



GESTURING
TOWARD
REALITY
DAVID
FOSTER
WALLACE
AND PHILOSOPHY

EDITED BY ROBERT K. BOLGER AND SCOTT KORB

B L O O M S B U R Y

Gesturing Toward Reality

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David Foster Wallace and Philosophy

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Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb

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*For Dave
and
for Kate*

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Love, and What You Will, Do: An Introduction

Scott Korb

In April 2011, I received an email from Robert Bolger—“from the Old days at Union,” he reminded me—asking whether I’d be interested in helping him pull together a collection of essays about David Foster Wallace and philosophy. More than a decade earlier, in the year we overlapped at NYC’s Union Theological Seminary, Robert had known me as a reader of Wallace’s work. I’d known him as a fellow Catholic in our liberal Protestant seminary, and he was studying philosophy. Since we’d last seen each other, Robert explained, he’d earned his PhD in philosophy of religion, written a book about religion and science, and, while living in Claremont, California, had come to know Dave, as he called him, through regular gatherings in “a meeting hall at a local church.” In time they became friends.¹ I said I’d be happy to help out.

That’s basically how this book came to be.

Now, I’m no philosopher. (You’ll see there’s no full essay from me collected here.) Since leaving seminary, which I followed with a degree in literature, I’ve been writing books about religion, while also teaching undergraduate and MFA writing courses. And as long as I’ve been teaching I’ve been teaching essays by Wallace.

Each semester, no matter what sort of writing we’re about to undertake, my students and I first turn to Wallace’s 2001 essay “Tense Present” (later published as “Authority and American Usage”). Here we read of the “Democratic Spirit,” which, Wallace writes, “combines rigor and humility, i.e., passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others.”² This is not easy, Wallace warns—“you will have to be willing to look honestly at yourself and at your motives for believing what you believe, and to do it more or less continually”—and, admittedly, there is sometimes little evidence of such a spirit in our classroom discussions. But we try. Anyway, it’s always struck me as a good idea to begin each term with a commitment—and for

¹ Robert intersperses some of their correspondence in his essay contained here, “A Less ‘Bullshitty’ Way To Live: The Pragmatic Spirituality of David Foster Wallace.”

² Wallace, “Authority and American Usage,” in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005), 72.

me, a recommitment—to this democratic ideal and, with Wallace’s choice of “Spirit,” to the possibility of what religion scholar Karen Armstrong has identified as a modern “spiritual attitude”: “to see beyond our immediate requirements, and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness.”³

An undergraduate once put this all very succinctly: “Just remember,” she said to the class, “you might be wrong.”

Teaching “Tense Present”—and in certain courses about food writing, Wallace’s 2004 “Consider the Lobster”—has led me this year to organize an entire course around Wallace’s nonfiction. Again, we address the Democratic Spirit. Again, we ask, as Wallace does in the context of the Maine Lobster Festival, “Is it all right to boil a sentient creature alive just for our gustatory pleasure?”⁴

But there’s also this question: “Am I the only one who had this queer deep sense as a kid?—that everything exterior to me existed only insofar as it affected me somehow?—that all things were somehow, via some occult adult activity, specially arranged for my benefit? Does anybody else identify with this memory?”⁵ And this: “Is it possible really to love other people?”⁶ Plus: “Are some things worth dying for?”⁷ And they have to deal with this too: “I find myself, in my comfortable navy blue seat, going farther and farther away inside my head.”⁸

Questions without answers. Endless recursiveness. Life and death. And so on, twice a week, for sixteen weeks. It’s a lot. By midterm, some of the students say that they have a better sense of the inside of Wallace’s head than they do any of the topics he covers in his essays. And while going “farther away”⁹ inside Wallace’s head offers the students many great pleasures, some of them remark that they like him less than they did at the beginning of the term. A few of them say that the work leaves them feeling a little hopeless. (There’s no denying that his suicide—the end to his own despair—plays into this thinking.)

³ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2005), 137.

⁴ Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 243.

⁵ Wallace, “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1997), 89.

⁶ Wallace, “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” in *Consider the Lobster*, 265.

⁷ Wallace, “Just Asking,” in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2012), 321.

⁸ Wallace, “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 352.

⁹ Jonathan Franzen seems to have borrowed this phrase for his 18 April 2011, *New Yorker* essay about his reaction to Wallace’s suicide.

All this makes me eager for my students to see this present volume, for it's filled with hope. It's filled with the Democratic Spirit. And, to be frank, I think it's filled with a love, even in moments of sharp critique, that Wallace would have appreciated.

Individual writers collected here may disagree with my sense that there's some "transcendent value" in bringing a Democratic Spirit to their consideration of Wallace's writing. Indeed, each of the essays collected here has a simpler goal in common—to present Wallace's work as one of the many places where philosophical ideas reside. And collected as they are here, these essays reveal Wallace's work as a series of reminders of how life is and how it could be.

Wallace used as his epigraph to "Tense Present" a line from St Augustine: *Dilige et quod vis fac*. Love, and what you will, do. Although I might be wrong, I've often considered this line a sort of gloss on his entire body of work. Essays and novels, stories, and reviews, that present life as it is and ask how it could be different, better, if our actions were always preceded by love.¹⁰

¹⁰ Fitting how love–love is the score in tennis, a game Wallace loved and wrote beautifully about, before the action starts.

How We Ought To Do Things with Words¹

Alexis Burgess

Plenty of ink has already been spilled over David Foster Wallace’s apology for prescriptive linguistics in “Authority and American Usage,” which was ostensibly meant to be a review of Brian Garner’s *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, but unsurprisingly wound up a constellation of anecdotes, arguments, allegories, and (let’s be honest, occasionally abusive) analyses of antecedent salvos in those harrowing debates between linguistic liberals and conservatives—Descriptivists and Prescriptivists—about how we use language, how we ought to use language, who ought to say how we ought to use language; not to mention, or *now to mention* (amending the alliterative list initiated by “constellation of” above): announcements in applied ethics, like his perplexing pro-life/choice synthesis; an autobiographical analysis of SNOOT; various afterthoughts and appendices, railing, for example, against political correctness; and of course the compulsory footnotes, including an approving reconstruction of the private language argument, of all things.

But I’d like to spill some more. Because, although, as we’ll see, there’s a lot I want to take issue with in this piece of Wallace (henceforth, DFW), his “thesis statement for [the] whole article”—which is frustratingly hard to locate, by the way, despite explicit references to it in several section headings²—has

¹ Thanks to Lanier Anderson, David Hills, Josh Landy, and Adwait Parker for helpful discussion of this material surrounding a presentation to Stanford’s Program in Philosophy and Literature.

² I think it might be this: “I submit, then, that it is indisputably easier to be Dogmatic than Democratic, especially about issues that are both vexed and highly charged. I submit further that the issues surrounding ‘correctness’ in contemporary American usage are both vexed and highly charged, and that the fundamental questions they involve are ones whose answers have to be literally *worked out* instead of merely found.” Even in context, though, that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2005), 72.

that rare pair of qualities, {Truth, Significance}, that generally ought to help a thought percolate up through the muddiest intellectual waters to the surface of public consciousness, but, regrettably, so far as I can tell, hasn't here. The unvarnished fact is that *our linguistic choices matter*, for all sorts of reasons. (The main one DFW highlights has to do with the dynamics of group inclusion/exclusion, but hang on, we'll get there.) More people—philosophers, authors, students, fans, teachers, dentists, whoever—should know that “merely verbal” or “semantic” issues can actually be quite important, and that we can accordingly pursue the ethics of diction and other linguistic decisions without being excessively snooty.

If you think you've already internalized this moral, here's a quick diagnostic. Upon first hearing right-wing arguments against same-sex “marriage” based on premises about the meaning of the word, were you inclined to dismiss them more or less out of hand, on something like the ground that semantic considerations are simply irrelevant to social justice? I'll admit that I was. But I was wrong.³ Now wait, don't get me wrong! I support same-sex marriage every bit as much as the next coast-dwelling, Sunday-*NYT*-subscribing, liberal academic elitist. But the soundness of our arguments is more important than the truth of our conclusions, if only because the former strictly entails the latter. Which is kind of the whole point of my revisiting DFW on the Usage Wars: he got the right answer for (largely) the wrong reasons. So the bulk of this paper is going to be critical. Someone must have said that criticism is a higher form of flattery than imitation. Anyway: end stylistic homage. Pretty much.

The players, the stage

Like the present article, DFW's essay starts negatively but ends more positively. Readers eager to arrive at the Significant Truth on which he and I agree can always skim or skip to my final section. But before he argues *for* a thesis I'll follow him in calling Prescriptivism (P), DFW argues *against* an opposing thesis, Descriptivism (D). Now, this dialectical distinction would just collapse if our two -isms were logically contradictory—any argument against D would be a back-handed argument for P—but in fact they're only logically contrary. In other words: P and D are inconsistent with each other,

³ See, for example, Sally Haslanger, “What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds,” *Hypatia* 20, 4 (November 2005): 10–26, for an illustration of the potential significance of semantic considerations to social justice (though obviously and emphatically *not* for an indictment of same-sex marriage).

but could both be false. Or so it seems to me. DFW never explicitly defines our -isms. But his discussion suggests the following first approximations:

- (P) One should (sometimes) make prescriptions about language use.
 (D) One should *not* (ever) make prescriptions about language use.

I take it that P and D can't both be true, because it's not possible to sometimes-and-never do any given thing. (Two tacit premises: if one should do A and one should do B, then one should do A-and-B; and if one should do C, then it's possible to do C.) But as I say, P and D might both be false. It could turn out that there just aren't any "shoulds" about linguistic prescriptions.

We can of course define weaker forms of Prescriptivism and Descriptivism—entailed by P and D respectively (but not entailing them)—which do in fact logically contradict D and P respectively, just by negation:

- (WP) It's not the case that one should not make prescriptions about language use.
 (WD) It's not the case that one should make prescriptions about language use.

WD is easy enough to read, but WP is a bit tortuous. Under standard assumptions about the relationship between obligation and permission, it's equivalent to the more legible:

- (WP*) One can permissibly make prescriptions about language use.

If DFW just wanted to establish WP or WP*, arguments against D would suffice; but, again, it seems to me that he's after the somewhat more ambitious P. The irony here is that his positive case for P is, as we'll see, quite clear, concise, and compelling. But he frontloads his review essay with a long string of tricky and ultimately less successful arguments against D. This is a pretty big rhetorical slip in an often masterful paper on, among other things, the rhetoric of lexicography.⁴

Having completed this somewhat tedious exercise in deontic logic, one might like to know what P and D actually *mean*. To begin with, we can say that "prescriptions" are claims about what one should or ought to do. So Prescriptivism is itself a prescription. And insofar as omissions are actions, Descriptivism is a prescription too. This isn't just ironic, it's actually borderline paradoxical. For D is arguably "about" language use—insofar as it's about prescriptions, which are typically expressed using language. So, being a prescription about language use, D falls under its own scope. If it's

⁴ Of course, my paper structure exhibits a similar mistake. But, well, he started it.

true, one shouldn't say so. But DFW doesn't try to win on this technicality. His glosses on D effectively skirt paradox by qualifying the "One" they address. (One could equally qualify the relevant kind of language use.) He actually distinguishes two main kinds of Descriptivism: Methodological and Philosophical.⁵

Methodological Descriptivism (MD) targets practical lexicography: the dirty business of writing dictionaries, grammar books, and style manuals. Philosophical Descriptivism (Φ D), on the other hand, targets academic linguistics, especially syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. I'm really not at all sure why DFW uses these labels. (I can tell you that "Methodological" is meant to evoke "the scientific method—clinically objective, value-neutral, based on direct observation and demonstrable hypothesis" (83); but of course, linguists are scientists too.)⁶ Suffice it to say for present purposes that there's nothing paradoxical about the following claims—

(MD) Lexicographers should not make prescriptions about language use.

(Φ D) Linguists should not make prescriptions about language use.

—so long as they're made by people outside the respective fields (or, again, if language use is somehow circumscribed so that MD and Φ D turn out not to be "about" it). And of course there are corresponding versions of Prescriptivism, plus weakenings of all four new views, after the pattern of the Ws above, for a total of twelve (!) balls in the air. The next two sections take up DFW's arguments against MD and Φ D in turn. I'll argue that they fail, and even suggest some countervailing considerations in favor of MD and Φ D.

Before we get going, though, let me address one last stage-setting question you might be asking yourself. Why does DFW focus on these two special cases of Descriptivism? Because, you might think, lexicographers and linguists are the principal actors in the Usage Wars. And why is that? Because they've been charged with the study of language, and the Usage Wars are all about whether the study of language ought to be partly prescriptive or purely descriptive. But this rationale has a couple of holes in it. First, philosophers

⁵ Before he starts using these terms, and intermittently afterward, DFW talks about methodological and philosophical *arguments* for Descriptivism, rather than methodological and philosophical versions of the view. In the interest of consistency, I think we should pick one way of talking or the other. (Though of course we should still distinguish arguments for a given thesis from the thesis itself.) I've found it easier to think and talk in terms of "versions" of Descriptivism, but much of the discussion below could be recast the other way.

⁶ I think he chooses "Philosophical" just to dignify these latter opponents. He could equally have called them sophisticated Descriptivists.

of language are also charged with (part of) the study of language. Second, English and expository writing teachers are also embroiled in the Wars. In fact, they're at the front lines. And as we'll see, DFW actually mounts his main campaign for P from this very outpost. Maybe he means to fold pedagogues in with practical lexicographers; and maybe, as the adjective "Philosophical" suggests, he means to lump linguists together with people like me.⁷ If so, it's not clear from the text. More importantly, though, his emphasis on MD and Φ D obscures a third (or fifth) party one might have thought would want to weigh in on normative issues like these. A party that's philosophical, practical, pedagogical, and prescriptive all at once: ethicists.⁸ We'll come back to this suggestion.

Methodological Descriptivism

MD says that dictionaries should refrain from issuing prescriptions about the use of language. I can make out at least three separable arguments against MD in DFW's article. What follows are two paragraphs on each, the first expositing the argument and the second replying to it. My overarching complaint will be that DFW tries to prove too much. For in all three cases he reaches (vainly for) the extreme conclusion that a purely descriptive lexicography is *impossible*, in practice and in principle, and therefore that MD absurdly implores dictionary writers to do what simply can't be done. As one might expect, and as we'll verify later, there are more modest and more successful ways to establish the desired anti-Descriptivist result (WP*) that one *can* permissibly make prescriptions about language use.

Here's a reconstruction of DFW's first argument against MD. If MD were true, then lexicography should be exclusively concerned with describing actual language use. The best, most comprehensive way to describe actual language use would simply be to list all of it—to provide an exhaustive catalogue of our linguistic behavior, past, present, and onward. But that's obviously not feasible. (And even if new technology eventually allowed for it, how/why would we use such an unwieldy list?) So, the argument continues, dictionary writers will inevitably have to choose which bits of usage to include and which to exclude. In other words, they'll have to decide what *should* go in their books. Which is of course to make a normative judgment

⁷ I'm a philosopher of language, not a linguist or lexicographer (and rarely a writing instructor).

⁸ I don't mean to suggest that how we write and talk is a *moral* issue (though it might be, occasionally). Moral philosophy is just a fragment of ethics, on my understanding of these terms. Ethics is the broad business of figuring out what we should or ought to do.

about language use. And the resultant dictionary will reflect this judgment, implicitly endorsing or prescribing the uses of language it includes and tacitly censuring the rest. Descriptive lexicography is therefore self-undermining. To pursue it in earnest is ultimately to abandon it. So, demanding the impossible, MD must be wrong.

This argument fails at almost every step. First of all, listing every instance of something is not usually the best way to describe that thing. The best way to describe our use of forks, for example (or covalent bonding, for another), is not to enumerate every historical fork deployment (or to catalogue every covalent bond). Good descriptions are illuminating because they are, among other things, suitably general. Which, second, is not to concede that dictionary writers will have to make inegalitarian divisions among uses of language. For they can simply choose not to include *any* individual uses in their books. After all, the primary kind of “description of language use” we actually find in dictionaries is *definition*. Definitions tell us that a word or phrase is used—by some linguistic community, at some period in time—to mean more or less the same thing as another, typically longer but more familiar phrase. Of course, dictionaries often supplement their definitions with illustrative sentences in which the defined terms appear. But the point is: they needn’t. Third, even when they do, the choice to include one example rather than another needn’t involve any judgment about what *should* be in the dictionary. Absent some heavy-duty meta-normative theorizing (e.g., Allan Gibbard’s 2003 book *Thinking How to Live*), it would seem that I can choose which dessert to have without thereby deciding which dessert I should or ought to have.⁹

DFW’s next argument against MD is a bit more formidable, but it overreaches for the same impossibility theorem. I’ll give you some of his own words this time. Just to put them in context, recall that he wants to saddle his opponent with the view that lexicographic description ought to be properly “scientific.” In the second argument against MD, we’re told that it “involves an incredibly crude and outdated understanding of what *scientific* means. It requires a naive belief in scientific Objectivity, for one thing” (85). Which belief is then said to have been undermined “in the physical sciences, [by] everything from quantum mechanics to Information Theory,” and a bit later, to have been “thoroughly confuted and displaced—in Lit by the rise of post-structuralism . . . [and] in linguistics by the rise of Pragmatics” (86). Now, I very much doubt that any *one* thing was challenged, let alone refuted, in all of these diverse areas. But I suppose DFW’s thought is just that observation

⁹ Moreover, such normative judgments don’t have to be informed by views about which uses of language are good or bad, right or wrong. The criteria for inclusion could simply be statistical representativeness of actual usage and/or likely promotion of comprehension.

and description—however sober, systematic, scholarly, and/or scientific—are ultimately things that *people* do; and people are inevitably “biased” by their “ideologies,” to use a couple of his go-to terms. Summing up this second argument against MD, he writes: “To presume that dictionary-making can somehow avoid or transcend ideology is simply to subscribe to a particular ideology, one that might aptly be called Unbelievably Naive Positivism” (86). So, just as with his first argument against MD, we’re invited to conclude that there can be no such thing as a purely objective/descriptive lexicography, because lexicography is a human endeavor, and like all such endeavors, it’s essentially, inextricably subjective.

Never mind the dubious identification of Positivism with the quest for objectivity. The best response to this argument is just to reject the identification of the objective and the descriptive—or more to the point: the subjective and the prescriptive. Let’s grant DFW that all human inquiry is laden with “ideology” and therefore subjective. (I take it one’s ideology is supposed to be something like a system of core values and beliefs, resistant, if not impervious, to rational reappraisal.) This hardly guarantees that the fruits of such inquiry will be prescriptions rather than descriptions. Look, I relied (however tacitly) on a lot of different values and beliefs to decide what to buy at the grocery store yesterday. But I can tell you what I bought and why I bought it without saying you should buy the same—without saying anything at all about what one should or ought to do. If Reader-Response Criticism or Jaussian Reception Theory implies otherwise, then so much the worse for them! Our common sense conviction that there’s a nontrivial descriptive/prescriptive line to be drawn should carry more weight than the conjunction of the premises in some abstruse philosophical argument to the contrary.

DFW’s third argument against MD is comparatively simple. Never mind whether all human inquiry is inherently subjective; and never mind whether you can cram all of our linguistic behavior between two covers. Dictionaries have to be prescriptive simply because they make claims about meanings, and such claims are inextricably normative.¹⁰ Here DFW farms out most of the work to Wittgenstein (note 32; a long one), but I think we can actually appreciate his point without dipping into the private language quagmire. If you say that word *W* means *M* in language *L*, you may not be semantically expressing a normative proposition, but you’re sure as heck going to convey—pragmatically, or in some other way—that to use *W* with any meaning other than *M*, in a context where *L* is the presumptive language of discourse, is to

¹⁰ For reasons not altogether clear to me, DFW often prefers to write in terms of “grammar and usage” rather than “meanings.” I’m fairly confident, however, that this distinction doesn’t make a difference to his arguments.

misuse the word, to make a mistake, to do something wrong. What's more, this implication is hard to cancel. Just imagine a book in the reference section with a preface that read: "Proceed at your own risk. The definitions herein are emphatically *not* offered as guides to the usage of any actual language." The idea is basically just that dictionaries function in society as "authorities" on meaning and usage.¹¹

Okay, but we might just as well have said that physics textbooks function in society as "authorities" on mass and universal gravitation. DFW's third argument was supposed to target lexicography specifically, not all human inquiry indiscriminately.¹² Yet it lapses into anti-Descriptivism about absolutely everything:

If a physics textbook operated on Descriptivist principles, the fact that some Americans believe electricity flows better downhill (based on the observed fact that power lines tend to run high above the homes they serve) would require the Electricity Flows Better Downhill Hypothesis to be included as a "valid" theory in the textbook—just as, for Dr. Fries [a proponent of MD], if some Americans use *infer* for *imply* or *aspect* for *perspective*, these usages become ipso facto "valid" parts of language. (89)

This is so stupid it practically drools—to recycle one of DFW's replies to Fries. Or more charitably: so funny one might easily miss its fatuousness on first read. Why in the world would a Descriptivist be impelled to think that *physics is a branch of psychology*, devoted to studying people's *beliefs* about electricity and other physical phenomena? By the same token, why would a proponent of MD be obliged to say that dictionaries should record people's false views about the meanings of public language expressions? I just don't get it. I wish I had something more constructive to say about this third argument against MD, but I'm afraid it might be fundamentally confused.

¹¹ Incidentally, one of the main themes of DFW's review (which I haven't tried to treat) has to do with the rhetorical ingenuity Garner demonstrates in cultivating his own authority here.

¹² As he puts it: "Even if, as a thought experiment, we assume a kind of nineteenth-century scientific realism—in which, even though some scientists' interpretations of natural phenomena might be biased, the natural phenomena themselves can be supposed to exist wholly independent of either observation or interpretation—it's still true that no such realist supposition can be made about 'language behavior,' because such behavior is both *human* and fundamentally *normative*" (86–7). I let it slide earlier, but for the record, DFW is just plain wrong about the state of mainstream philosophy of science. At the time he was writing, and still today, subjective or mind-dependent phenomena in the physical sciences are widely thought to be exceptions that prove the rule.

At any rate, none of the considerations we've surveyed in this section tell against the view that lexicography can and should refrain from issuing prescriptions about the use of language. Anecdotally, for what it's worth, the dictionary on my Kindle isn't very pushy at all, and I have to say I like it that way. But let's move on to DFW's second target in this negative part of his article.

Philosophical Descriptivism

Again, I'm not sure why Φ D is so-called, but best I can tell, the view is supposed to be that academic linguists—and perhaps philosophers of language—shouldn't issue prescriptions about language use. DFW's comparatively brief treatment of Φ D is pivotal to his project in the review, as it transitions us from criticisms of Descriptivism to a positive case for Prescriptivism. So let me be clear about the structure of the present section. First I mount an argument for Φ D, loosely inspired by some of DFW's expository remarks. Then I assemble a line of response from his discussion of utility and interpretive labor. Next I show that this line doesn't actually defeat the original argument. Finally, I argue that prescriptivists like DFW shouldn't be bothered by this result, for two reasons. First, restricted forms of descriptivism like Φ D are of course compatible with special cases of P (generated from different restrictions). In particular, we might rest content with the conclusion that *ethicists* should issue prescriptions about language use. Second, and more likely to satisfy DFW, we can actually reconcile P in full generality with Φ D (and MD), by distinguishing what one ought to do *qua* linguist (or lexicographer) from what a linguist or anyone else ought to do *qua* citizen of her linguistic community.

For Φ D. By charter or definition, linguistics is in the business of *explaining* our linguistic behavior.¹³ Now, explanation does come in a dizzying variety of (blendable) flavors: causal, historical, statistical, deductive, nomological, teleological, and more. But, crucially, all of these are purely descriptive enterprises. So, given their mission statement, linguists *qua* linguists simply

¹³ Not every individual action will be amenable to systematic, scientific explanation. Some of the data are just noise. Explanation in morphology and phonology has to leave room for more or less "arbitrary" historical contingencies. Hyperbolically: "there's no particular metaphysical reason why our word for a four-legged mammal that gives milk and goes moo is *cow* and not, say, *prtlmpf*" (91). Explanation in syntax and semantics has to leave room for performance errors—deviations from the behavior dictated by linguistic competence.

have no business issuing prescriptions. After all, the whole point of making a “should” claim is to try to *change* someone’s behavior (or at least ensure it stays on a desired course). Whereas the whole point of explanation in a science like linguistics is to try to understand our behavior *as we find it*. All of this is compatible with the logical possibility that generalizations encoded in traditional schoolhouse rules of grammar and usage might turn out to play some role in the production or explanation of our linguistic behavior. However, adding insult to injury, the more we actually learn about the causal/historical underpinnings of our speech and writing, the more these rules look like *ad hoc* conventions imposed after the fact. Like rules of etiquette, they lack explanatory value: “prescriptions against dangling participles or mixed metaphors are basically the linguistic equivalent of whalebone corsets and short forks for salad” (92). And as DFW acknowledges, the sorts of “rules” posited in generative linguistics are no more prescriptive than the “laws” governing chemical composition.

Of course, one might counter that, on a reasonably accommodating conception of “linguistic behavior,” the fact that a given schoolhouse rule was taught and enforced in a given country or region, at a certain period in its history, is itself a datum falling under the explanatory purview of linguistics as we demarcated the discipline above. Charitably construed, one of DFW’s central points in this portion of the article is that sociolinguistic facts like these can often be explained teleologically, by adverting to the utility of the rules in question. Most of his illustrations have to do with communicative virtue of saving your audience work; whether it’s the work involved in resolving indeterminacy in surface syntax, or just the work required to process gratuitous verbiage. (Incidentally, it’s hard to believe the irony presented by DFW’s own prose styling was lost on him here.)¹⁴

¹⁴ Confession: I never finished *Infinite Jest*. Dog-eared evidence reveals that I stopped at page 531 of the first paperback edition, at the section titled “0450H., 11 November. . . .” Part of the problem is obviously that the book’s so long; but I’ve finished comparably long novels. Another part of the problem is sentences like this one, picked more or less at random: “The student engineer, a pre-doctoral transuranial metallurgist working off massive G.S.L. debt, locks the levels and fills out the left side of his time sheet and ascends with his bookbag through a treillage of industrial stairways with semitic ideograms and developer-smell and past snack bar and billiard hall and modem-banks and extensive Student Counseling offices around the rostral lamina, all the little-used many-staired neuroform way up to the artery-red fire door of the Union’s rooftop, leaving Madame Psychosis, as is S.O.P., alone with her show and screen in the shadowless chill” (185). Granted, it’s not as bad as the worst of Joyce, say, but sentences like this one make those of us with tastes for desert landscapes pine for the sparse elegance of Hemingway, or even just the flat-footed storytelling of Paul Auster. Every time I have to use my Kindle’s dictionary, or restart a sentence because I parsed it incorrectly, I get thrown out of the narrative.

Here's one list: "The injunction against two-way adverbs ('People who eat this often get sick') is an obvious example, as are rules about other kinds of misplaced modifiers ('There are many reasons why lawyers lie, some better than others') and about relative pronouns' proximity to the nouns they modify ('She's the mother of an infant daughter who works twelve hours a day')" (93).

To his credit, DFW doesn't accuse the academy of simply overlooking the role that expedience plays in our linguistic self-regulation: "doubtless there are whole books in Pragmatics or psycholinguistics or something devoted to unpacking this point" (96). But what he fails to make clear is that none of this really tells against ΦD —or even against the specific argument for it we developed above. After all, the mere *study* of linguistic prescriptions doesn't logically entail *making* any. More generally: the scientific study of a practice needn't involve participation. (We can learn as much as we care to about cannibalism, for example, without engaging in it ourselves.) Of course, calling a rule or prescription "useful" certainly sounds like an endorsement. But utility can be unpacked in purely descriptive terms. Cutting back on big words is useful insofar as more people will be able to understand you. That doesn't mean you *ought* to cut back. I can report the statistical facts about sophisticated diction and audience uptake, and then immediately go on to say—quite sincerely, and without any infelicity—that you can talk however you like.

DFW would actually ultimately agree with most of this, I'd hazard. His real beef with ΦD has less to do with the business of workaday linguistics or philosophy of language, and much more to do with the fact that its philosophical/linguistic proponents implicitly (and occasionally explicitly) underestimate the importance of normative issues about how we write and talk. Reacting to a barb of Steven Pinker's, DFW writes: "from the fact that linguistic communication is not strictly [better: causally] dependent on usage and grammar it does *not* necessarily follow that the traditional rules of usage and grammar are nothing but 'inconsequential decorations'" (94). Simply put: ΦD does not entail D. Even if linguists *qua* linguists have no business issuing prescriptions about language use, someone else might. Who? Well, as I mentioned earlier, one might think ethicists would be well suited to the job. But DFW has other ideas.

He wants to argue for P, which mandates that *everyone* participate in the messy business of regulating our linguistic behavior.¹⁵ As it turns out, however, this needn't preclude ΦD (or MD, for that matter). The trick to reconciliation has to do with the "*qua*"s I've been dropping recently. We all play lots of

¹⁵ Hence the stuff about the Democratic Spirit (see n2).

different social roles. Even if the job description for linguists (or lexicographers) excludes issuing prescriptions about language use, it can't dictate what they do in their private lives, or more to the point, in their public lives as members of our shared linguistic community. What DFW really cares about establishing is that we all, *qua* citizens of this community—*qua* possible interlocutors—take responsibility for shaping linguistic communication. No matter how we earn our livings, we should be prepared to evaluate how we write and talk, and make prescriptions about language use if and when the need arises.

Stop and think about how you're saying what you're saying

If you're just joining us—perhaps having taken up my early invitation to skim or skip—welcome. Over the last two sections, I've been trying to establish that DFW's offensive against Methodological and Philosophical Descriptivism founders on the actual facts about lexicography and linguistics. But for all we've said thus far, it might still be true that some or all of us (*qua* linguistic citizens) ought to make prescriptions about language use. The aim of this final section is to initiate a positive argument for some such species of Prescriptivism. The general strategy DFW and I both favor involves establishing that our linguistic choices can often have nonlinguistic consequences of pretty obvious practical or ethical significance. In other words, given what we already care about, we should also care about how we express ourselves.¹⁶

DFW sort of sneaks up on this point in the discussion of interpretive labor we reviewed above, but there are lots of other ways in which our linguistic decisions matter. Elsewhere, together with Professor David Plunkett, PhD, and force of nature, I've tried to catalogue some of these different ways, sketching a basic framework for what we there call "conceptual ethics"—that is, normative/evaluative theorizing about thought and talk Burgess and Plunkett, manuscript.¹⁷ Consider, for example, the tangible harm done by the

¹⁶ Case in point. One could easily get negative attention on the blogs for referring in a book review to The Saul Kripke Center as CUNY's Center for Kripkiana. Readers might gloss "-iana" as an expression of derision, implying in this instance that the organization is somehow trifling. Offended parties might well stop reading before the review is even really underway, lending four errant letters excessive influence over the size of one's audience. "This reviewer acknowledges that there seems to be some, umm, personal stuff getting dredged up and worked out here; but the stuff is germane" (104).

¹⁷ A. Burgess and D. Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics I." *Philosophy Compass*, 8 (2013): 1091–101. doi: 10.1111/phc3.12086; A. Burgess and D. Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics II." *Philosophy Compass*, 8 (2013): 1102–10. doi: 10.1111/phc3.12085

use of racial slurs. Or, to cash in my titular allusion, think about the practical upshot of a speech act like promising. Once we get going, illustrations start flooding in; for there's no obvious way to cordon our linguistic behavior off from everything else we do.

Plunkett and I focus mostly on the ethics of individual terms or concepts of special philosophical interest, like "personal identity" and "truth." But one of our original inspirations was DFW's observation that how we use language directly affects our chances of gaining membership into various social and professional groups. "The point here is obvious," he admits; and maybe it is, once you've had it pointed out to you: "People really do judge one another according to their use of language. Constantly. . . . [And] at least one component of all this interpersonal semantic judging involves *acceptance*, meaning not some touchy feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of someone's bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else's collective or community or Group" (97).

DFW sketches various thought experiments involving decisions about diction or grammar that seem to virtually guarantee exclusion from a given group. But the most compelling example in the essay derives from his own experiences teaching black students the mechanics of conventional, academic, expository prose—the dialect of SWE or "Standard Written English, which we might just as well call 'Standard White English' because it was developed by white people and is used by white people, especially educated, powerful white people" (108–9). Here's an excerpt from the relevant lecture summary:

In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It Is. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself. (109)

One of the reasons this can be so hard to read, I submit, is that it's (still) painfully true. I can't put the point any better than DFW has, but I can say that I thought about it every day I tutored the middle-school children of Spanish-speaking Angelinos at 826LA.¹⁸ The tragic fact is that these kids

¹⁸ If you don't know about the organization, it's a beautiful, national nonprofit founded by Dave Eggers, one of DFW's literary peers, accepting volunteers at a major US city near you.