c), but not as necessary, either conceptually or metaphysically, only as *contingent* truths about human beings (1992:133). The dialectical situation here is complex, because it is difficult to accept some of the anti-holist's claims against holism without presupposing with him that atomism or molecularism is true. For instance it is difficult to accept Fodor's claim that recognition of a semantic level of sense, above the semantic level of reference fatally leads to holism, without granting with him that some form of causal account of reference is correct (Bilgrami 1992, 1992a). And it is difficult to accept certain of Dummett's claims that holism is false because it implies a kind of realism and of transcendence of meaning with respect to use, without granting Dummett's molecularism and intuitionism<sup>6</sup>. So I agree that the minimalist line of argument about holism sketched in this section is unlikely to convince anybody who is independently convinced of the truth of atomism or molecularism in their stronger forms, and will seem to beg the question against him. But this fact should be a problem for my strategy if I wanted to stick to minimalistic or deflationary holism, that is if I claimed that there is no more to say about meaning than the truth conditional platitudes and the holistic platitudes alluded to above. I think that one can go beyond them, and in this respect I want to defend a more substantial form of meaning holism.

### ***3. Succumbing to temptation: deflationism inflated***

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<sup>5</sup> I have examined Tennant's views and the debate between holism and molecularism in logic in Engel 1991, ch.XI-XII

<sup>6</sup> see for instance Bilgrami 1986

*In a sense* Fodor and Dummett are right: it is difficult to consider such platitudes as (a)-(c) as *just* platitudes, and that they quickly lead to more substantial forms of holism. But these more substantial forms of holism do not seem to me to be dangerous or false.

The situation is similar with respect to minimalism about truth and with respect to minimalism about meaning. I have said above that I was accepting for the time being these deflationist claims. Now I want to qualify my acceptance. I shall not try to argue this point fully, but I consider that Wright's (1992) diagnostic about deflationism about truth is correct. Wright claims that the platitude about the truth predicate as registering the possibility of asserting the corresponding sentence is indeed a platitude - that truth is, as Wittgenstein said, a "formal", or as the scholastics would have said, "transcendental" concept - but that it is more substantial than it is claimed to be by the deflationist. This is, according to him, because the equivalence between "S" is true and the assertion that S is not a purely "formal" property of the truth predicate. It also registers a *norm* of assertoric practice, a norm about the correctness and appropriateness of assertions. Hence truth, contrary to what the deflationist claims, does indeed express a substantive property, a normative property (1992:15-24). So deflationism has to be "inflated". Wright's claim depends upon what is to be called a "substantive" property, and upon what is to be called a "norm", and the deflationist about truth could here reply that a normative property, such as the correction of assertions is not substantive in the same sense as, for instance, correspondence, on the view that truth means correspondence and that correspondence can be spelled out, for instance, within a theory of facts and states of affairs. It does not, unlike correspondence, *explain* truth, and all that the deflationist says is that truth does not express any such explanatory property. But although the deflationist would be right to point out that a normative property such as the fact that assertions have to be correct is thinner than a (purportedly) thick property such as correspondence with facts, he also has to admit with Wright that there is *more* to truth than the strictly formal property expressed by the disquotationalist schema. In this sense there is room for a "minimalism" about truth in Wright's sense: "deflationism, if you will, but unencumbered by the classical deflationist's claim that truth is not a substantial property"(1992:24).

Consider now the platitudes about meaning, as Johnston and others formulate them. Here too one can agree that the platitude that knowing the meaning of a sentence is knowing its truth conditions is indeed a platitude, but that there is in it something which exceeds the platitude, namely the fact that the truth conditions are verification transcendent and independent of our knowing that they obtain (Wright



1987:18). This is of course the classical anti-realist doubt about a truth conditional conception of meaning: that it might involve a deeper commitment to *realism.*, in Dummett's sense. Now Wright and others have shown, to my mind convincingly, that this involvement is far from obvious, and that there is no *general* simple line of argument from the truth conditional conception of meaning to a substantial form of realism about truth and meaning. In this sense they have made a step in the direction of meaning-deflationism. But it does not follow, from the absence of a general argument from the truth conditional platitude to realism, that there is no substantial debate between realism and anti-realism. There is still a lot of room to argue about the extent of the epistemic constraints on truth and meaning, on the possibility to equate truth to assertability or to some form of idealised assertibility, or, according to Wright's proposal (1987,1992) to superassertibility. And there is still room to argue about realism and anti-realism about *particular* areas of discourse, such as ethics, mathematics, or secondary qualities. So I do not consider that the platitudes about meaning justify automatically a pure form of deflationism or minimalism, such as that expressed by Johnston's claim (4) above, which is sometimes called *quietism* (e.g. Wright 1992), the view that the realist-anti-realist debate about meaning and truth should rest in peace.

Just as we can't stick to minimalism and deflationism about truth and meaning, we can't stick to minimalism about meaning holism. There is more to meaning holism than the platitudes (a)-(c). Those who oppose holism as well as radical holists (if there are any) will say: *Of course, there is much more!* I want to say: *not too much..* So how are we to constrain holism? At one point, Fodor has identified the kind of strategy that I want to pursue. He tells us (1992,34) that, apart from the strategy he recommends (dropping semantic atomism and subscribing to semantic atomism), there are two possibilities: either (i) accept semantic atomism but block holism by accepting some analytic/synthetic distinction, or (ii) accept semantic atomism and reject the a/s distinction, but block holism by grounding "in some other principled way the inferential relations which are constitutive of content and the ones that are not." He disclaims the first option because he wants to give up the a/s distinction. But he does not seriously consider this option. Tennant's combination of meaning holism for a language and of "separability" of logical constants is one way of pursuing this strategy. Although I think it is a serious option to consider, and that some form of the a/s distinction is correct, I shall not examine it here, because I want to remain neutral on the a/s issue.<sup>7</sup> Fodor does not consider the second option either, but he seems to assimilate this second option to "a molecularist compromise", according to which

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<sup>7</sup> In the book quoted above, I argue that some form of a/s distinction has to be accepted for logical constants, and agree with Dummett that a holistic justification of deduction is untenable. Nonetheless I do not think that it implies subscribing to the form of molecularism that Dummett recommends.

"there are other beliefs that we must share if we are to share the belief that P, but [which] denies that *all* our other beliefs have to be shared"(1992:31) And he adds that it involves some use of the a/s distinction "for believing that P requires accepting the *analytic* inferences in which P figures" (*ibid.*). So it seems that the second option boils down to the first, and that if it does not, then it succumbs to more extreme forms of meaning holism. I shall describe two kinds of views which seem to instantiate this second option, but neither of which admit the a/as distinction nor succumb to extreme holism, although one view is much stronger than the other.

#### ***4. Uncontrolled inflation: minimal meaning holism maximised***

One familiar way of going beyond the minimal holistic platitudes while accepting them is to adopt the stance of the radical interpreter, in Davidson's sense. The exact nature of Davidson's holism is a moot point, but it is generally agreed that it cannot simply consist in such platitudes as (a)-(c). The well-known extension of platitude (a), about meaning ascription, in Davidson's philosophy is the view which we might call the interdependence of meaning and belief: it is not possible to interpret what someone means unless one interprets also what he believes, and there is no principled way of sorting out meaning from belief. So meaning holism and belief holism, if such there be, must be connected together (e.g. Davidson 1984, ch.10). The well-known extension of platitude (b) about systematicity and compositionality, is Davidson's proposal to consider a Tarskian theory of truth as a theory of meaning for a language. The well-known extension of platitude (c) is the sort of combination of the extensions of (a) and (b) that one gets when it is said that a theory of truth will ascribe structure to beliefs and meanings in a speaker and that there is no principled way of saying which of an appropriate set of related beliefs and meanings a speaker has when he is ascribed one belief.<sup>8</sup> Another well known source of Davidson's holism is the role of the normative principles of rationality, such as the principle charity. One way of understanding the relationship between normativity and holism is the following. If the radical interpreter has to be charitable in the sense that he wants to ascribe rational and coherent beliefs to a speaker, then he has at least to ascribe to him mastery of certain basic inferences, such as the modus ponens. But in order to make inferences, one must have more than *one* belief, and several, apt to be related in inference; so the rationality of belief ascription obliges the interpreter to ascribe various beliefs related to a given belief, if the speaker is to be coherent. I do not see why an radical interpretation procedure would imply that one must ascribe "lots" or

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance Davidson 1984, p.200 (the remark about the belief that a cloud is passing before the sun).

"indefinitely many" beliefs and meanings if one is to ascribe meanings and beliefs at all, as it is often said. Moreover it is not obvious that Davidson subscribes to the kind of holism which is usually considered as the most threatening and implausible, *language-holism*, the view that the meaning of a sentence or a word depends on the meaning of *all* the other sentences and words of the language. This is not obvious if one is reminded that, for Davidson, "there is no such thing as a language" if "language" is to be understood as something which might exist independently of our interpretative practice (Davidson 1986: 445). Languages exist only in so far as one has a theory of interpretation or them. So if there is no language outside interpretations of speakers by speakers, there is no such thing as the (presumably infinite) set of *all* the meanings of sentences and words in a language, and thus no place for language holism in the sense envisaged. There can be only local or partial holisms, but no global holism. I agree, however, with many of Davidson's critics that a radical interpretation procedure, in his sense, fails to individuate the fine structure of beliefs and meaning, and in particular the *concepts* that compose the agents beliefs (cf. Dummett 1975, 1987; Peacocke 1992:36).

But this first impression can be resisted if one reflects that a radical interpretation theorist can, and says that he must, impose various constraints on interpretation to secure uniqueness. Davidson's empirical constraints are themselves minimal. They impose us to consider only attitudes to the truth of sentences (holding-true and preferring-true), and to consider the causal environment which causes our beliefs according to what Davidson calls the "distal theory of reference" (1990,1990a). Although Davidson claims that these constraints will secure uniqueness, there is still reason to doubt that it could give us access to the fine grain of the structure of beliefs. But there is a way, on behalf of the radical interpretation theorist, to answer this doubt and to trivialize the holistic constraints. It has been formulated recently by Akeel Bilgrami (1992, 1992a). Bilgrami considers the problem of ascribing meanings and concepts to subjects within the broadly Davidsonian framework of an interpretation theory. He claims that we have to distinguish two levels of analysis. Dealing with such problems of ascriptions of particular beliefs to speakers as in Kripke's puzzle about Pierre, he calls a "meaning-theory" any theory which will deliver axioms like:

- (i) "London" refers to London
- (ii) "Londres" refers to London

Such a theory will state *all* the beliefs that an agent associates with the terms of his idiolect, idealizing this set of beliefs from certain bits of evidence. At this first level,

which Bilgrami calls "aggregative", the various beliefs, as specified by the axioms of the theory, will be interrelated, but they will not say what the *actual* conception of the agent is, nor will they tell us what are the actual references of the terms for him. The "aggregative" level is therefore holistic, in exactly the sense that the anti-holists dislike: although the evidence will have helped us to select a certain set among the beliefs of the agents, there will be no possibility of individuating the actual meanings and concepts of the agent - as Bilgrami says "the way he conceives things". But there is another level of analysis, at which various specific beliefs will be selected to capture this conception. This is the *local* level. At this level, beliefs are fine-grained and individuated. Their individuation will be relative to, and conform to the usual criteria of, the explanation of actions. For instance, in the Pierre case, beliefs about what Pierre calls "Londres" and what Pierre calls "London" will be differentiated, for instance by his actions (he wants to show the first, but not the second to his girlfriend). The local level will *not* be holistic in the sense that all the beliefs contents will be supposed to be true of the individual at the same time. They will be selected according to the usual canons of the explanation of behaviour. There will be no principled way of distinguishing the aggregative from the local level, apart from such ordinary constraints on explanation. So our local ascriptions of content will be revisable. So there is no analytic/synthetic distinction: there will not be beliefs true in all localities (1992:36); our local ascriptions of content will be revisable. Bilgrami claims that most of Fodor's complaint about holism comes from a confusion between the aggregative level and the local level, and that once you distinguish these two levels, holism is harmless, because it does not occur at the level of the explanation of meaning and content. Meaning-theories never give content, for content is always local.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with Bilgrami that this way with holism renders it harmless. But until we have exposed the particular limitations of the range of local explanations, we shall not see how holism is limited. But Bilgrami does say that "there is not canonical selection from the meaning-theoretic level to the local level" and he refuses to set principles about the individuation of content. But then his position is bound to oscillate between the classical Davidsonian account, which, we have agreed is not individuating, and a position like that of the "modest" theorist envisaged by McDowell, according to whom content has to be approached "from the inside", from what "makes sense to us".

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<sup>9</sup> Bilgrami's distinction is reminiscent of Davidson's distinction's between explanation *within* a theory of meaning and explanation *of* the theory (1984, 220-221)

## 5. Controlling inflation

So we have to try to specify the nature of our holistic constraints at a level which is both different from the meaning-theoretic level and the "local level" of the application of the meaning-theory to particular explanations. The inflation of the platitudes which I propose, along the lines of Peacocke (1992) is to impose our restrictions to holism at the level of *concepts*, considered as constituents of thoughts. But before we impose our restrictions, we have to *assure* holism, in a minimal form, which can be distinguished from the inflated form of holism which appears so threatening.

In his book *A study of Concepts*, Peacocke formulates a general requirement for what he calls the "possession conditions" of a concept:

A(C) : A concept *F* is that unique concept *C* to possess which a thinker must meet condition A(C)

He takes this to be the analogue, for a theory of concepts, of the "manifestability" requirement that Dummett imposes on a theory of meaning: a theory of meaning is a theory of understanding. A theory of concepts is a theory of the conditions under which we possess concepts. The possession conditions of a concept individuate it in various ways, depending on the kind of concept it is. Thus in the case of logical concepts, the possession conditions are such that the subjects must find certain inferences "primitively compelling" (e.g. the familiar introduction and elimination rules for "and" are primitively compelling and determine the possession conditions for the concept of conjunction). In other cases, such as for perceptual concepts, the possession conditions will be of another kind. Peacocke also requires that concepts satisfy a principle of compositionality for thoughts, in the sense that the semantic value or the reference of a concept is determined by the semantic value or reference of its parts. Peacocke also accepts a form of molecularism comparable to Dummett's: he supposes that the possession conditions of one given kind of concept cannot in general presuppose the possession conditions of another kind of concepts, and therefore that there exists a hierarchy and partial ordering of concepts (1992:12). Thus a certain form of holism is blocked, since it is not true that the possession conditions of a given concept must presuppose those of *all* the other concepts, without any restriction. Peacocke, however, allows that some concepts are dependent, for their individuation, of other concepts. In these cases we have "local holisms". For instance the concept of *mass* and the concept of *force* are thus interdependent (1992:10)

Peacocke also admits that "holism is correct at the level of concepts" (*ibid.* 52) in the following sense:

(GC) If a thinker can entertain the thought  $Fa$  and also possesses the singular mode of presentation  $b$ , which refers to something in the range of objects of which the concept  $F$  is true or false, then the thinker has the conceptual capacity for propositional attitudes containing the content  $Fb$  (*ibid.* 42)

This is a version of the familiar Generality Constraint formulated by Evans. It corresponds to our third platitude concerning the generality and productivity of thoughts.

These conditions apply to concepts as constituents of *thoughts*. They presuppose a relative independence of thought from language (see Peacocke 1986), and thus a rejection of what Davidson call *the interdependence of belief and meaning*, which is one the bases of his holism. But how do the possession conditions for concepts relate to meanings? It is not true, Peacocke says, that to every concept there corresponds a word in a language (1992: 3) and there is no one-one relation between concepts and meanings. But the mastery of a word can be a way of acquiring a concept. There can be *attribution conditions* of a concept which involve the assent that a subject gives to sentences. containing a word. These attribution conditions are distinct from the possession conditions of a concept, but can be nevertheless associated to them (29 ff.). If the use of a word is such that a speaker manifests certain possession conditions of a concept expressed by the word, the requirement which apply at the level of concepts can be related to the requirements on meanings. Peacocke says that Dummett's objection according to which a theory of concepts and thought constituents is bound to accept a view of language as a *code* or thoughts does not apply to his theory (34). He also rejects McDowell's quietism or "defense of modesty" in a theory of meaning, according to which a theory of meaning must *always* presuppose, for the individuation of thoughts and meanings, these very thoughts and meanings. Thought is not strictly dependent upon language.

I have only outlined certain principles of Peacocke's theory of content. Many questions have to be answered before we could have a satisfactory account of holism, and in particular the following ones. 1) Peacocke's possession conditions individuate concepts at the level of something like Fregean *sense*. It therefore presupposes a version of Frege's sense/reference distinction, and would be, without doubt, rejected by a Fodorian causal theorist of reference. 2) Peacocke's possession conditions are close to (what are usually called) *conceptual roles* (in particular in the case of logical

constants). It is thus open to the Fodorian to object that they presuppose holism (Fodor/Le Pore 1993, ch.3), and that a theory of conceptual roles is bound either to reject compositionality or to accept a version of the analytic-synthetic distinction. I do not believe that these objections are compelling, although arguing for this has to be deferred to another occasion. It is indeed true that Peacocke's possession conditions presuppose *some* form of distinction between what holds *a priori* for a given concept and what holds empirically of it (psychologically). But it is not evident that this amounts to an analytic/ synthetic distinction in the Quinean sense that Fodor accepts.

In this paper I have claimed that one could stick to a form of minimal holism satisfying the three platitudes: methodological holism at the level of belief and meaning ascriptions, sentence holism and compositionality and the generality constraint. It does not follow, from this minimal holism, that *radical* holism (as it is perhaps held by Davidson) is true, and it does not follow either that we must revert to atomist or to molecularism. Thus we can inflate minimal holism without tears.