

RULE-FOLLOWING

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's late writings, one finds numerous interconnected remarks having to do with meaning, understanding, and rule-following – remarks in which Wittgenstein can seem to be continually circling around these topics without ever arriving at any definite conclusion. An exceptionally clear and compelling way into this material was provided by Saul Kripke in his influential 1982 book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. By presenting Wittgenstein's concerns in the form of a single extended argument, Kripke brought many readers to see that Wittgenstein's discussions of rule-following bear significantly on central issues in (among other things) contemporary philosophy of language. As Kripke recasts Wittgenstein's remarks, they amount to an argument for a radical form of skepticism – a skepticism according to which there are no facts about what we mean by any of our utterances or inscriptions. In what follows, a sketch is provided of the skeptical argument that Kripke finds in Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following. That done, an effort is made to distinguish the actual, historical Wittgenstein from Kripke's reconstruction of him.

The Skeptic's Challenge

Suppose that I'm asked to add two numbers that I happen never before to have added together: I'm asked (let's say) "What's 68 plus 57?" I think for a moment and reply "125." Kripke imagines a "bizarre sceptic" (1982, 8) who contests this answer. The skeptic suggests that, given what I've always meant by the word "plus" in the past, the correct answer to "What's 68 plus 57?" is not 125. For in the past, he says, what I meant by "plus" might have been a function – call it the "quus" function – that yields 5, rather than 125, given the arguments 68 and 57. By hypothesis, the quus function is consistent with all of the "sums" that I have computed before today. (Imagine that the *only* difference between the quus function and the plus function is that 68 quus 57 – that is, the "quum" of 68 and 57 – is 5.) Kripke's skeptic challenges me to show that, in the past, when I used the word "plus" (or "addition" or "sum"), what I meant was *plus* (*addition*, *sum*) rather than *quus* (*quaddition*, *quum*). I'm to show this by citing a fact or set of facts about my former self.

Although the skeptic's challenge concerns my use of a mathematical expression, it is important to understand that what's at issue has nothing especially to do with mathematics. I might just as well have been challenged to show that in the past I meant *horse* by "horse." If the skeptic can secure his conclusion concerning my past uses of "plus," the point will generalize – from "plus" to other words and from past uses to present ones. The conclusion he seeks is that there are no facts of the matter about what I, or anyone, ever meant, or mean, by any utterance or inscription. The argument may be understood to proceed by a process of elimination. Kripke adduces various answers to the skeptic's challenge and, one by one, shows each to be unsatisfactory.

Interpretationalism

Perhaps the most natural reply to the skeptic would make appeal to the notion of a rule or interpretation in something like the

following manner: When I learned to add, and so learned what "plus" (and "+") mean, I didn't merely memorize the answers to a finite list of addition problems. I learned a rule for addition (and so for using "plus" or "+") that determines the sum of any pair of numbers, regardless of whether I happen to have yet encountered them. That the correct answer to "What is 68 + 57?" is 125, rather than 5, is determined by this rule – a rule that, Kripke suggests, might have taken the following form:

Take a huge bunch of marbles. First count out x marbles in one heap. Then count out y marbles in another. Put the two heaps together and count out the number of marbles in the union thus formed. The result is $x + y$. (Kripke 1982, 15)

The problem with this sort of answer to the skeptic's challenge is *not* that I may be misremembering the rule – the interpretation of "+" – that I learned as a child. The skeptic is happy to grant that as a child I learned precisely this formulation and that I remember it clearly to this day. But he questions how this rule – let's call it R – ought to be understood. While the skeptic allows that R is the interpretation that I've long assigned to the plus sign, he claims that I am, at present, misapplying R . He suggests that given what, in the past, I meant by the word "count," the result that a correct application of R would yield, given "68 + 57," is 5.

At this point, I might reply to the skeptic by recalling an interpretation of the word "count" that I also internalized as a child. But he will just make the same sort of move again: He'll grant me the remembered interpretation and suggest that I am, at present, misapplying it. Thus, each new interpretation that I adduce seems to require another one standing behind it, and an infinite regress threatens. The moral – the problem with what might be called *interpretationalism* – may be put as follows: However tempting it is to say that our words derive their meanings from rules or interpretations, saying this just leaves us with the question of where these rules or interpretations get *their* meanings.

Dispositionalism

Another kind of reply to Kripke's skeptic would appeal to dispositions rather than to interpretations or rules. Thus, the skeptic's challenge might be answered as follows: While I have never before added 68 and 57, it's nonetheless true that *had* I been asked to add these numbers, I *would* have arrived at the answer 125. My having meant *plus* (rather than *quus*) by "plus" consists in my having been so disposed – disposed to answer questions of the form "What is x plus y ?" with the sum (and not the quum) of x and y .

A problem with this sort of *dispositionalism* becomes apparent when one considers the fact that speakers are sometimes disposed to make mistakes. Imagine that when I'm sleepy, I am disposed to answer 115 if someone asks me to add 68 and 57. We don't want an account of meaning according to which it would follow from this that when I'm sleepy, what I mean by "plus" is not addition but, instead, some function that yields 115, given 68 and 57 as arguments. Or consider a nonmathematical example: It might be that I have a disposition to answer the question "Is that a horse?" affirmatively when I'm shown an albino

zebra or a donkey in dim light. Our account of meaning had better not commit us to claiming that the word “horse” in my idiolect therefore includes albino zebras and dimly lit donkeys in its extension.

A further problem with the dispositionalist answer to Kripke’s skeptic (one that Kripke himself does not discuss) is this: The dispositionalist – at least as we (following Kripke) have imagined him or her – takes it as a datum that for much of my life, I have been disposed to answer 125 in response to being asked for the sum of 68 and 57 (disposed, as Kripke puts it, “when asked for any sum ‘ $x + y$ ’ to give the sum of x and y as the answer” [1982, 22]). But to say any such thing is to give a thoroughly *intentional* characterization of my behavior – to describe me not merely as having a disposition to produce certain physically describable movements and sounds (under some set of physically describable conditions), but as being disposed to *answer a question* in a particular way, that is, to *say* something – something with a particular semantic content – in response to being *asked* something. Thus dispositionalism, at least as we’ve imagined it, takes for granted the phenomenon (semantic content, meaning) that it pretends to vindicate and explain – the very phenomenon that Kripke’s skeptic calls into doubt.

Reductionism and Platonism

As these and other replies to Kripke’s skeptic are tried and shown to be unworkable, it begins to look as if there may be no way to meet his challenge – that is, no way to justify my present answer to the question “What’s 68 plus 57?” by adducing facts that constitute my having meant *plus* by “plus.” Perhaps the chief virtue of Kripke’s book on Wittgenstein is that it makes a strong case for thinking that persons’ meaning something by their words cannot be reduced to a set of, as it were, semantically neutral facts – nonintentionally characterized truths concerning, for example, their (or, for that matter, their community’s) behavior or dispositions to behave. As Kripke reads Wittgenstein, however, the latter takes the failure of this sort of reductionism to show that there are no facts about what persons mean by any of their utterances or inscriptions. (Or, anyway, this is how Kripke’s book is most often read. There are grounds for claiming that he equivocates on the question of how much Wittgenstein ultimately grants to the skeptic.) If one is convinced that meaning-facts cannot be reduced to semantically neutral ones, must one accept this skeptical conclusion? Why not instead reject *reductionism* about meaning? Why not claim, for example, that I have always meant *plus*, not *quus*, by “plus” – but that this fact about me does not “consist in” any set of facts that could be characterized without recourse to intentional vocabulary? Notice that given such a claim, my inability to satisfy Kripke’s skeptic wouldn’t come with any earth-shaking skeptical implications. But to many philosophers – Kripke’s Wittgenstein among them – this sort of anti-reductionism is liable to look like a kind of mystery-mongering *Platonism*.

Think of Platonism as a desperate attempt to resuscitate (what’s referred to as) interpretationalism by blocking the infinite regress that seems to undermine it. Platonism represents meanings as mysterious regress stoppers that stand behind our

in-themselves-empty utterances and inscriptions – *superinterpretations* that, unlike mere vocalizations or marks on a page, neither need nor brook any further interpretation. Wittgenstein characterizes the impulse toward this sort of position when he writes, “What one wishes to say is: ‘Every sign is capable of interpretation; but the *meaning* mustn’t be capable of interpretation. It is the last interpretation.’” (Wittgenstein 1958, 34). Platonism is a target of criticism in his late writings. But it is a mistake to read Wittgenstein as holding that in order to reject reductionism of the sort that Kripke’s skeptic presupposes, one must embrace Platonism.

To get Wittgenstein’s response to Platonism into view requires that one appreciate how much the semantic skeptic, the interpretationalist, the dispositionalist, and the platonist have *in common*. All four see our communicative activities as the production of in-themselves-meaningless movements, noises, and marks. All four agree, in effect, with Wittgenstein’s interlocutor at *Philosophical Investigations* §431 when he says, “The *order* – why, that is nothing but sounds, ink-marks” (1953). Disagreement arises concerning how best to answer a question that might be put as follows: “What, if anything, gives semantic significance to the (mere) sounds and ink-marks that our orders, assertions, questions, greetings, and so on really are?” Wittgenstein does not offer a fifth answer to this question. Instead, he tries to expose and undermine the philosophical moves that make it seem pressing, moves whose effect is to induce us, first, to consider our words apart from the contexts in which they *have* semantic significance – thus giving them the appearance of being nothing more than “sounds, ink marks” – and, then, to search in vain for the special somethings (interpretations or dispositions or meanings-in-the-sky) that, as it were, bestow significance upon the now flat-seeming words.

Wittgenstein understands this seeming flatness as a kind of self-induced illusion. If he is right, freeing oneself from this illusion would allow one to reject the sort of reductionism that Kripke’s skeptic takes for granted *without* lapsing into Platonism.

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