Metaphysics Handouts
Revised
05 Nov 2026
10:34

Metaphysics // Fall 2026

Handout 10

The sceptical solution: Kripke

The shape of the answer. Nothing in me makes it true that I mean addition by ‘plus’. Still, the licence to say that I do so mean may be in good order. So is the licence to withdraw it if I behave unexpectedly. Therefore, when we say that someone understands a word, are we describing something in them, or granting them some practical status?

Two kinds of solution. Hume’s *Enquiry* raises ‘sceptical doubts’ about our inferences from past to future and then offers a ‘sceptical solution’ of them. What is the contrast? A ‘straight solution’ shows that the scepticism was unwarranted: some argument, perhaps an elusive one, proves the thesis the sceptic doubted, as Descartes did for his own doubts. A ‘sceptical solution’ begins by conceding that the sceptic’s negative claims can *not* be answered. We then argue that our ordinary practice is justified all the same, because it never needed the justification that is impossible by the sceptic’s light. 66

Or to put it differently: A straight solution would name the fact that constitutes my meaning addition by ‘plus’. Well, the sceptical paradox found none. Kripkenstein doesn’t even look for one. He agrees with W-sceptic that there’s no such fact, in the ‘internal’ world or the ‘external’ one. Nobody denies that people mean things by their words and follow rules with perfect right, or that ‘the fact that Jones meant addition’ has an ordinary use. What’s denied is the ‘superlative fact’ (§192) that philosophers hang on those words, a state of my mind that fixes in advance what accords with my meaning. 69 69 65

In fact, this is Berkeley’s move. We first deny the existence of matter. Then we say that the ordinary man never *meant* to insist on its existence (or: never referred to matter). He only ever spoke of ideas produced in him independently of his will. Kripke finds such claims almost invariably suspect, since the alleged ‘misconstrual’ is probably the natural and correct reading. 64 65

Question 1. Once we grant that nothing makes it true that I mean addition, is our practice still ‘justified’ in the sense we started with? Or has ‘justified’ changed its meaning on the way?

Private causation. Both Hume and W-sceptic question a nexus from past to future. W-sceptic doubts the link from my past intentions with ‘plus’ to my present computation. Hume doubts the link from one event to the next. Having seen A-events followed by B-events, we’re conditioned to expect a B on seeing an A, and to call this *a* the cause of this *b* is to place the two under such types. 67 62 67

Example 2. Strike a match and it lights. Even God, looking at just these two events, would find nothing relating them beyond succession. Remove the rest of the universe, leave these two, and no causal notion applies to them at all. 68 67

That’s the impossibility of private causation. The private language argument, Kripke proposes, has the same structure: a sceptical paradox accepted rather than refuted, a sceptical reinterpretation of ‘Jones means addition by “+”’, and as a corollary the impossibility of saying of a single person, considered alone, that he means anything. 68 68

Remark 3. The analogy is only in shape, the two problems are distinct and independent. Hume keeps both relata and doubts the step between them, causal and with it inductive. His question is: the match was struck and lit every time so far, so why expect it next time? W-sceptic doubts a relatum, the past fact of meaning, and grants the future: I *am* disposed to answer ‘125’ and will. Allow full uniformity of nature, my past states fixing every answer I’ll ever give, and the paradox still remains: that’s the dispositional theory again, and the determination isn’t causal (§195). It is a ‘should’ where Hume’s is a ‘must’. 63 62 53

Assertability conditions. Kripke’s reply to the worry that conceding the sceptic leaves all language meaningless goes through the change from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*. The *Tractatus* has a sentence mean by its truth conditions: to each sentence a possible fact, and the sentence is true if the fact obtains and false if not. The later Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* implicitly rejects this Fregean-Tractarian view that to explain a sentence’s meaning is to state its truth conditions. Instead of ‘what must be the case for this sentence to be true?’ come two questions: 71 73

(10-1) Under what conditions may this form of words be asserted or denied? And what role and utility does the practice of asserting it under those conditions have in our lives?

Verificationism stops at the first question. The second question sets Wittgenstein’s picture apart: the licence to make a move must do some work in our lives, lest that part of the language game is idle. 75

Example 4. I hand the grocer a slip marked ‘five red apples’. He recites the numerals up to five, handing over an apple at each. Those are the circumstances in which we’re licensed to use numerals. 76

Now the switch does two jobs. It’s a picture of how language means at all, and it’s applied to ascriptions of meaning themselves. If truth conditions were of the essence of meaningful assertion, the sceptical conclusion would make every sentence of the form ‘Jones means addition by “+”’ meaningless. Apply the two questions instead, and all that’s needed is roughly specifiable circumstances under which such sentences are assertable, and a role for asserting them. No fact has to correspond, and we may still call them true, since to call a statement true is just to assert it. 77 77 78 86

ONE PERSON ALONE. No analysis of rule-following is on offer, since that would be a straight solution, so take one person first. The most obvious fact about rule-following is one the paradox may have hidden from us: it holds no terrors in daily life. Asked for 68 plus 57, we reply '125' without hesitating and without a thought for quus, and we do so without justification. Ask why we carry as we do and soon there's nothing left to say: maybe 'carry' meant quarry. We act 'unhesitatingly but *blindly*', which is Wittgenstein's using a word without justification yet not wrongfully (§289). So the conditions under which one person may say that he ought to go on this way rather than that are, at bottom, that this is the way he's inclined to go on. Whatever he inclines to say, nothing lets us add that he should have said something else. And that isn't our concept of following a rule.

Our idea that a rule binds future choices is exemplified in conditionals like (10-2):

(10-2) If Jones means addition by '+', then, asked about '68 + 57', he'll answer '125'.

For one person considered in isolation they have no substantive content, since there's no fact in virtue of which he accords with his past intention or not. Attend to his justification conditions alone and all we can say is that he's licensed to follow the rule as it 'strikes him'. This is §202: to think one is obeying a rule isn't to obey one, so one can't obey a rule 'privately', or thinking one obeyed it would be the same as obeying it.

Question 5. Can't I check myself? I remember what I meant yesterday and correct today's slip by it. Kripke says: one person has only conflicting inclinations and a single will to settle them, where a community has independent wills. Is that a difference in kind?

ENTER SMITH. Place the rule-follower among others, and the picture changes. Others now have their own conditions for saying that he follows the rule correctly or incorrectly, and those conditions don't just defer to him.

Example 6. A child is learning to add. If he insists that 2 + 3 is 7 and 2 + 2 is 3, the teacher won't say that he adds badly but that he isn't adding: he's computing another function or, more likely, following no rule at all. If he gets nearly all small sums right, he's allowed mistakes on large ones, provided they look like slips in the right procedure and not like a quus-like procedure.

What does 'the right answer' mean here? Only that the child gave the answer the teacher himself would give, and 'the right procedure' the one the teacher is inclined to apply. So the rough conditions come out like this. Jones may say 'I mean addition by "plus"', provisionally and subject to correction, whenever he has the feeling of confidence that he can go on, and he may call a new answer 'correct' simply because it's the one he's inclined to give. Both inclinations are primitive, justified by nothing further. Smith will say that Jones means addition only if Jones's answers agree with the ones Smith is inclined to give. Or, where they differ, if Jones can be seen to follow the right procedure, and otherwise that Jones has lapsed, or follows no rule at all. Smith's own inclinations are just as primitive as Jones's. At no point does Smith look into Jones's head for a rule identical to his own.

Example 7. Play Smith. A classmate answers your sums: 3 + 4 is 7, 12 + 9 is 21, 25 + 40 is 66, 57 + 1 is 5. At which answer do you withdraw 'she's adding', and what did you consult to decide? Not her mind, but what you'd have said yourself.

Now consider:

(10-3) If Jones doesn't answer '125' when asked about '68 + 57', we can't assert that he means addition by '+'.

Read straight, (10-2) seems to say that some state in Jones guarantees his answer, which is what the sceptic denies. Wittgenstein's picture concentrates on the contrapositive, (10-3), and on its assertability conditions. This is similar to Hume's position on causation: the conditional that if A-events cause B-events and an A occurs, a B must follow, seems to commit us to a nexus. The Humean reads it as a commitment to withdraw the causal claim whenever an A isn't followed by a B. The two forms are equivalent, but attending to the contrapositive reverses the priorities: the regularity comes first, and the causal claim answers to it. Asserting (10-2) likewise commits us, should Jones behave bizarrely enough and often enough, to stop saying that he means addition. It states a restriction on the community's game of attributing a concept, not a mechanism inside Jones.

The slogan, crude and, Kripke concedes, not really accurate, is that we don't all say 12 + 7 = 19 because we grasp addition, we say we grasp addition because we all say 12 + 7 = 19. Kripke adds that positions of this sort make him suspicious.

Question 8. Smith corrects Jones by Smith's own inclinations, which nothing corrects in turn. Has the problem been solved, or merely given to a second person who has it just as badly?

WHAT THE GAME IS FOR. The second question remains: what's the use of saying of others that they follow a rule when their responses agree with ours, and denying it when they don't?

Example 9. Back at the grocer's. The customer who asks for five apples expects the grocer to count as he does, and if the bill involves '68 + 57' he may simply leave the sum to the grocer. The grocer may err, or cheat, but as long as the customer credits him with the concept of addition he doesn't expect quus-like behaviour. To say that a child has mastered addition is to say that we can entrust him to react as we do in dealings like this.

Our lives run on countless such dealings, and the game of attributing concepts declares whom we expect to behave as we do. The expectation is a real restriction, which the solitary rule-follower lacked: not just any behaviour will do. Someone whose responses diverge in enough cases isn't judged to follow our rules, may be judged a madman following no coherent rule, and is excluded from dealings like the grocer's as someone the community can't rely on. Attributing a concept depicts no special 'state' of a person's mind. It takes him provisionally into the community, for as long as further deviance doesn't exclude him.

That, Kripke says, is the whole of the sceptical solution: conditions for attributing concepts, and the utility of the game. Now the game would have no point without general agreement in the community's responses, and in fact we agree, regarding our procedure as the only comprehensible one. The set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave with our activities, is our form of life. 96

Here Kripkenstein excludes an overwhelmingly natural (Fregean) explanation. We can't say that we agree on '68 + 57' because we all grasp the same concept, since there's no fact of grasping it, for the community any more than for Jones. The licence to say of each other that we mean addition rests on the *brute fact* that we generally agree, and nothing guarantees that the agreement won't break down tomorrow. In Wittgenstein's words, what has to be accepted, the given, is forms of life. 97 98



Example 10. Beings who consistently agreed in giving quus-like answers would share another form of life, incomprehensible to us, like the lion who could talk. Still, no a priori argument would seem to exclude them, and if we can imagine such a form of life, its members could attribute rules and concepts to each other as we do, by agreement with their own quus-like responses. 96 96

Question 11. Kripke sees a tension here. The paradox says that a creature following a quus-like rule is conceivable, whatever this means. The solution relies on our finding our own way of going on inevitable, which seems to make a quus-like way of going on unintelligible 'from the inside'. Can the quus tribe be right by its own lights, and if so, are we right by ours in any stronger sense? 98