Kripkenstein on Rule-Following and Meaning

Philosophy of Language

Unit 3: *How is Meaning Even Possible?*

> 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. —Wittgenstein, *PI*

The Paradox

Kripke asks us to consider being asked to perform some computation that you've never performed before. For the sake of argument, let's assume the computation is:

- 'What is 68 plus 57?'

Let us suppose you now (at time t) perform the computation, obtaining the answer: 125. You are confident in your answer; moreover, you are also confident that at earlier times your use of the word 'plus' denoted a function that, when applied to the numbers 68 and 57, returned the number 125.

However, Kripke asks us to imagine a bizarre skeptic, who confronts you with the following challenge:

Skeptical Challenge: What makes you so sure? Perhaps in the past (at times $< t$) you used the word 'plus' to denote a different function. Perhaps you used it to denote a function that, when applied to the numbers 68 and 57, returned the number 5. Perhaps your current inclination to answer: '125' simply shows that you are now associating a different function with the word, 'plus' than you had associated with it in the past.

It is important not to misunderstand the skeptic's question. The question is **not** a question in the epistemology of addition; it is **not** the question of how you know that 68 + 57 = 125. Rather, the question is about the epistemology of language: it is about how you know that your use of the word 'plus' (or your use of the symbol '+') on previous occasions referred to the addition function rather than another function—what we can the call the 'quaddition' function, defined as follows:

Quaddition: x quus (written: $\oplus$) $y = \begin{cases} x + y & \text{if } x, y < 57; \\ 5 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$

The upshot of the skeptical suggestion is not that you actually *did* mean quaddition rather than addition when you used 'plus' previously. Rather, the upshot is that there is no way of determining which of the two you meant. Indeed, perhaps there is simply no fact of the matter!

Kripke suggests that we can distinguish two versions of the challenge:

1. Is there any fact of the matter as to whether you meant addition rather than quaddition by your use of the word, 'plus' on previous occasions?

2. Do I now have any reason to be confident that I should now answer '125' to the question 'What is 68 plus 57?', rather than '5'?

A word of clarification on the first question: Kripke's focus is actually on whether any facts could possibly *ground* the fact that you meant addition rather than quaddition. The implication is that if there are no such facts, then there is no fact of the matter as to whether you meant one rather than the other.

Nothing in the skeptic's challenge hinges on this being a mathematical example. The skeptic could equally well formulate the challenge in terms of my past usage of *any* expressions in the language. Take, for example, the word, "table." We can imagine the skeptic asking:

> How do you know that in the past when you used the word "table", you meant *table*, and not *tabair*, defined as follows:

Tabair: A tabair is $\begin{cases} \text{a chair located under the Eiffel Tower;} \\ \text{a table located anywhere else.} \end{cases}$

Or take the word, "green". We can imagine the skeptic asking:

> How do you know that in the past when you used the word "green", you meant *green*, and not *grue*, defined as follows:

Grue: x is grue iff x is green prior to April 10, 2018 and blue afterwards.

Candidate Responses

- *Past Usage:* What grounds the fact that I meant addition rather than quaddition when I used 'plus' in the past is some fact about my past computations. (And similarly what grounds the fact that I meant table rather than tabair when I used 'table' in the past is some fact about my past usage of the term.)

  Skeptical Reply: But, by assumption, you never performed the computation, '68 plus 57'. You only performed other computations—say, '45 plus 12', '22 plus 26', etc. But the addition and quaddition functions deliver the exact same answer to all of those computations. And so you past computations cannot decide between the two hypotheses. (Similar remarks apply to the other examples—we can imagine that you never previously talked or thought about tables beneath the Eiffel Tower, and so all your past usage of the word "table" is consistent both with the hypothesis that in your past usage you meant tabair rather than table.)

- *Rules/Algorithms:* What grounds the fact that I meant addition rather than quaddition when I used 'plus' in the past is that my past computations were guided by a rule/algorithm. For example:

  R: For any two numbers x, y: x plus y is the number one would get if one started with a pile of x-many things, combined with it with a pile of y-many things, and then counted the result.

  Skeptical Reply:

  1) Are you sure that's the rule you used? You probably never explicitly formulated R previously. Maybe you'll say that you relied on the rule implicitly in the course of your computations. But since you never previous added 68 and 57, all of your past behavior is consistent with the hypothesis that you were implicitly following an alternative rule, e.g.:

  R′: For any two numbers x, y: x plus y is the number one would get if one started with a pile of x-many things, combined with it with a pile of y-many things, and then *quounted* the result,

    – where *quounting* is the same as *counting*, unless the pile is formed from the union of two piles, one of which contains 57 or more things, in which case one correctly quounts a pile by giving the answer '5'.

2) Suppose you did explicitly formulate the rule, and it was R. (Perhaps you even wrote it down in the margins every time you did your sums.) Still, you formulated this rule in some language, such as English. And this sentence can be re-interpreted so that it conveys the quadditon rule rather than the addition rule. For example, how do you know that the sentence you wrote down you meant R, rather than R'? (That is, how do you know that when you wrote down the word "count", it meant counting rather quounting?)

- *Meaning Experiences:* The fact that I meant addition by my past usages of 'plus' is grounded in the fact that my previous usages were accompanied by a certain introspectible experience. (Something like a mental image or a headache say, though presumably a bit different.). And this introspectible experience determined that my usage of 'plus' meant addition rather than quaddition.

  Skeptical Reply: There doesn't seem to be any such introspectible experience accompanying our usages of 'plus'. But even if there were, this wouldn't solve the problem. Suppose our past usages were accompanied by a special mental image or a headache or whatever. How could this headache manage to inform us that we were doing addition rather than quadditon?

- *Dispositions:* The fact that I meant addition by my past usages of 'plus' is grounded in the fact that I was disposed, at the earlier time, to respond to any question of the form, 'What is $x+y$?' by providing the sum of x and y (**not** their 'quum'). In particular, at the earlier time I was disposed to answer the question, 'What is 68 + 57?' with '125' rather than '5'.

  Skeptical Reply:

  1) We're disposed to make arithmetical errors. That is, most of us are not always disposed to give the sum of x and y in response to a question of the form, 'What is $x+y$?', since most of us are disposed to sometimes make mistakes. And so if the function you meant by 'plus' is determined by your previous dispositions, then that isn't going to be the addition function.

  2) We're finite creatures—there are some sums involving numbers so large that we'll never be able to compute them. (Consider, for example, numbers so large that our we can't process/remember them, or perhaps, numbers so large that we'll die of old age before we hear the end of them.) But the addition function isn't simply defined over numbers that *we* can compute. Instead, it's defined over numbers of arbitrarily large cardinality. Thus we're once again led to the following conclusion: if the function you meant by 'plus' is determined by your previous dispositions, then that isn't going to be the addition function.

  3) The dispositional reply gives the wrong sort of answer to our question. In particular, it gives a *descriptive* answer to a *normative* question. That is, the dispositionalist says:

    – If your use of '+' means addition, they you are disposed to answer '125' in response to the question, 'What is 68 + 57?' (**Descriptive**)

  But we wanted was some explanation for why:

    – If your use of '+' means addition, they you *should* answer '125' in response to the question, 'What is 68 + 57?' (**Normative**)

  The skeptic asks: 'Why should the descriptive claim entail the normative claim? Why does a fact about what answer I am disposed to produce entail something about what answer I *should* produce?'[1]

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[1]Cf. Hume on the 'Is-Ought' Gap.

- *Community Dispositions:* The fact that I meant addition by my past usages of 'plus' is grounded in the fact that I am a member of a community that was disposed, at an earlier time, to respond to any question of the form, 'What is $x + y$?' by providing the sum of x and y.

  Skeptical Reply: All the objections to the simple dispositional reply re-emerge at the community level.

Kripkenstein's Skeptical Solution

For any paradox, we can distinguish between:

- *A straight solution:* Shows that we have the sort of justification the skeptic denies we possess.

- *A skeptical solution:* Agrees with the skeptic that we lack the sort of justification in question, but denies that this problematic.

Analogy with the skeptical challenge to inductionL

Skeptical Challenge: "You have seen the sun rise in the morning thousands of times. You expect that it will rise tomorrow. But what entitles you to this expectation? It is certainly logically possible that the sun will fail to rise. And you can't appeal to your past experiences to justify your expectation, since all of your past experiences are experiences of the sun having risen in the past. They do not speak to what is at issue here, which is whether it will rise in the future. It seems, then, that your expectation is unjustified."

- Straight solution to the challenge tries to prove the skeptic wrong: it tries to show that we do have some compelling justification for our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow.

- Skeptical solution is to concede that we cannot justify this expectation—or, at least, we can't provide the sort of justification demanded by the skeptic. But it denies that this is problematic. It's enough if we can give an explanation of (i) why we form expectations about the future based on experiences in the past, and (ii) why forming expectations in this manner is useful.

Kripke advocates a corresponding skeptical solution to the skeptical challenge about meaning. Indeed, Kripke suggests that we should concede to the skeptic that there are no objective facts about meaning, and hence no objective facts of the form: *I mean the same thing now by my use of 'plus' as I did 20 minutes ago.*

All the same, Kripke thinks we can give an account of the conditions under which we make claims about meanings—that is, the conditions under which we say things like:

(1)   Ana means addition by her use of the word, 'plus'[2]

What's the account? Very roughly, the idea is that:

A speaker S will assert (1) provided that they find that Ana tends to give the same answers that S (the speaker) would give to various questions involving the word 'plus'. By contrast, if Ana's answers systematically diverge from S's answers, then S will be inclined to think Ana means something else by her use of the word 'plus', and hence S will not be inclined to assert (1).

Question: Is this a satisfactory solution to the paradox?

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[2]Here Kripke's skeptical solution bears a close analogy with moral expressivism. Recall that the expressivist says that there are no objective facts about what is morally right or wrong. However, the expressivist nonetheless goes on to give a (non-truth conditional) analysis of our moral language. Kripke is arguing for a similar conclusion applied to meaning language, rather than moral language.