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PAUL BOGHOSSIAN'S WITTGENSTEIN

The problem of meaning in the later Wittgenstein[1]

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38.1 Introduction

As I see it, there is a simple – though insuperable – obstacle to arriving at a satisfying interpretation of the later Wittgenstein's views on meaning and rule-following.[2] The obstacle is that they harbor a contradiction.

In general, of course, an inconsistency in a complex philosophical corpus need pose no insuperable bar to understanding it. For one thing, the inconsistency may concern relatively unimportant aspects of the corpus in question; for another, it may be a deep or surprising inconsistency, one whose discovery and explanation are rich in exegetical or philosophical payoff.

Unfortunately, however, nothing so interesting is in prospect in Wittgenstein's case. For the doctrines that generate the inconsistency in Wittgenstein appear to be, on the one hand, *fundamental* to the later writings and, on the other hand, *obviously* inconsistent with each other. As a result, any interpretation of these writings faces an unpleasant dilemma: it must either present Wittgenstein as disbelieving a thesis that, on the face of it, is central to his later outlook; or it must present him as believing an inconsistency that no philosopher – let alone one of Wittgenstein's acuity – would have had any trouble detecting. Since neither option strikes me as palatable, I despair of ever really understanding what the later Wittgenstein thought about meaning and rule-following.

38.2 The solution

38.2.1 A problem about meaning and rules and its solution

Let us begin where the ground is firmest. Starting around PI §138, Wittgenstein launches into a sustained discussion of the idea of someone meaning something by a word or phrase. The discussion moves freely between talk about "meaning something" and talk about "following a rule," the connection being that to mean something by a word is, at least in part, to use that word *according to a rule*, the rule specifying the kinds of things to which alone the word correctly applies. So much, I think, is indisputable.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003226260-41

Also indisputable is the claim that part, anyway, of what transpires in Wittgenstein's discussion is that he presents a *problem* about meaning (or following a rule) and a *solution* to that problem. Crucially, this solution is supposed to show that meaning and rule-following are *not possible* under certain kinds of circumstances. These impossibility theses are signaled very clearly at what is recognizably the end of the sustained discussion of rule-following; and they are clearly presented as *flowing* from that discussion. It will be useful to have the relevant passages before us.

To begin with, what is the problem about rule-following with which Wittgenstein is concerned? A careful reader could not be faulted for forming the impression that Wittgenstein is worried about a problem of the following *form*:

> *(How Possible) How* is an act of following a rule with respect to a word so much as *possible,* given that it must involve a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of the rule?

Thus, Wittgenstein's imaginary interlocutor says:

> But how can a rule show me what I have to do at *this* point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule.
>
> *(PI §198)*

The problem is then restated in Wittgenstein's own voice:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.
>
> *(PI §201)*

As these passages make clear, Wittgenstein considers it essential to the phenomenon of someone's following a rule that there be correct and incorrect applications of the rule. And the difficulty he is alluding to is that, on certain assumptions yet to be specified, there seems to be a difficulty drawing such a distinction. It seems right to call this a *skeptical problem* – or, in Kantian terms, a "how possible" problem – about following a rule.

Wittgenstein's *solution* to this problem seems to assume the form of providing an account of *what it is* to follow a rule, an account of the *nature* of that phenomenon – a *constitutive* account, as I shall call it. And, according to this account, following a rule is a social custom or practice. That is to say, following a rule with respect to a word is not something that happens in the minds of solitary individuals; it is a *public practice*, not a private event. And it is *social* in nature, not individual, in that it requires a certain regular way of using that word by several individuals organized in a characteristically social form. The idea seems to be that, if, but also only if, following a rule is understood to be a social practice in this way, would there be no mystery seeing how there could be correct and incorrect applications of the rule. Thus,

> *(Solution)* Following a rule is possible because it is a public social practice of responding to signs in certain regular ways; and it is clearly possible for there to be such practices.

Thus, the interlocutor asks whether we are to acquiesce in a skepticism about rule-following. Wittgenstein replies:

> That is not what we ought to say, but rather: any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.
>
> *(PI §198)*

The interlocutor persists:

> Then can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?
>
> *(PI §198)*

Wittgenstein replies:

> Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a sign-post – got to do with my actions? What sort of connection is there here? – Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it.

"But," the interlocutor objects,

> that is only to give a causal connection; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign-post; not what this going-by-the-sign *really consists in*.
>
> *(Emphasis added)*

Wittgenstein replies:

> *On the contrary*; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.
>
> *(Emphasis added)*

(This solution is restated at PI §201), Note the "on the contrary." The regular, customary, use of sign-posts is not just some contingent causal fact about how sign-posts are routinely used; it is, Wittgenstein says explicitly, a necessary, constitutive fact about following a sign-post that there is such a regular, customary use of sign-posts.

Following the statement of the problem and its solution, we have the *consequences* that are supposed to flow from this solution. There appear to be at least two of them. One is stated immediately after the first statement of the solution, at PI §199; we may call it, following Colin McGinn (1984), the "multiple-application thesis."

> Is what we call "obeying a rule" something that it would be possible for only *one* man to do, and to do only *once* in his life? – This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression "to obey a rule."
>
> It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. – To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs, uses, institutions*.

The second, which we may call the "anti-privacy thesis," is stated at PI §202, immediately after the second statement of the solution:

> And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.

Given the view of rule-following as a social practice, there would seem to be a natural path to the advertised impossibility results. It is not possible for only one person to follow a rule only once, since such an isolated event is not a *practice*; and it is not possible to obey a rule *privately*, since the practice has to be social and public in nature.

Of course, having said this, much work remains to be done to explain exactly what it all means and how it has been argued for. But that something along these lines is true seems inescapable: the text seems practically to cry out for such an interpretation. In particular, the claim that the solution on offer assumes the form of a constitutive account of following a rule seems inescapable for two reasons. First, because we have what amounts to Wittgenstein's explicit *insistence* that that is the sort of account that's on offer ("on the contrary"). Second, because it's hard to see how the impossibility results are going to flow directly from the proffered solution if that solution does not assume the form of a constitutive account. For the argument on offer clearly seems to have the following structure: a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of the rule is essential to any rule-following. It is only if rule-following is a social practice that there can be such a distinction. Hence, single-application and private rule-following are not possible.

Everything, then, about the rule-following discussion would appear to indicate that Wittgenstein holds that:

a certain features (correct and incorrect applications) are *essential* (or necessary) to rule-following;
b this essential feature is possible if and only if rule-following has a social and practical *nature*; and, therefore,
c that the impossibility results – the multiple application and privacy theses – are true.

The outstanding exegetical questions appear only to be: (i) What in more detail is that account? (ii) How exactly is it argued for? And (iii) how precisely does it ground the impossibility results that are supposed to flow from it?

38.2.2 Wittgenstein's other views on meaning and philosophy

However, no sooner has this description of the rule-following dialectic been stated than doubts begin to set in. For how could *this* be the project of the philosopher who wrote:

> The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in.
>
> *(*Zettel *p. 16)*

Of course, this is not an isolated expression of hostility toward constitutive accounts. As every reader of Wittgenstein knows, if there is a single theme that dominates his later

writings, it is a relentless hostility toward the "craving for generality" that a search for constitutive accounts represents. Thus, at *Blue and Brown Books*, p. 19, he writes:

> The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation…

And he traces this idea to a "number of tendencies connected with particular philosophical confusions" (*Zettel*, p. 17), among which is

> Our preoccupation with the method of science…This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness. I want to say here that it can never be our job to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything.
> *(*Zettel*, p. 18)*

This antipathy toward looking for necessary conditions, essences, or natures is rehearsed endlessly throughout the later writings; it is applied explicitly to an enormous variety of concepts and phenomena, most famously, of course, to the concept of a "game" but most strikingly for our purposes, to the concepts of "meaning" and "language" themselves. Thus, at PI §65, Wittgenstein writes:

> Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations. – For someone might object against me: "You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or part of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language."

Wittgenstein replies to his imagined objector:

> And this is true. – Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all "language".

At PI §92, the scorn is evident:

> '*The essence is hidden from us*;' this is the form our problem now assumes. We ask: '*What is* language?' '*What is* a proposition?' And the answer to these questions is to be given once and for all; and independently of any future experience.

Now, what on Earth is anyone with *these* views doing providing *a priori* constitutive accounts of, or a priori necessary conditions for, anyone, anywhere meaning something by a word, or following a rule? There appears to be an outright contradiction between the constitutive pretensions of the rule-following discussion and the anti-constitutive,

anti-essentialist, anti-generalist rhetoric of the rest of the later writings. And what's worse is that the contradiction is, by anyone's standards, not a subtle one. Could Wittgenstein really have tried to hold *both* sets of views?

This is the puzzle about Wittgenstein's interpretation that I have in mind. There looks to be an outright contradiction between the first-order claims about meaning and rule-following – the constitutive account of meaning and rule-following – and the sexy consequences about privacy and multiple applications that are supposed to flow from them and the insistently anti-constitutive, anti-essentialist, anti-generalist metaphilosophy.

So long as nothing is said about how these two absolutely central aspects of Wittgenstein's later philosophy are to be reconciled, there can be no satisfactory interpretation of what he was up to. The question is whether there is some subtle way in which the reconciliation might be pulled off.

38.2.3 Kripke's account

Against this background, Saul Kripke's famous reading of the *Investigations* may be seen as an ingenious attempt to solve this exegetical problem (though I don't know to what extent intentionally). For Kripke's reading, the anti-constitutive metaphilosophy is not an independent constraint on the interpretation of the rule-following dialectic but emerges, in fact, as the *conclusion* of that dialectic: in Kripke's view, it is precisely the *moral* of the rule-following considerations that one should not look for necessary and sufficient conditions for following a rule with respect to a word. Thus, the rule-following considerations are seen, in effect, as providing an *argument* for the antecedently articulated anti-constitutive metaphilosophy. If this reading held up, it would constitute a surprising and creative solution to the puzzle we are confronting. But does it hold up?

According to Kripke, Wittgenstein's view was that the skeptical problem about following a rule that he is grappling with cannot be given a "straight solution," a solution that would say outright what someone's following a rule consists of. It can only be given a "skeptical solution," in which we don't give necessary and sufficient conditions for following a rule but rather just give the assertibility conditions for saying of someone that they are following the rule for addition, as opposed to the rule for quaddition, or no rule at all.[3] Since, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, this is the only way for us to avoid the crippling and self-undermining paradox that no one means anything by any word, the anti-constitutive metaphilosophy emerges as vindicated by the rule-following considerations themselves!

Ingenious as this may be in connection with the puzzle about Wittgenstein interpretation we are confronting, there are several reasons for doubting that it is a satisfactory way of understanding what he was up to, though not for the reasons that are usually given.

Almost without exception, Kripke's critics have charged that, whereas in PI: 201, Wittgenstein seems unequivocally to indicate that his paradox is intended to serve as a *reductio* of one of the premises leading to it, Kripke has him *accepting* the paradox. The crucial remarks occur in the following paragraphs from PI §201:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

> It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation,* but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.

Now, this complaint can't be quite right as stated; for, surely, no one, not even Kripke's Wittgenstein, could sensibly suggest that a *paradox* be accepted. Rather, what Kripke has Wittgenstein claiming is that the skeptical *conclusion* – that there are no facts about meaning – will *prove paradoxical* so long as we cleave to a truth-conditional conception of judgment and assertion. Hence, the thought which Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein continues: we must reject a truth-conditional picture.

But now, with this correction in place, the interpretation on offer does look as if it satisfies the *structure* of argument indicated in PI §201 – that of a *reductio ad absurdum* of some premises leading up to a paradox. To be sure, the repudiated premise occurs in an inference that moves from the skeptical *conclusion* – there are no facts about meaning – to the skeptical *paradox* – no one ever means anything; it is, therefore, consistent with the claim that Wittgenstein accepted the skeptical conclusion and proposed a merely "skeptical solution" to the skeptical paradox it threatens. But the purely structural observation that Wittgenstein's argument has the form of a *reductio* leaves Kripke's interpretation completely unscathed. What, then, *is* wrong with it?

Another very common criticism might seem to supply the answer. Wittgenstein couldn't have accepted the skeptical conclusion because that conclusion presupposes a robust conception of facts and truth, whereas Wittgenstein was a committed deflationist about these notions. (For the distinction between robust and deflationary conceptions of facts and truth, see Boghossian (1990).)

Both of the claims embodied in this criticism are correct: claiming of a meaningful declarative sentence that it is not truth-conditional presupposes a robust conception of truth, and Wittgenstein does appear in his later writings to repudiate such a robust conception. But their impact on Kripke's reading is uncertain. For as Kripke presents it, the rejection of robust truth conditions for meaning-attributing sentences occurs as part of a *wholesale* rejection of robust truth: sentence significance is construed *quite generally* in assertion-theoretic terms, and no invidious semantic distinction is drawn between the sort of significance possessed by meaning-attributing sentences and that possessed by sentences of other types. But this in effect means that, on Kripke's reading, part of the moral of the rule-following dialectic just is a deflationism about truth. This being so, there can hardly be a conflict between the skeptical conclusion (correctly understood) and Wittgenstein's previously articulated deflationism about truth – for they are consistent with one another. On the contrary, and just as with the rejection of constitutive accounts, Kripke's reading has the felicitous effect of exhibiting an intimate connection between the rule-following dialectic and Wittgenstein's professed deflationary views: the former is again represented as providing an argument for the latter.

If Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein is wrong, it is not, I think, for these familiar reasons. There are, however, other more telling ones; I shall mention three of them.

First, there is the fact already alluded to above that in PI §198, Wittgenstein appears to almost go out of his way to insist – "on the contrary," in response to the interlocutor's complaint – that he *is* offering a constitutive account of following a rule.

Second, for all that Kripke's reading conserves the suggestion that Wittgenstein's argument has the form of a *reductio*, Kripke's *reductio* appears not to be Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein signals in no uncertain terms what he regards as the offending premise:

> What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation,* but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.
>
> *(PI § 201)*

As Wittgenstein explains, what he means by an "interpretation" of a sentence is just another sentence which is somehow to be seen as giving the meaning of the former. *However*, there is no natural way to read the claim that there must be a way of grasping a rule which does not involve interpretation as expressing the rejection of a truth-conditional conception of declarative sentence meaning.

The final problem is perhaps the most serious: it's impossible to see how Kripke's skeptical solution will be able to generate the sexy impossibility results we were promised. On Kripke's view, the moral of the rule-following considerations is that declarative sentences, including those attributing meaning or rule-following, are to be understood as expressing assertibility conditions and not truth conditions (except in a deflationary sense). And the solution to our problem is supposed to be that the impossibility results about following a rule are to be seen as derived from the assertibility conditions for following a rule, not from its truth conditions. However, it really isn't possible to see how this might go.

Kripke is very clear about the limited, wholly descriptive nature of the skeptical solution, at least in his official explications of the view:

> We have to see under what circumstances attributions of meaning are made and what role these attributions play in our lives. Following Wittgenstein's exhortation not to think but to look, we will not reason *a priori* about the role such statements *ought* to play; rather we will find out what circumstances *actually* license such assertions and what role this license *actually* plays. It is important to realize that we are *not* looking for necessary and sufficient conditions (truth conditions) for following a rule, or an analysis of what such rule-following 'consists in'. Indeed such conditions would constitute a 'straight' solution to the sceptical problem, and have been rejected.
>
> *(pp. 86–87)*

It is important to recognize, however, that the counseled modesty – we will not reason a priori about the role such statements ought to play – is not merely the exercise of a commendable option: it is *compulsory*. For how, in the absence of a conception of the *truth conditions* of meaning-attributing sentences, could we hope to second-guess their *actual* assertion conditions? Were we equipped with an account of their truth conditions, we might be able to reason a priori about what their assertion conditions *ought* to be and, hence, potentially to revise the conditions for assertions *actually* accepted for them. But since it is the principal point of the skeptical solution that these sentences have *no* truth conditions, there is no scope for that sort of ambitious project: a descriptively adequate account of the *actual* assertion condition for such sentences is the most we may cogently aim for.

If this is correct, though, it is difficult to see how the skeptical solution is to deliver the advertised impossibility results with the requisite *modal* force: that it is (metaphysically)

impossible for a rule to have been obeyed only once, or to obey it "privately." For even if it were true that our actual assertion conditions for meaning-attributing sentences advert to the dispositions of a community, the most that would license saying is that *our* language is not individualistic or private. And this would be a lot less than the result that we were promised, which was that no *possible* language can be individualistic or private, not merely ours.

For all these reasons, then, I can't accept that Kripke shows us a way out of our puzzle.

38.2.4 McDowell's account

The explicit letter and implied "transcendental" pretensions of the rule-following considerations mandate that we think of Wittgenstein as offering a priori necessary and constitutive conditions on anyone, anywhere following a rule or meaning something by a word. Yet many other aspects of his later writings, most especially, but not exclusively, his meta-philosophical remarks, suggest not only that that type of claim is the furthest thing from his mind, but that it is the source of all that has been bad about philosophy, his own previous efforts included. Kripke's account, which hoped to reconcile these two conflicting aspects of the later Wittgenstein, by arguing that the anti-constitutivism emerges as a solution to the rule-following problem, fails.

The difficulties I have been outlining here are powerfully illustrated in another influential reading of the *Investigations*, this one by John McDowell (1984). McDowell, too, is anxious to respect Wittgenstein's hostility to philosophical theorizing of all kinds, especially to constitutive claims. He goes so far as to criticize Kripke and Wright for attributing to Wittgenstein doctrines that are in clear violation of the maxim enumerated in PI §128:

> If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, since everyone would agree to them.

However, it is hard to imagine *any* philosophical doctrine being safely attributable to Wittgenstein under the terms of the implied constraint, let alone one that would have some prospect of grounding the advertised impossibility results.

True to his word, McDowell understands Wittgenstein to reject substantive, constitutive answers to the question: In virtue of what do expressions possess meaning? He says:

> By Wittgenstein's lights, it is a mistake to think we can dig down to a level at which we no longer have application for normative notions (like 'following according to the rule'). *(p. 341)*

According to McDowell's Wittgenstein, we have to resist the temptation to form a picture of "bedrock" – "of how things are at the deepest level at which we may sensibly contemplate the place of [meaning] in the world" (p. 341) – which does not already employ the idea of the correct (or incorrect) use of an expression.

However, if we are simply allowed to help ourselves to the distinction between correct and incorrect application, how do we get an argument for the impossibility results?

McDowell does not shrink from attributing to Wittgenstein those classic claims. Thus, he writes:

> Wittgenstein warns us not to try to dig below 'bedrock'. But it is difficult, in reading him, to avoid acquiring a sense of what, as it were, lies down there: a web of facts

> about behaviour and 'inner' episodes, describable without using the notion of meaning. One is likely to be struck by the sheer contingency of the resemblances between individuals on which, in this vision, the possibility of meaning seems to depend, and hence impressed by an apparent precariousness in our making sense of one another.
>
> *(p. 348)*

And:

> It is true that a certain disorderliness below 'bedrock' would undermine the applicability of the notion of rule-following. So the underlying contingencies bear an intimate relation to the notion of rule-following….
>
> *(p. 349)*

These are our familiar impossibility results: meaning is possible only in the context of a *practice* of using signs, and only if that practice is *communal*, and only where it is characterized by a fair measure of *agreement*. The question is how, in light of the rejection of substantive answers to the constitutive question of what meaning is, are they to be argued for?

Consider the contrast here with Wright's (1980) communitarian view. That view engages the constitutive question, offers a substantive answer to it, and generates, thereby, a straightforward argument for the necessity of a communal practice: since correctness is said to *consist* in conformity with one's fellows, correctness and, with it, meaning are possible only where there are others with whom one may conform or fail to conform.

McDowell finds the attribution of such a reductive constitutive account to Wittgenstein unsubtle, to say the least: his paper begins with a quote from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*: "These things are finer spun than crude hands have any inkling of" (RFM VII §57). The "subtle" view he attributes to Wittgenstein involves rejecting the very demand for a substantive account of correctness: norms are part of the "bedrock," beneath which we must not dig.

But if we are simply to be allowed to take the idea of correctness for granted, unreduced and without any prospect of reconstruction in terms of, say, actual and counterfactual truths about communal use, how is the necessity of an *orderly communal practice* to be argued for? From what does the demand for orderliness flow? And from what the demand for community?

McDowell seems to think that he has an answer to this objection, because he seems to believe that the argument Wittgenstein had in mind runs somewhat as follows:

1 Meaning is possible only if understanding someone else is not necessarily done by interpretation – "not essentially a matter of forming a hypothesis about something concealed behind the surface of his linguistic behavior."
2 Understanding will be a necessarily interpretative process unless it is possible to simply hear someone else's meaning in his words (i.e., unless it is possible that utterances under intentional descriptions can be the subject-matter of direct perception).

Therefore,

3 Meaning is possible only if utterances under intentional description can be the subject-matter of direct perception.

The argument is evidently valid, but there are several problems seeing how it could be used to support the advertised impossibility results.

To begin with, what is the argument for the initial premise (1)? Why think that meaning is possible only if understanding someone else is not always interpretative? McDowell takes this to be the claim signaled in the famous passage concluding the discussion of rule-following at PI §201:

> What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is …

So, he evidently believes that those considerations, whatever precisely they may be, provide the requisite support.

The reading sounds tantalizingly plausible, at least on the surface. But it is not believable for a simple reason. The entire surrounding textual context in which PI §201 occurs makes it very clear that when Wittgenstein talks about "grasping a rule," he is talking, at least in part, about *acquiring a concept for the first time* (think here of the student learning to expand the series "+2"), not just (or even perhaps not at all) about hearing a *previously acquired* concept in someone else's speech.

But there is surely no plausibility in the suggestion that someone who is merely being *taught* a concept should be able to simply *hear* that concept in his instructor's words. McDowell himself is careful to insist at this point:

> *Of course such an outward aspect cannot be conceived as made available to just anyone; command of the language is needed in order to put one in direct cognitive contact with that in which someone's meaning consists.*
>
> *(p. 348)*

But what, then, is the Wittgensteinian argument that is supposed to lead to this conclusion? The argument Kripke finds in Wittgenstein certainly won't do: for even if you think – as I do – that Kripke's skeptical challenge can be answered with an appropriately anti-reductionist conception of meaning, that is a purely constitutive thesis; in itself it is entirely independent of the essentially *epistemological* thesis that constitutes McDowell's first premise. Nor does McDowell indicate some other argument by which the premise is to be supported.

However, even if we ignored this and simply granted McDowell his conclusion, I still don't see how it is going to support the advertised impossibility results. For it to do so, it would have to be true that a capacity to directly perceive the content of someone's utterances itself requires the existence of a convergent communal practice in the use of the constituent words. It doesn't, however, obviously *follow* from the conditional claim. If there were other people for me to understand, then my understanding of them must be purely perceptual that there actually *are* any other people for me to understand or, if there were, that their practice with words must assume a certain orderly shape. So, what is needed is a *separate* argument demonstrating the necessity of a convergent communal practice for the direct perception of meaning, one, moreover, that is subject to the constraint that it, at no point, assumes a substantive constitutive account of meaning or understanding. I cannot begin to see how this program is to be executed.

Toward the end of his paper, McDowell writes:

> When we had no more than an abstract characterization of Wittgenstein's response as an appeal to the notion of communal practice, there seemed to be justice in this query: if the concept of a communal practice can magic meaning into our picture, should not this power be credited to the concept of a practice as such – so that the practice of an individual might serve just as well? … But if Wittgenstein's position is the one I have described … it is precisely the notion of a communal practice that is needed, and not some notion that could be applied outside the context of a community. The essential point is the way in which one person can know another's meaning without interpretation.
>
> *(p. 351)*

For the reasons outlined above, I cannot accept that anything like this claim has in fact been demonstrated; nor, indeed, can I imagine demonstrating it in any manner that is consistent with the rest of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

38.3 The problem

Even if there is no saying what Wittgenstein's *solution* to the rule-following problem amounted to, there remains the question what specific *problem* it was supposed to address. Let me begin with Kripke's view of the matter since it is well-known and can serve as a useful foil for the account I wish to propose.

On Kripke's reading, the problematic of the rule-following considerations is encapsulated in the following question: how could there be a state of meaning something by a word, given that such a state would have to be essentially *normative* and *infinitary* in nature? The important observation underlying this question is that the relation between meaning something by a word and the use of that word is a normative relation: the fact that I mean *house* by "house" implies truths about how I *ought* to use that expression, how it would be *correct* for me to use it. And, Kripke maintains on Wittgenstein's behalf, there is a serious difficulty seeing how any real state of my mind could constitute such a state, could have the property of normatively determining the subsequent use of an expression in an endless variety of distinct situations.[4]

Now, the importance of Kripke's question is, I think, incontestable, but I can perhaps begin to explain my reluctance to believe that it is Wittgenstein's own by pointing out that it is the sort of question that is most likely to trouble someone with strong *reductionist* views, in particular someone with strong naturalistic views. And Wittgenstein, with his persistent anti-scientism and anti-constitutivism, appears emphatically to have been no such person.

I have argued elsewhere (1989) for the claim that the normativity of meaning poses a problem primarily for a naturalist and will not attempt to rehearse those considerations here. For my purposes now, it suffices to note that Wittgenstein appears not to have balked at saying that meaning something by a word normatively determines the future use of that word, and yet not as a result of subscribing to any sort of reductionism about that notion (cf. PI §§692–693).

If Wittgenstein's problem is not Kripke's, what is it? One somewhat misleading but provocative way to express it is this: Wittgenstein's problem is not:

> How could there be a state of meaning something by a word, given that such a state would have to be essentially normative in nature?

But rather:

> How could there be a state of meaning of something by a word, given that such a state would have to be *both* essentially normative *and* essentially descriptive in nature?

I shall explain.

38.3.5 First-person and third-person aspects of meaning

I believe that the focus of Wittgenstein's concern about meaning is that it seems to have two distinct and seemingly exclusive natures, depending upon whether it is viewed from a first-person or a third-person perspective. His problem is how to reconcile the tension generated by these competing demands.

Let's reflect on what a fact of meaning looks like from the first-person point of view – "from the inside", as we might say. One aspect stands out: what I mean now by a given word, say, "square", seems immediately and unproblematically accessible to me. I have no significant doubts on this score. I now confidently believe that I now mean *square* by "square." I have some other beliefs as well, of course. One of them is that I have always meant *square* by "square" in the past. Another is that I will probably continue to mean *square* by "square" in the future. A third is that most of my fellow-speakers mean *square* by "square". All of these beliefs seem to me to be firm, though perhaps none are quite as overwhelming and direct as the belief about what I mean by "square" *now*. In any event, that is the belief I wish to concentrate upon here, in this discussion.

Here are some other beliefs I have about the word "square," not overtly about its meaning but about the history of its use. I believe that in the past I have sometimes applied "square" to square things and, on occasion, owing to unfavorable circumstances, to some non-square things. I believe that, in the future, this pattern is likely to continue: by and large, "square" will be applied to things that are in its extension but, on occasion, to things that aren't. Needless to say, these predicted occasional departures from the correct application of "square" contribute not at all toward undermining my confidence that I know that I mean *square* by "square" now.

But here is a somewhat more arresting fact. Even if I were to discover now that, in the future, I will *never* end up applying "square" to a square thing, this will still not appear to me to warrant a change of view about what I now mean by "square." From the inside, what I mean by the word now seems settled *here and now* and in complete autonomy from my future behavior with the word. My prediction, of course, is that my future behavior will run a certain course, mixing in the occasional misapplication with the usual diet of largely correct applications. But from the standpoint of the *constitution* of the meaning-fact, the prediction is ancillary: it is not a conceptual or necessary truth that someone who means *square* by "square" will apply the word by and large to square things. Viewed from a first-person point of view, a meaning attribution is not a prediction about future linguistic behavior, not even in part.

What, then, from this perspective, is the relation between meaning something by a word and the future use of that word? The answer is that it is a *purely normative* relation: it simply constitutes the *standard* relative to which my behavior with the word should be assessed as correct or incorrect, as true or false.

In and of itself, it implies nothing about whether the use of the term will in fact meet that standard.[5]

Now, let's turn to considering how meaning-facts appear from the third-person perspective of an interpreter of my language – "from the outside," so to speak. From this vantage point, my meaning, *square* by "square" seems very different. No interpreter who is doing his job right would be willing to say that I mean *square* by "square," unless it is true that I (at least) sometimes exhibit a disposition to apply the word to square things. And how else am I to exhibit a disposition to phi, except by sometimes phi'ing?

To put the point in familiar terms, third-person interpretation is governed by a principle of *charity* or *humanity*: *modulo* explicable error, what a word means is just what it typically gets applied to. Hence, what it typically gets applied to is *eo ipso* the extension of the word. This is not to say, of course, that no errors in the application of expressions are allowed, only that global error is disallowed. In interpreting someone else, there appear to be no circumstances under which an interpreter would be warranted in assigning an interpretation to a word that made the speaker's use of a word globally false. As Quine (1960) put it:

> The maxim of translation underlying all this is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language. …
>
> The common sense behind the maxim is that one's interlocutor's silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation—or, in the domestic case, linguistic divergence.
>
> *(p. 59)*

Some of Quine's wording in these passages suggests that he regards the status of the charity principle in other-person interpretation to be simply that of a very plausible assumption. But the textual context makes it clear that he holds it to express a *necessary truth*, a view of the matter that has been nicely described by Davidson (1973):

> The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.
>
> *(p. 137)*

In any event, whatever Quine's precise intention, it seems quite clear that Wittgenstein, along with many contemporary philosophers, regarded charitable interpretation as non-optional:

> Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstance would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on. The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.
>
> *(PI §206)*

> Let us imagine that the people in that country carried on the usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their behaviour we find it intelligible, it seems 'logical'. But when we try to learn their

> language we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connexion between what they say, the sounds they make, and their actions; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if we gag one of the people, it has the same consequences as with us; without the sounds their actions fall into confusion—as I feel like putting it.
>
> Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and the rest? There is not enough regularity for us to call it "language"
>
> *(PI §207)*

If we take these points on board, we seem to give a satisfactory account of what Wittgenstein was worried about. The problem is that both first-person and third-person perspectives seem essential to our notion of meaning; both seem equally important to our understanding of it. And yet they point in opposite directions. From the third-person perspective, a meaning attribution bears a constitutive link to actual behavior; in this respect it looks to be the attribution of a disposition. Whereas from the first-person, a meaning attribution sustains no essential link to a description of behavior and, hence, does not look like a disposition. The question is how to reconcile these two, apparently contradictory, pictures.

That this is Wittgenstein's problem comes through very clearly, it seems to me, in some of the crucial passages of the discussion of rule-following, notably at PI §197:

> "It's as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash."—And that is just what we say we do. That is to say: we sometimes describe what we do in these words. But there is nothing astonishing, nothing queer, about what happens. It becomes queer when we are led to think that the future development must in some way be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn't present—For we say that there isn't any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand its meaning lies in its use. There is no doubt that I now want to play chess but chess is the game it is in virtue of all its rules (and so on). Don't I know, then, which game I want to play until I *have* played it? or are all the rules contained in my act of intending? Is it experience that tells me that this sort of game is the usual consequence of such an act of intending? so is it impossible for me to be certain what I am intending to do? And if that is nonsense—what kind of super-strong connexion exists between the act of intending and the thing intended?

The interpretation I am proposing of Wittgenstein's problematic about meaning and rules is related to the important reading proposed by Wright (1980, 1984). According to Wright, Kripke gets half the problem that Wittgenstein was concerned with. Wittgenstein's problem was not merely how could there be a finite state of meaning something by a word that had normative implications for a potential infinity of applications of that word, but more specifically, how could there be such a finite state to which we have immediate, authoritative first-person access?

One difficulty with putting it this way is that it invites simple dissolutions of the problem, for unless more is said, we are allowed to read the sense in which "meaning is use" in a normative, not descriptive, sense: that is, to read it as saying that meaning is *correct* use, not that it consists in the actual dispositions of the thinker to use it in a certain way. And many philosophers believe, rightly or wrongly, that there are readily available deflationary solutions to the problem about authoritative self-knowledge when use read as normative (see, e.g., Peacocke 1996).

On the reading of the problem I'm proposing, which also has the advantage of making better sense of the passages in the *Investigations* cited above, no such deflationary solutions are available.

How Wittgenstein proposed to solve this problem, I have already argued in Part I, we seem forever precluded from understanding. The question remains how it ought to be solved.

38.4 Conclusion

In the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein remarks that he found it difficult to put his thoughts into the form of a conventional philosophical treatise. As Alex Miller has nicely observed to me, if I am right that Wittgenstein's thought is afflicted with an obvious and foundational inconsistency, that would explain why he was unable to do so. Most every other serious interpretation of his work that I'm aware of – those of Kripke, Wright, and McDowell included – make a mystery of that fact. In any case, this is my apologia for forsaking interpretation of Wittgenstein's positive views in favor of grappling with the remarkable philosophical problems he did so much to bring to our attention.

Notes

1 This chapter was drafted sometime around 1988. Around that time, Simon Blackburn, then the Editor of *MIND*, had invited me to write one of its "State of the Art" articles about what had come to be called Wittgenstein's "rule-following considerations." (I believe the phrase was coined by Crispin Wright.) These considerations are found throughout the later writings but especially in *Philosophical Investigations* §§138 to 202. Spurred by Saul Kripke's original reading of those considerations, published as *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* in 1982, but with important prior contributions from a number of other writers, most especially Wright, a huge literature had developed about both the exegetical and philosophical aspects of Wittgenstein's discussion of rules. I had naturally intended to discuss both aspects in my commissioned article. However, as I worked on the piece, I found that while I had a great deal to say about the underlying philosophical issues, the exegetical aspect remained elusive. I couldn't see how any of the proposed interpretations could be correct because I couldn't see how *any possible* interpretation could make sense of certain central facets of Wittgenstein's thought. As a result, I sidelined the exegetical issues completely in the *MIND* paper, which appeared as "The Rule Following Considerations," in 1989, focusing wholly on the philosophical issues. In the third footnote of that paper, though, I advertised the present essay, promising that I would therein explain why I despaired of ever fully understanding what Wittgenstein himself was up to. For reasons that aren't entirely clear to me, I never got around to publishing the essay. Some thirty-five years later, and at the kind suggestion of Alex Miller and Ali Hossein Khani, it will finally see the light of day. I offer it here with some trepidation. If I were writing on this topic today, I might well write something quite different: in particular, the proposal at the end about the problem that Wittgenstein was concerned with needs much greater development than I have given it here. But the essay's main ideas still seem sound to me, so I have decided to let it go. With thanks to Alex Miller and Yu Guo, the original draft has been revised very lightly, and some references to more recent literature have been added where appropriate.

2 Henceforth, when I speak of Wittgenstein's views, I will mean those of the later Wittgenstein, unless otherwise noted.

3 'Quaddition' is the name for a "bent" function that agrees with addition up to a certain summand and diverges from it thereafter.

4 Wikforss (2001) and others contest that "correctness of application" is a genuinely normative notion. I explain why it is in Boghossian (2022).

5 It may also be possible to put this point as follows: From the inside, my meaning *square* by "square" does not appear to be any sort of a prediction.

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