The death of Kripke and false accusations and filth

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Abstract. I consider the place of Saul Kripke and what to make of accusations against him. I raise the problem of evaluating such accusations in an environment of false accusations. I end with a response to a remark by Wittgenstein.

“Saul Kripke has passed away
I found out just yesterday”

Saul Kripke was widely considered to be the greatest living philosopher in the analytic tradition. But have our political philosophers heard of him? I remember I was seated next to one in a seminar. After reading some sentences by him on war, I asked if he knows who Kripke is but I don’t recall the sentences and I cannot now fathom why Kripke would be relevant in this context. His relevance may be wider than it seems.¹

At least two questions arise upon this death: what to make of the contributions to philosophy he leaves behind and what to make of the various accusations directed against him? If we think about the material which we could hope for students to remember, slightly above average ones, he presents a strange combination

(a) On the one hand, he is renowned as a genius in a competitive field with plenty of other talented contributors.

¹ Well, Kripke is used there (Rawls 2001: 69).
(b) On the other hand, it is reasonable for a Nozick or a Williamson to fancy challenging Kripke’s place. “These are my most famous contributions; these are his. What’s the big difference?” Tracking conditions versus meaning skepticism; unmarked clock phenomena versus killer yellow; and so forth. I confess from the conversation with the political philosopher writing on war, I actually only remember my own counterexample.

Regarding the accusations, I suppose they can be divided into those of plagiarism and sexual misconduct. I presume the allegations of misconduct are well-founded, because of how various respected philosophers address the issue (e.g. Harrop 2022), and do not wish to undermine them, but my reaction is influenced by my having received lots and lots of false accusations over the years from students, while working at a university. One accusation was this: I apparently found two female postgraduates at a desk I liked to use and told them, “If you sit at this desk again, I will break your neck!” (“Your neck: was it actually a two-headed female postgraduate?”) After the complaint, made in 2018, I was prohibited from going to the fourth floor of a certain building, where the fabled desk was located.

Imagine you are setting up a university. Who is going to apply to be a student, who is going to apply to be a lecturer, who is going to be selected? I have no idea. But I fear some people would apply in a spirit of “A new university: what’s going on here? Let’s get in and find out and make sure everything is as it should be,” with their own peculiar conception of as-it-should-be. The unwanted amateur management includes some undergraduates, postgraduates, lecturers, security, and cleaning staff. They study the system in place carefully for how they can achieve their ends, as well as receiving information from others experienced in such business. False accusations are amongst their managerial techniques. Enough inquiries about your conduct and you are probably going to be more nervous about
everything. What can those more distant from events say about accusations against Kripke given such a technique? (Should one introduce Kripke like this: a genius, but there are allegations we believe, but there are also such things as false allegations and plenty of them?)

What other amateur managerial techniques are there? Let’s return to an earlier genius. Recall Wittgenstein’s famous remark “Philosophers should not sh*t higher than their arses.” It comes across as startlingly original but perhaps someone located his preferred lavatory in the college and another technique was used there. “We don’t want you in the college any more and this is how we make life difficult for you.” Without wishing to undermine Wittgenstein’s reputation for brilliance, I very strongly suspect this particular remark was not a bolt of inspiration from nowhere. The genius was in making this literal and metaphorical use of the material before his eyes.

References

Harrop, S. 2022. The Mozart of Modality. Available at: https://www.city-journal.org/saul-kripke