

KRIPKE'S SCEPTICAL ARGUMENT¹

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In *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*² Kripke has presented a reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument against the notion of rule-following. In this talk I want to take a closer look at the argument as it is reconstructed by Kripke. I will disregard the question of whether Kripke's reconstruction comes close to Wittgenstein's intentions or not. Kripke's argument is meant to establish that there is no act of meaning anything. Aside from its relevance to psychology, this conclusion is also important for the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mathematics: if there is no act of meaning anything by a word, then, first, the notion of linguistic meaning seems to turn out to be a spurious notion, and, second, it becomes difficult to see what the correct application of mathematical rule could consist in. My aim is to show that Kripke's argument is not convincing.

I. Kripke's argument consists of two parts. One part tries to establish the conclusion that "there can be no such thing as meaning anything by a word" by showing that any alleged performance of adding numbers can be made compatible with the application of other numerical functions and, hence, that there is no way to decide which function was actually used in a computation. The second part tries to reach the same conclusion in a different way. Various accounts of what meaning something by a word consists of are considered and each of these is exposed as unsatisfactory. Because each of the discussed accounts fails, Kripke concludes that there is no fact which constitutes meaning something by a word.

I will concentrate only upon the first of the two parts: this argument is developed with addition as an example:

- (1) Let us assume that I have to calculate " $68+57$ ", that I have never computed " $68+57$ " before and that both arguments are larger than all arguments which I have ever added before.
- (2) Obviously, $68+57=125$, if we use our familiar addition function. I compute " $68+57$ " and get " 125 ".
- (3) We now define a new function, quaddition, which agrees with addition in all arguments smaller than 57. But for all arguments larger than 57, quaddition yields a constant value of, let us say, "5".
- (4) Now I meet a 'bizarre sceptic' who doubts that in the past I have used "plus" to mean our familiar addition. He maintains that I had used "plus" to mean quus ("quus" from quaddition).
- (5) Now, if the sceptic's assertion is false, there must be a fact which can be adduced for its refutation.
- (6) But every assumption as to what I might have meant can be put into doubt. Given any account of what I might have meant, we can find a non-standard account which agrees just as well with all of my past responses.
- (7) Hence there is no fact about me that constitutes my having meant plus rather than quus.

Now, I take it that the step leading from (6) to (7) is not obvious at all. I shall expand the argument in such a way that we can see what suppressed premisses this step depends upon. I shall start with a slight reformulation of (5):

- (8) If the assertion Q ("I have meant quus") is false there must be a fact f, which can be adduced for the refutation of Q.

But how can this refutation be effected?

- (9) The refutation of Q has to use a sentence F stating a fact f.

Now, for all possible assertions F, the following is true:

- (10) Every assertion F can be put into doubt. Given any account of what I might have meant, we can find a non-standard account which agrees just as well with all of my past responses.

Now we immediately infer (11):

- (11) We cannot know whether I meant plus or quus.

And in a last step we infer our conclusion (7).

I take it that the crucial stages in this argument are the steps from (10) to (11) and from (11) to (7). Now, the step from (10) to (11) could be licensed by a principle like the following:

- (12) If two or more alternative accounts of a person's psychological state agree with his/her responses in the past, there is no reason to adopt one of these accounts as possibly correct.

And another principle is presupposed by the step from (11) to (7):

- (13) If we cannot know whether a person is in one psychological state or another, there is no fact that constitutes that person's being in the one state or the other.

II. Let us step back for a moment and consider an argument pattern of which Kripke's argument, as analyzed here, is an instance:

- (14) Alternative incompatible theses T_1, T_2, \dots on some subject matter S are proposed.

- (15) We adopt a set of evaluation criteria $\{c_1, \dots, c_n\}$.

- (16) In the light of these criteria all alternative theses fare equally well.

- (17) Hence we cannot know if the thesis T_i is true of the subject matter considered.

- (18) Hence with regard to subject matter S there is no fact of the matter which corresponds to differences between the theses T_i .

This pattern of argument, as such, does not automatically yield valid argument instances. Obviously, the legitimacy of the step from (16) to (17) depends on the evaluation criteria adopted. Only if the alternative theses fare equally well in the light of an *exhaustive* set of *somehow reasonable* evaluation criteria, one might be justified to accept (17), when (16) is given. The step from (17) to (18) can also be questioned; it seems to presuppose a principle like the following:

- (19) If we cannot know something about a matter of fact, this matter of fact does not exist.

If we accept (19) and consider it a *logical* principle (not a methodological one) we are stuck with a verificationist's understanding of truth; for (19) seems to imply:

- (20) If p is true, then we can know that p.

But it cannot be taken simply for granted that the mere possibility to know that p is a necessary condition for the truth of p.

I think that various arguments in the philosophy of language and related areas exhibit the structure which I have displayed here—especially various arguments for the inscrutability of reference and for the indeterminacy of meaning. Kripke's argument has the same structure. Its presupposed principle (12) states the evaluation criteria adopted in the argument. Its presupposed principle (13) is a special version of principle (19).

III. Kripke's argument starts out with a consideration of alternative theses about what I might have meant. Then, implicitly, only my past performances in solving problems of addition are admitted for testing which of the alternative theses is correct. That is to say, only my behavior is admitted for the decision between the alternatives. But, given how the problem is set up, no decision in favour of one of the alternative theses is forthcoming. Then it is inferred that we cannot know whether I performed addition or quaddition, and, finally, it is concluded that there is no fact of the matter which constitutes my meaning plus or quus.

If we look at Kripke's argument in this way we can see immediately where it is liable to go wrong: (a) in the step from (10) to (11) which depends on the evaluation criteria adopted, and (b) in the step from (11) to (7) because we might not be prepared to share the verificationist account of truth. Here I will not enter into the merits of a verificationist account of truth and concentrate on the step from (10) to (11) instead. Of course, if this step does not go through the whole argument will be vitiated. It seems as though in Kripke's argument only one evalua-

tion criterion is at work which could license the step from (10) to (11). This criterion concerns the adequacy of a hypothesis when confronted with behavioral data, where "behavioral" is taken in a narrow sense: what counts, is my writing "5" as response to the stimulus "2 + 3". The intention I might have had in writing "5" is not to be taken into consideration. Therefore my protest "But I wanted to add, not to quadd" is excluded as relevant datum. What I am arguing for is that other evaluation criteria should be taken into consideration. Adequacy of a hypothesis when confronted with behavioral evidence is just *one* criterion among others, after all. It is easy to think of others: (a) adequacy of a hypothesis when confronted with behavioral data in a broader sense, including evidence of intentions and from introspection; (b) plausibility in the light of theoretical background knowledge; and (c) integrability into a wider theoretical framework. The exclusion of such criteria seems to be an unjustifiable restriction.

So, in particular, I do not even see why empirical evidence of intentions or from introspection should be disregarded in the evaluation of the competing theses. Such data should be given some weight in the decision process. But if we do so, my declaration as to my past intentions in problems of computation can help to decide the matter. Against this one might want to argue that empirical evidence based on intentions is not independent of the theses under consideration, and that in the test of hypotheses only independent evidence should be admitted. But most people would agree that when testing theories in the physical sciences we also use evidence not independent of the theory to be tested. So, why should we adopt stronger standards in the non-physical disciplines? Also the appeal to memories concerning past computations cannot be ruled out. As there seem to be no telling reasons against the use of intentional evidence nor against the use of memories, we should use both kinds of consideration in the evaluation of the alternative theses. But, if we do so, the alternatives will no longer turn out to be empirically equivalent. In this case, however, the step from (10) to (11) cannot be accomplished and the whole argument breaks down.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The research on which this paper is based was financed by a "Forschungsstipendium" of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.—A more detailed treatment of the same subject matter can be found in my "Scetticismo nella teoria del significato", in *Il Cannocchiale*, Nr. 3, 1983, p. 27–52, and in my Habilitationsschrift *Bedeutung, Gegenstandsbezug, Skepsis*, which is yet to appear in print.
- ² Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language. An Elementary Exposition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

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