Philosophy of Language // Spring 2019

Handout 13

The meaning paradox: Kripke

Grasping the rule. Kripke announces that the paradox he is about to discuss is a new form of philosophical scepticism (and a central problem in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*). And so it seems: though presented very differently, Wittgenstein's paradox has in common with Greek scepticism the claim that knowledge is impossible. This would follow from the claim that knowledge of meaning is impossible. 7

Consider how I use the rule of addition in computing 68 + 57. Based on my past intentions, I claim to unambiguously apply the rule to indefinitely many instances. Let us suppose that, till now, I have always worked with numbers smaller than 57. No matter: trained in arithmetic, I proceed to do the computation and get 125. But on what basis? 8

The 'bizarre sceptic' challenges me to explain how I go on applying the rule of addition, if I have never encountered these particular numbers in the past. The sceptic agrees that in adding the numbers I should intend to use the *same* addition as before. Only the function I have learned is not 'plus', but rather 'quus'. The two are related: 8

$$\begin{aligned} x \oplus y &= x + y, \text{ if } x, y < 57 \\ &= 5 \qquad \text{otherwise.} \end{aligned} \tag{13-1}$$

So to repeat: at time t I am pondering the application of the rule of addition (or: the meaning of 'plus'). I assume that I have grasped that rule at $t' < t$ when I used that rule. These uses of course include examples given to me by my instructors. I want to stay faithful to my past use of the rule. However, there is no way to decide whether I grasped the meaning of 'plus' or of 'quus'.

Possibility of quus. The sceptical view is strange and fantastic, but not impossible. For it *is* possible to imagine how I meant 'plus' all along before t, but panicked for whatever reason and decided that I have really meant 'quus', so that 68 + 57 = 125. The sceptic inverts the story: I calculate 125 precisely because of a panic attack, or drugs, or whatever. 9

Sceptical demands. The point is a general one. If I have correctly grasped the meaning of addition, then: (*a*) there must be some fact about my past showing that I grasped the rule for 'plus', and (*b*) this fact must be such that can give me confidence, a good reason, for using 'plus', rather than 'quus'. 11

The sceptic maintains that there is no such 'meaning-fact' to be found. At time t I *do not have to* give the answer '125'. Sure enough, I do now give this answer. But the question is simply why. So the question is not: 12

How do I know that '68 plus 57 equals 125'? (13-2)

This can be answered by giving a calculation. The sceptical question is about meaning and warrant:

How do I know that '68 plus 57 equals 125' *has to come out true*, given my past use of 'plus'? (13-3)

If the sceptic is right, then any view about meaning collapses before it begins. If there is no fact about may past use of 'plus', then there is, by the same argument, no fact about my present use either. But for the time being at least, we pretend that the question is only about the past use. 13-14

Indeterminacy and behaviourism. The sceptical paradox is not generated by any premisses of behaviourism. I do not look at myself from the outside and ask what sort of observational evidence tells in favour of plus or quus. Far from it: even if I examine my mental life—nay, even if God examined it!—no meaning-fact would still be discovered. My present use is a 'leap in the dark', disconnected from the past use. 14 15

In this sense the sceptic goes beyond Quine's indeterminacy of translation. Kripke returns to Quine later on at the beginning of Chapter 3. Once again, Quine is portrayed as a behaviourist, or more exactly, as a behaviourist gone mad. The irrelevance or unavailability of internal mental evidence (of the first-person perspective, in Searle's terms) is a conclusion of Wittgenstein's paradox, but a premiss in the indeterminacy of translation argument. The argument is then taken as establishing the inadequacy of the behaviourist account of meaning. This is the oft-repeated charge we have seen earlier in Searle (and e.g., Chomsky). Now if the sceptical argument goes through, then we have a response to Searle. 'Rabbit' and 'rabbit-stage' are indistinguishable, even if their meaning is fixed somehow in the first-person perspective. There is, that is, no point in insisting, as Searle does, on 'but I know what *I* mean!' 55-57

Kripke also takes Quine to task for defending the notion of stimulus meaning. According to Quine (according to Kripke), I learn the meaning of 'sepia', say, by being exposed repeatedly to qualitatively similar samples and filtering out irrelevant details of the environment. So, Kripke says, 'there is no question' 56 57

about what I mean by ‘sepia’. But this diagnosis, I think, is unfair to Quine. There is indeed ‘no question’ about my meaning only in the sense of predicting my reactions to the stimulus and the fluency of communication with other users of ‘sepia’ (or with my own diary). There remains, however, a very big question whether any amount empirical data can decide between me meaning ‘sepia’ and me meaning ‘sepia-surface’ (or something like that).

And here is another way to apply Quine’s thesis to the first-person perspective (see Handout 10). We could say that memory serves as evidence of my past use. But this evidence is liable to be under-determined just as any other kind of evidence. And no matter how much evidence I pile up, there will always be a possibility of alternative interpretations. You might object that Quine’s thesis here is still formulated in terms of ‘stimulus meaning’, where ‘stimulus’ is extended to cover mental reactions too, and that no such notion is assumed by the present sceptic. But then, what is Kripke (and Wittgenstein) are after when they demand to be given the facts of my past use of the term explaining my present use? Aren’t they demanding to know what I *did* at $t' < t$ that gives me a reason at t to mean plus by ‘plus’?

Perhaps another way one might try to distinguish the sceptical challenge and the indeterminacy thesis is via the notion of normativity. For Quine eschews any talk about norms, necessity, and ‘ought’, whereas the sceptic asks precisely why I *ought to* give the answer ‘125’ rather than ‘5’. But, I think, the difference is superficial. Quine’s claim is that there is no respectable, scientific reason to give for preferring one translation manual over another, one universe of discourse (with rabbits) over another (with rabbit-stages). This is a normative talk. Quine eschews necessity and normativity not because the terms are meaningless, but because you simply do not find any when you survey the world and your theorising about it.

Remark 1 (Grue). [to be completed]

Instructions. A very intuitive response to the sceptic may be as follows. No sane learning of a term is given by a finite list of examples. Instead, the trainee is given instructions to apply in an indefinite number of cases. So we may imagine that I learn addition by learning how to count marbles. Take two heaps of marbles, count the pieces in one, then in another, then put all of them together, and count again in the big heap thus formed. This operation will be incompatible with understanding addition in (13-1).

But the sceptic only needs to push the objection one step further. This rule refers to ‘counting’. What is counting? Might I not, in giving myself that rule, really used ‘quonting’—a rule that makes a provision for heaps having more than 57 items? Of course I might. And if the response is that I meant counting (or whatever it was) to be independent of the contents of the heaps, the sceptic’s reply, again, is that I used ‘quondependence’, rather than ‘independence’, if I indeed had any such supplementary rule. The same should be said of the more sophisticated definitions of addition.

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