Metaphysics Handouts
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Handout 9

The sceptical paradox: Kripke

The Tractarian background. A Tractarian name means an object, and the object is its meaning. The object encapsulates its possibilities. If I know it, I know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs, no new one can be discovered later. Yet we can build languages able to express every sense with no idea how each word has meaning, or what its meaning is. 3.203 2.0123 4.002

Kripke's sceptic, at least at first, leaves the object side untouched. He doesn't doubt that addition is a genuine function, defined on all pairs of integers, or that we can speak of it. The proof that the addition function contains the triple $(68, 57, 125)$ belongs to mathematics and has 'nothing to do with meaning or intention'. Frege's objective sense doesn't help. It determines its referent by its nature, fine—but what makes my idea, a finite object, a grasp of this sense rather than a quus-like one? Back in the *Tractatus*, recall that depicting is an 'internal relation' between language and the world. 12 54 4.014

So we might say that the sceptic allows Tractarian objects, keeps the Tractarian demand that meaning contain every possibility, but then puzzles what in a finite mind could meet it.

Question 1. Can the Tractarian reply be that knowing an object is unanalysable, so beyond the sceptic's reach, or is that Kripke's 'primitive state' under another name?

The problem. Wittgenstein's paradox (§201): no course of action can be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. Kripke starts with arithmetic. I use 'plus' and '+' for addition. I've computed only finitely many sums, yet my grasp of the rule settles my answer for indefinitely many new ones. Let '$68+57$' be a sum I've never done, with arguments larger than any I've used. I compute, get '125', and am confident it's correct in two senses: arithmetically, since 125 is the sum, and 'metalinguistically', since 'plus', as I meant it in the past, denoted a function that gives 125 here. A bizarre sceptic questions only the second. Perhaps by 'plus' I meant quus. 7 7 8 8

Definition 2. The quus function $\oplus$: 9

$$x \oplus y = \begin{cases} x + y & \text{if } x, y < 57, \\ 5 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

All my past sums had arguments below 57, so each is a quum as well as a sum. 8

The hypothesis is wild and no doubt false. But it isn't a priori impossible, so if it's false there must be some fact about my past usage that refutes it. Ordinarily I don't take myself to leap in the dark but to follow directions I gave myself earlier, which determine that I should say '125' now. Yet I never told myself what to say in this very case. An answer to the sceptic, who disputes neither my computation nor my memory, must meet two conditions. It must say what fact about me constitutes my meaning plus rather than quus. And that fact must show how I'm justified in answering '125': the 'directions' for new cases must somehow be 'contained' in it. Otherwise my response is arbitrary, as the sceptic says. 9 10 11

Remark 3. Kripke presents 'Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke', or in short, we are dealing with 'Kripkenstein'. Our excerpt has only the paradox. The quasi-Humean solution that follows it is the business of Kripke's 'The sceptical solution'. 5 4

Question 4. Does the second condition prejudge the case? It wants a fact I could be guided by, and a fact about my brain might fix which function I meant without being anything I consult.

A rule for interpreting a rule. The natural protest: I didn't give myself a finite list of examples to extrapolate from, I internalised a rule. Thus count out x marbles, then y, put the heaps together and count the union. These directions, engraved on my mind, exclude quus. 15

Example 5. The sceptic's reply may be this. I applied 'count', like 'plus', to finitely many cases. So perhaps by 'count' I meant quount: to count in the ordinary way, unless the heap is the union of two heaps one of which has 57 or more items, in which case the answer is 5. If 'count' meant quount, the marble rule itself yields '5' for '$68 + 57$'. 16

If I appeal from one rule to a more 'basic' one, the sceptic just repeats his move at that level. Sooner or later, this has to stop, at an irreducible rule simply stipulated by finitely many examples. There 'justifications come to an end somewhere', and I apply the rule 'blindly'. The finitely many cases aren't essential to the puzzle, though, since in principle that step can be dropped. Had I thought of every case and told myself to reply '125' when asked about '$68 + 57$', the sceptic could reinterpret those directions too. So if finitude matters, it matters more crucially because *justifications* come to an end, rather than because I thought of finitely many cases. Still, Kripke adds, either fact can be used to develop the paradox. 17 18 17 52 52

Question 6. If an infinite table in my mind wouldn't help either, what is the paradox about: interpretation, or the finitude of the mind? The two diagnoses call for different cures.

Constitutive, not epistemic. Arithmetic isn't in question. The sceptic grants my present usage and argues throughout in my present language. He asks only whether it conforms to my past intentions. The problem isn't how I know that 68 plus 57 is 125, which a computation settles, but how I know that 'plus', as I meant it, should give 125 here. Nor does the sceptic set behaviourist limits on the facts I may cite: inner states count as much as behaviour, any hostility to the 'inner' is to be argued rather than assumed, and even God, looking into my mind, couldn't tell that I meant addition. Quine's indeterminacy of translation has a linguist guessing at someone else from behaviour alone. Here the question is posed from the 'inside', about myself. Put in terms of my present intent, the problem sounds epistemological: how 13 12 12 14 15

can anyone know which function I meant? But everything in my mental history is compatible with both hypotheses, so knowledge isn't the issue. Nothing in my mind or behaviour, 'not even what an omniscient God would know', could establish it, so it seems there was no fact that constituted my meaning plus. That's why simplicity is beside the point: it decides between hypotheses about genuine matters of fact, and an omniscient being would have no need or use for simplicity considerations. The God, Kripke adds, is only a dramatic device for denying that there's any fact of the matter. And I don't form hypotheses about what I mean: to treat the fact as hidden is 'already to take a big step in the direction of scepticism'. Now the ladder goes. If there was no such fact about the past, there's none about the present either. The sceptic granted me present meanings so that the problem could be stated, and the concession was fictive. 'The ladder must finally be kicked away.' So there's no fact about me that distinguishes my meaning plus from my meaning quus, and none, he goes on, that distinguishes my meaning a definite function by 'plus' from my meaning nothing at all. The second claim goes further than the first: it isn't just indeterminate which function I meant. 'It seems that the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air.'

Question 7. Does the step from what no God could find to what there's no fact about need a premise about which facts count? And can the conclusion be stated at all, in words whose meaning it denies?

DISPOSITIONS. A reply Kripke has heard more than once: the argument assumes the meaning-fact must be an occurrent mental state. Instead, to mean addition by '+' is to be disposed, when asked for any sum, to give the sum, and to mean quus is to be disposed to give the quum, so that even in the past I was disposed to answer '125'. The reply is off target. The puzzle was about my justification for saying '125', and the dispositionalist tells me that '125' is what I'm disposed to say, and would have said. How does that show the answer was justified by instructions I gave myself, rather than a 'jack-in-the-box' response?

Example 8. Let '*' be a sign by which I mean no function at all. Assuming determinism, for any m and n there's still a unique answer I would give to '$m * n$'. But here, unlike with '+', my answer can't be called right or wrong. A disposition is one thing and a meaning another.

Whatever I'm disposed to do, a candidate for the meaning-fact has to fix a unique thing I should do. Otherwise, as §258 says, we can't talk about right. Almost all objections to the view, Kripke says, boil down to one: it simply equates performance with correctness. Kripke draws the moral at the end: the dispositionalist describes a relation that is normative.

(9-1) If I meant addition by '+', I will answer '125'.

(9-2) If I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I should answer '125'.

The dispositionalist offers (9-1), but that isn't the proper account of the relation. Computational error, finite capacity and other disturbing factors may leave me not disposed to respond as I should, and then I haven't acted in accordance with my intentions. The proper account is (9-2). 'The relation of meaning and intention to future action is normative, not descriptive.' Notice the antecedent of (9-2). Meaning addition obliges me to nothing: it fixes what accords with my past meaning, and the 'should' depends on my intending to accord.

Question 9. Is this normativity anything more than meaning's fixing correctness conditions? If not, can't the dispositionalist grant it and carry on? Boghossian's 'The rule-following considerations' presses the point.

FINITUDE AND ERROR. Two more difficulties. First, my dispositions are as finite as my performance: some sums are too large for me to grasp at all. So redefine quaddition to agree with addition wherever I have any disposition to add and to diverge beyond that. Idealise, then: ceteris paribus I'd give the sum. Fleshed out naively, the clause speculates about extra brain matter and a longer life, and that's for 'science fiction writers and futurologists'. What the clause really means, Kripke says, is that if I were given the means to carry out my intentions, and did carry them out, I would respond with the sum. True, and useless, since it presupposes the very intention in question: granted that I meant quaddition, I'd respond with the quum. 'The idealized dispositions are determinate only because it is already settled which function I meant.' Second, I have dispositions to make mistakes.

Example 10. Some people forget to carry. For certain sums they're disposed to give an answer that departs from the table. We say they 'mean addition' and that they 'err'. The dispositionalist reads the function off the dispositions, so he must say they compute a non-standard function, skaddition, without error. Where common sense sees a fallible adder, he sees a flawless skadder.

Screen the mistakes out by a ceteris paribus clause, say, by excluding 'noise', and you've presupposed which function is meant. A disposition to make a mistake is a disposition to give an answer other than the one that accords with the function I meant.

Question 11. The error argument needs a standard of correctness that isn't read off the function I meant. Could a teleological one, what the mechanism is for, supply it without smuggling the function back in?

THE MACHINE. A variant of the dispositional reply (after Dummett): a machine can follow this rule, so where does a human being get a freedom of choice the machine doesn't have? Build a machine that computes the function. Then the answer it would give is the answer I intended.

But 'machine' is ambiguous. If it means the program I draw up, the sceptic reads the program quus-wise, exactly as he read '+'. Calling the program an 'abstract object' only shifts the question: which abstract program corresponds to the one I wrote on paper, as I *meant* it? If it means the hardware, i.e. metal and gears, I still need a software to tell me how to read its output, and the sceptic can reinterpret that too. Now set that problem aside and suppose, for the sake of argument, that I read the machine's output as intended. Even then the two objections to dispositions come back. The machine is

finite, it takes only so many inputs, so indefinitely many programs extend its actual behaviour, and picking one by the designer's intention hands the sceptic his wedge again. And machines malfunction. Whether a melting wire or a slipping gear counts as a malfunction isn't a property of the physical object but is fixed by the program as its designer intended it.

Given the program, the hardware-machine is superfluous, and the sceptic turns to the software program. Idealise the machine into a finite automaton, no malfunctions and an infinite life, and it can add in decimal notation, digit by digit, but it provably can't multiply: at large enough arguments its ‘ times ’ goes ‘ quimes ’-like.

Looking inward. Perhaps the ‘ decisive move in the conjuring trick ’ was the demand to reduce meaning to something else. Why not say that meaning addition by ‘ plus ’ is an irreducible experience with its own quale, like a headache, known directly by introspection?

Example 12. Suppose I do feel a special headache whenever I think of ‘ + ’. How would it help me decide between ‘ 125 ’ and ‘ 5 ’? If I take it to indicate ‘ 125 ’, nothing about it refutes the sceptic who says it indicates ‘ 5 ’. An image fares no better: a drawing of a cube can be projected so that a triangular prism fits it, and so can a schema of the projection (§§139–41).

The regress returns: no inner impression with a quale can tell me, by itself, how it is to be applied, and no collection of them can, either. Wittgenstein further argues, by introspection rather than from a behaviourist premise, that no such experience exists. Add 5 + 7 now: would the experience have differed had I been trained in quaddition and performed it, though the quum here is 12 as well? Or had I performed the multiplication 5×7, apart from giving a different answer? Kripke invites the reader to try it. There remains the desperate option: meaning addition is a primitive state, neither qualitative nor dispositional, ‘ a state of a unique kind of its own ’. It may be irrefutable, yes, but it leaves the state completely mysterious: not introspectible, yet each of us is aware of it with fair certainty. And there's a logical difficulty. The state would be a finite object in a finite mind, not an explicit thought of each case, yet each case is supposed to be ‘ in some sense present ’ in it (§195).

Question 13. Is ‘ mysterious ’ an argument, or the reductive demand restated? And how does the primitive state sit with the first-person certainty Kripke himself insists on?

Beyond arithmetic. The same problem may be restated throughout language.

Example 14. Entering the Eiffel Tower for the first time, I call this something at its base a table. The sceptic: by ‘ table ’ I meant tabair, a table not found at the base of the Tower, or a chair found there. I never thought of the Tower when I learned the word, and had I done so, those directions could be reinterpreted too.

Goodman's fans will see the same with ‘ green ’, since the sample I bring to mind was also grue. And the point extends to sensation words. That's why Kripke relocates the private language argument to the rule-following sections before §243, where §202 already states the conclusion: one can't obey a rule privately, since then thinking one was obeying it would be the same as obeying it. The sensation sections go over the ground again for a special case that seems to be a convincing counterexample.

Question 15. Is plus/quus just Goodman's new riddle turned on my own past meaning? The condition that the meaning-fact must justify my answer says the problem is different in kind. Which is it?