

## **Kripke's Wittgenstein:**

### **The Meaning Sceptic**

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter introduces Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein's later remarks on meaning and rule-following. After a short introduction, Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptic's sceptical argument will be presented, the general strategy of the sceptic to reject the classical realist explanation of the commonsense notion of meaning will be explored, and the sceptical conclusions of the sceptical argument will be explicated. The sceptical argument leads to the conclusion that there is no fact as to what someone means by her words. The chapter will then go through Kripke's Wittgenstein's sceptical solution to the sceptical problem, which aims to bring us back to the ordinary practice of attributing meaning to ours and others' utterances. It will be explained how this solution is intended by Kripke to accommodate the main features of Wittgenstein's later remarks on rule-following. The chapter ends with raising some challenges for the sceptical solution.

#### **Keywords:**

Saul Kripke; Kripke's Wittgenstein; Kripkenstein; meaning scepticism; normativity of meaning; rule-following; the sceptical argument; the sceptical solution; the private language argument; Robinson Crusoe; speech-community; classical realism; dispositionalism; reductionism; non-reductionism; non-factualism; George Wilson; language-games; form of life; truth-conditions; assertability conditions.

### **1. Introduction**

Saul Kripke's novel reading of Wittgenstein presented in his celebrated book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982) has dramatically reshaped the focus of the already intense debates on Wittgenstein's later view. The book, like Kripke's fascinating book *Naming and Necessity* (1980), is based on his lectures on the topic delivered in the late 70s. The book consists of three chapters and a postscript. The short "Introductory" chapter sketches the general framework of Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein. The main chapters are the other two. Chapter 2, 'The Wittgensteinian Paradox,' portrays Wittgenstein as supporting a 'sceptic' who presents a 'sceptical argument' against a certain sort of explanation of our commonsense conception of meaning. The chapter ends with the sceptical conclusion that there is no fact as to what someone means by any word at any time. Chapter 3, 'The Solution and the "Private

Language” Argument,’ has been dedicated to the ‘sceptical solution’ that Kripke takes Wittgenstein to be offering, which basically aims to bring us back to the ordinary practice of attributing meaning to each other’s as well as our own utterances. Finally, the postscript, ‘Wittgenstein and Other Minds,’ carries out two tasks: first, to show how a similar sceptical problem arises in the case of the attributions of sensations and, secondly, to introduce a sort of ‘special problem,’ which Wittgenstein, as Kripke reads him, believes there is in the idea of extending the concept of a sensation from the case of our own to the case of others. The present chapter will not cover this postscript.

Kripke’s book has been subject to enormous discussions for over 40 years, which have formed an extensive literature on Kripke’s Wittgenstein (‘KW’ henceforth),<sup>1</sup> examining almost every aspect of his reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s later view, such as the accuracy of his interpretation of Wittgenstein, the soundness of the sceptical argument, possible answers to the sceptical problem, and the plausibility of the sceptical solution itself. The responses to Kripke’s book start even before its official publication in 1982. For instance, Peacocke (1981) and Baker (1981) discuss Kripke’s lectures on the topic delivered in 1976 and 1978. The series of more serious responses begins in 1984 and continues to the present day, such as those from Baker and Hacker (1984), Blackburn (1984a, 1984b), McDowell (1984, 1992), McGinn (1984), Wright (1984, 1986, 1989), Horwich (1984, 1990, 1995, 2012), Ginsborg (2011, 2018a, 2018b), Goldfarb (1985), Chomsky (1986), Boghossian (1989, 1990), Pettit (1990, 1996), Davidson (1992, 1994), Byrne (1996), Stroud (1996) and Soames (1997, 1998), to mention just a few.

My aim in this chapter is to offer a hopefully clear enough characterization of KW’s sceptical argument and sceptical solution. I will end the chapter with raising some worries about the plausibility of the sceptical solution.

## 2. The Sceptical Argument

The interpretation Kripke offers of Wittgenstein’s later remarks – presented mostly in the *Philosophical Investigations* – differs significantly from others with respect to the way such remarks are often understood, especially those that appear in the sections preceding rather than following §201 and §202 of the *Investigations*. For Kripke, the private language argument and what sustains it has already been established in the sections preceding §202, where Wittgenstein declares that ‘*Hence* it is not possible to obey a rule “privately”: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it’ (1953, §202, emphasis added). In that section, Wittgenstein also states that ‘*hence* also “obeying a rule” is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule’ (1953, §202, first emphasis added). This section follows §201, where Wittgenstein presents his famous paradox, to which we will return. These ‘*hences*,’ for Kripke, signal that Wittgenstein’s remarks in these sections are the *conclusions* of certain already established arguments, in which case the sections following these central ones, such as those on sensations, are supposed to be read in the light of the arguments proposed in the earlier ones. But, what is the core claim in the sections Kripke is so concerned with?

In Chapter 2 of Kripke’s book, KW’s sceptic begins by calling our attention to the sort of commonsense conception that we have of the notion of meaning something by a word. The practice in question can be described in different ways by using different notions, such as that of following a rule, meaning something by a word, intending to use a word in a specific way, or applying a certain concept in such and such a way. The sceptic uses these notions almost

interchangeably because his aim is to undermine a particular, but common, *explanation* of what establishes the connection between what we did with our words in the past, however described, and what we should do with them now or in the future on that basis (see, for instance, Kripke 1982, pp. 7-8, 12, 77, 105-107).

The commonsense notion of meaning points to a general insight: although in everyday life we speak to, and understand, others unhesitatingly and almost automatically, it does not mean that such practices are nothing but ‘simply mak[ing] an unjustified leap in the dark’ (1982, p. 10). Rather, we are confident that our applications of words are correct and this confidence has to do with the fact that they accord with something determinate about them in the past. What is such a steady anchor? Putting it in terms of rules, we are confident that our current use of a word is correct because it accords with a specific rule, which we learnt, grasped or accepted in the past and which we have since then been following. For instance, we know that ‘15’ is the correct answer to the addition query ‘ $12 + 3 = ?$ ’ because we are certain that we have always been following the addition rule or taken the plus sign, ‘+,’ to denote the addition function. The rule can be specified along these lines:

Rule (Addition): “ $x + y = z$ ” is correct if  $z$  is the sum of  $x$  and  $y$ .

This rule is general in that it already determined the correct answer to any addition problem, no matter how large the numbers involved are. We can say the same thing of our use of other expressions of our language, such as ‘green,’ ‘table,’ and so forth. We have learnt the rule governing the application of ‘green’ in the past, say, ‘Rule (Green),’ according to which

Rule (Green): ‘green’ applies to certain (green) things only.

We are confident that applying ‘green’ to this emerald now is correct because this application accords with the rule – or what it requires us to do.

Putting it in terms of the notion of meaning, we meant something specific by ‘plus,’ ‘green,’ and other terms of our language in the past. I meant *green* by ‘green’ and thus, I am confident that applying it to this emerald is correct. Similarly, I meant *plus* by ‘plus’ and thus, ‘125’ is the correct answer to the new addition query ‘ $68 + 57 = ?$ ’ even if we assume, as the sceptic does, that we have never calculated the sum of numbers larger than 57 (see Kripke 1982, p. 8). Putting it in terms of concepts, I grasped the concept of GREEN in the past, which has a determinate extension or applies to certain things only. I am now confident that applying it to this emerald is correct. In the same vein, having grasped the concept of PLUS in the past, I am now confident that 125 is among the extension of this concept when it is applied to 57 and 68. Finally, I can be said to have formed a specific intention toward the use of ‘green’ in the past, i.e., to apply it only to green things. I apply it to this green emerald now because I know what my intention has been and I am faithful to it. Similarly, I formed the intention toward the use of ‘+’ as denoting the addition function. Therefore, ‘125’ is the correct answer to our query. Although the sceptic uses these notions almost interchangeably, it is not an attitude that all the commentators on KW accept. For instance, Peacocke (1984; 1992, Chapter 5) and Ginsborg (2011) disagree with this way of using such notions. To avoid repetition, I will only work with the notions of meaning facts and rules in the rest of this chapter.

The two main features of the commonsense conception of meaning or rule-following were the following: (1) we grasped certain rules governing the use of our words or we meant a specific thing by them in the past and (2) these rules or meanings have, at the same time, determined the correct way of using the words in the future. KW’s sceptic, however, puts forth some bizarre sceptical hypotheses about what we meant by our words in the past, with the purpose of casting doubt on our confidence in the correctness of our current use of them. What he asks us to do is

simply to rule out such sceptical hypotheses by citing something about ourselves, some *fact* about our past behavioral, mental or social life that can explain the aforementioned features of the commonsense notion of meaning.<sup>2</sup> In other words, such a fact must meet two conditions: (1) it must determine what we meant by our words in the past. Call it the ‘Constitution Requirement.’ (2) It must determine how the speaker ought to use them in the future. Call it the ‘Normativity Requirement.’ (See Kripke 1982, p. 11).

The second requirement is also called the ‘Normativity of Meaning’ thesis, according to which ‘[t]he relation of meaning [...] to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*’ (1982, p. 37). The sceptic introduces this feature in different ways by claiming, for instance, that a rule is ‘guiding the person who adopts it’ (p. 89), that it does ‘compel (or justify) the answer ‘125’’ (p. 13), or that it ‘justifies and determines my present response’ (p. 16). This topic is currently very much alive and growing, almost independently of Kripke’s discussion of it.<sup>3</sup> Boghossian famously characterizes this thesis as follows: ‘Having a meaning is essentially a matter of possessing a correctness condition’ (1989, p. 515). This is not a temporality-involving reading of the thesis, while KW’s characterization seems to be involving such a feature. Boghossian’s way of putting the matter, however, is neutral to such an issue: meaning vanishes without the existence of certain normative constraints on use. For KW’s sceptic, however, it is *past* meanings of expressions that are supposed to determine the correct way of using them *in the future*.<sup>4</sup> I will say more about this thesis. But, what are the sceptic’s sceptical hypotheses?

They can take different forms. One such hypothesis is that the correct answer to ‘ $68 + 57 = ?$ ’ is *not* ‘125’ but ‘5’. For, it is *possible* to imagine that by ‘plus’ we all meant something different, e.g., *quus* rather than *plus*, or that we took ‘+’ to denote the ‘quaddition function,’ not the addition function. The sceptic symbolizes such a strange function by ‘ $\oplus$ ’ and defines it as follows:

Rule (Quaddition):  $x \oplus y = x + y$ , if  $x, y < 57$   
 $= 5$  otherwise. (1982, p. 9)

We think we have been following the addition rule, but the sceptic thinks we have all been following the quaddition rule. Our answers to ‘ $x + y = ?$ ’ when  $x$  and  $y$  have been smaller than 57 have all been the same. Since 57 is an arbitrarily chosen number, we can see the danger of such a sceptical hypothesis: my past uses of ‘+’ cannot rule out the sceptic’s claim that we have been following the quaddition rule.

The sceptic, at least initially, does not deny that the expressions of our language are all currently meaningful: he is communicating with us via using these very expressions. If he claims that they are meaningless, so would be his own claims. He is rather ‘questioning a certain *nexus* from past to future’ (1982, p. 62). But, this has a consequence for the correctness of our current and future uses of words: the claim that ‘125,’ not ‘5,’ is the correct answer to ‘ $68 + 57 = ?$ ’ rests on the fact that we meant *addition* by ‘+,’ not *quaddition*. If we fail to resist his claim that we all meant *quaddition* by ‘+,’ ‘125’ would simply turn into a wrong answer to the query. Thus, we need to show that we really meant *plus* by ‘plus’. Eventually, however, ‘if there can be no fact about which particular function I meant in the *past*, there can be none in the *present* either’ (1982, p. 13).

Following Nelson Goodman (1973), we can offer another sceptical hypothesis, this time for the term ‘green.’ We think we use the predicate ‘is green’ in accordance with the following rule:

Rule (Green): The predicate ‘ $x$  is green’ only applies to all things that are green.

Now, consider the following bizarre rule:

Rule (Grue): The predicate ‘*x* is grue’ applies to all things examined before time *t* just in case they are green but to other things just in case they are blue. (See Goodman 1973, p. 74).

We *could* all follow Rule (Grue), instead of Rule (Green). But, we are confident that we do not. If so, the sceptic’s claim is false; ‘but if it is false, there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it,’ as KW’s sceptic states (1982, p. 9). Is there any such fact?

The sceptic’s chief claim is that there is *no* such fact: ‘the sceptic holds that no fact about my past history – nothing that was ever in my mind, or in my external behavior – establishes that I meant plus rather than quus’ (1982, p. 13). Any fact that one may introduce to ease the sceptic’s worries fails to meet the first or both of the aforementioned two conditions, or better, to accommodate the aforementioned two *aspects* of the sceptical problem. What kind of fact is the target of the sceptic’s attack? A variety of them. One of the striking features of the sceptical argument is that ‘there are no limitations, in particular, no *behaviorist* limitations, on the facts that may be cited to answer the sceptic’ (1982, p. 14). For instance, we can appeal to facts about the speaker’s past behavior, her dispositions to produce certain verbal responses, the internalized instructions, algorithm, mental images or ideas which she has had in mind and which she has associated with the words, the fact that each word has a certain objective, mind-independent Fregean sense, the fact that meaning something is an irreducible mental state with its own unique quale which is known to the speaker via introspection, or even the claim that meaning something by a word is a primitive state and facts about being in such states are *sui generis*.

In Chapter 2 of Kripke’s book, the sceptic discusses each of these candidates in detail and rejects them all by arguing that they either fail to meet the Constitution Requirement, i.e., to constitute the meaning fact that the speaker meant this rather than that by her word, or fail to meet the Normativity Requirement, i.e., to determine how the speaker ought to use them in the future, or both. Unpacking each of these various arguments here is unattainable. Nonetheless, we can detect the general strategy of the sceptic by considering an example.

If we have never encountered numbers larger than 57, our past behavior, responses, uses, or dispositions to answer to addition problems, as well as our past experiences when adding two numbers, and so forth, have all been the same up until now, i.e., when we face the query involving numbers larger than 57, e.g., ‘68 + 57 =?’. But does it mean that there really is no fact as to what we meant by ‘plus’? A natural response to the sceptic is that so far I have responded with the sum of numbers; I answer with ‘125’ to this particular query now and will continue producing the *sum* rather than the *quum* of any two numbers that I may be asked to add in my life. This very fact would suffice to show that I mean *addition* by ‘+,’ not *quaddition* or anything else. Nonetheless, the sceptical problem cannot be answered in this way because the sceptic now offers a new sceptical hypothesis: perhaps, by ‘+’ you have always meant *skaddition*, rather than *addition* or *quaddition*, which can be symbolized by ‘\*’ and which can be defined as follows:

Rule (Skaddition):  $x * y = x + y$ , if *x* and *y* are small enough for you to compute in your life time,  
= 5, otherwise. (See 1982, pp. 27, 30. See also Miller 2018, p. 208)

How can we evade this one? Obviously, none of the responses that one may produce in one’s entire life can rule this out. This is often called the ‘finitude problem,’<sup>5</sup> which is offered by the

sceptic to disarm the response from “dispositionalism.” According to the dispositional view, as Kripke characterizes it,

to mean addition by “+” is to be disposed, when asked for any sum “ $x + y$ ” to give the sum of  $x$  and  $y$  as the answer (in particular, to say “125” when queried about “ $8 + 57$ ”); to mean *quus* is to be disposed when queried about any arguments, to respond with their *quum* (in particular to answer “5” when queried about “ $68 + 57$ ”.) (1982, pp. 22-23)

But, even the totality of the responses one may actually be disposed to produce in one’s life still fails to determine whether one meant *addition* or *skaddition* by ‘+’ because they are all compatible with these different possible meanings and potentially with an infinite number of them. This is to emphasize that the sceptical problem is *metaphysical*, not epistemological: the sceptic’s claim is not that there are meaning facts but there are also epistemic limitations for *us* to successfully capture them (see Kripke 1982, pp. 21, 39). The conclusion that the sceptic is after is a sceptical one with ontological consequences, i.e., that there is no fact as to what someone means by her words. The sceptic guides us to his constitutive metaphysical scepticism through an epistemic route: the sceptic allows us to have unlimited epistemic access to the set of all facts of the matter which we can think of; he shows that we fail to find any fact in such a set that can constitute one determinate meaning fact; thus, there is no fact about meaning: if there was any, we could find it in that set.<sup>6</sup> The dispositional view also fails to accommodate the normative feature of meaning: if the speaker is systematically disposed to respond differently, we cannot claim that ‘She means *plus* by “plus” but is now making mistakes.’ For, it begs the question against the sceptic’s main claim: facts about what she means by the word were supposed to be *read off* from how she is disposed to respond. Facts about dispositions are *descriptive*, describing how she has been, is or will be responding. They are not *prescriptive*, telling how she ought to respond.

The sceptic aims to argue against all possible suggestions from two general, mutually exclusive camps: reductionist and non-reductionist. The meaning fact that Jones means *plus* by ‘plus’ can be said to be either reducible to, and thus constituted by, some other fact about Jones or primitive, irreducible to any other fact about him. The dispositional view was a key instance of the reductionist responses. We can characterize the sceptic’s general strategy against them as follows: they fail to constitute one unique meaning fact because they can be made compatible with – or equally eligible to constitute – different *possible* meaning facts. Meaning *addition* by ‘+’ is one possible meaning fact, which we claim to be the *actual* one. But, there are other possible meaning facts, such as meaning *quaddition* by ‘+,’ *skaddition* by ‘+,’ and so forth. As the sceptic showed, whatever we have done in the past, as well as whatever we have had in mind, can be interpreted in such a way that they remain compatible with different possible meaning facts. We then face a dilemma: either we have to appeal to a further rule, a further fact, a further instruction in the mind of the speaker, and so forth, in order to fix the rule or the meaning fact in question, in which case we have opened the path to the *vicious regress of interpretations*, or we have to claim that this very rule or fact in order to get fixed is in some way immune to the regress problem. In this case, however, we have made the ordinary notion of meaning entirely mysterious: we have made such a fact or rule a *superlative* one, somehow immune to the sceptical problem. This latter claim is related to the sceptic’s arguments against non-reductionist responses to the sceptical problem.

The chief non-reductionist response to the sceptical problem is that the very demand that we find some non-intentional, non-semantic fact about the speaker capable of constituting the fact that she means *green* by ‘green’ has been prejudicial and redundant at the outset because such a fact is simply primitive, *sui generis*. The sceptic’s strategy in this case is to show that treating the state of meaning something by a word as primitive makes the whole thing a myth:

we are finite beings with finite minds and brains, which have finite capacities, but such a state is not. Moreover, we are supposed to have, in a queer way, direct access, with fair clarity and precision, to the general content of this state, which somehow extends itself to all *possible* cases of using a word. How can we have such first-personal, non-inferential knowledge to the content of these states? (See Kripke 1982, pp. 41-53. Using Mackie's terminology (1977), this argument is often called the 'Argument from Queerness'. See Boghossian (1989), Miller (2010) and Wright (1984)).

So far, we have sketched the sceptic's general strategy to establish his desired sceptical conclusion, i.e., that there is no fact, reductive or otherwise, as to what one means by one's words. It is important to note that the sceptical problem does not aim to undermine the legitimacy of arithmetic, the accuracy of our perception, or the functioning of our memory. The problem concerns the meaning of expressions and has been designed to raise a metaphysical problem about meaning facts. The problem is not whether our memory works properly or whether the things we see as green are really green. Rather, *given that* this object is green, why are we so confident that the word 'green' ought to be applied to this rather than that object with a different color? The answer owes to what we *mean* by 'green.' In the same vein, *if* we can show that what we meant by 'plus' has been *plus*, the sceptic would have no objection to the fact that '125' *is* the correct answer to '68 + 57=?'. But, if he is right in his claim that we all meant *quaddition* by '+,' the correct answer ought to be '5,' *despite* the arithmetical fact that the *sum* of 68 and 57 is still and would always be 125. But, why does Kripke think that the sceptical problem leads to the Wittgensteinian paradox?

Suppose that the sceptic succeeds in showing that there is no fact as to what someone means by her words. This conclusion undermines a well-known explanation of the commonsense notion of meaning, i.e., the sort of explanation that is offered by 'classical realism' (Kripke, 1982, p. 73; Wilson, 1994, 1998) or the 'realistic or representational picture of language' (Kripke, 1982, p. 85).<sup>7</sup> This view explains the two features of the commonsense notion of meaning in the following way: it is a fact that the speaker means a determinate thing by her word and this very fact has determined the correct application of that word in the future. On this view, the sentences by which we attribute meaning to ours and others' utterances possess (classical realist) *truth-conditions*. For instance, the sentence that 'Jones means *green* by "green"' is true if and only if the fact that Jones means *green* by 'green' obtains; it is false if Jones means *grue* or something else by 'green.' Similarly, the sentence that 'I mean *green* by "green"' is true if and only if the fact that I mean *green* by 'green' obtains. Such meaning facts are either primitive or reducible to some other facts about the speaker. The sceptic, however, has subverted any such explanation of meaning: there are no such facts at all. This is what Wilson (1994, 1998) calls the 'Basic Sceptical Conclusion.' This conclusion combined with the classical realist view of meaning leads to a disastrous conclusion, which Wilson calls the 'Radical Sceptical Conclusion,' according to which '[t]here can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to accord with anything we may choose to do. So there can be neither accord, nor conflict' (Kripke, 1982, p. 55). This is, for Kripke, the paradox that Wittgenstein famously presents in section 201 of the *Investigations*: '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.' We are now left with nothing but a moot claim: when I apply a rule, 'I apply the rule *blindly*' (1982, p. 17). But, does this entail that meaning and understanding is impossible?

### 3. The Sceptical Solution

According to Kripke, Wittgenstein himself believes that the radical sceptical conclusion is ‘insane and intolerable’ (1982, p. 60) and ‘incredible and self-defeating’ (1982, p. 71). For, if it is true, how could the sceptical conclusions themselves have any meaning? We do mean certain things by our words all the time. Obviously, we have gone wrong at some point. For KW, the paradox is the result of a misunderstanding, a mistaken explanation, of the commonsense notion of meaning: ‘he has shown that an ordinary practice, if it is to be defended at all, cannot be defended in a certain way’ (1982, p. 67). Although KW agrees with his sceptic that there is no *fact* as to what we mean by our words, he rejects the bizarre conclusion that meaning something by an expression is impossible. The first step toward a solution is thus to dismiss classical realism as a bad philosophy, which is responsible for the paradox. In this sense, KW’s solution would not be a *straight solution*, i.e., one that strives for revealing to the sceptic a hidden fact that he failed to notice. KW’s solution begins by accepting the basic sceptical conclusion that there is no such fact. For this reason, his solution is a ‘*sceptical solution*’ (1982, p. 66). But, if the solution is sceptical, how is it supposed to provide us with any interesting story about meaning?

According to KW, meaning-ascribing sentences do not have any (classical realist) truth-condition because there is no fact whose obtaining makes them true. Nonetheless, they possess what Kripke calls the ‘*assertability conditions*’ (1982, p. 74). In order to preserve our ordinary way of talking about meaning, all we need to do is (1) to specify the conditions under which we are justified to assert that Jones means *green* by ‘green,’ that his use of the word is correct, and (2) to indicate the utility that such a practice of meaning-attribution has in our lives.<sup>8</sup> What the assertability conditions say is nothing but the simple fact that Jones is inclined to apply ‘green’ to this thing or that Jones is confident that applying ‘green’ to this object is correct. Accepting the sceptic’s (basic) sceptical conclusion has left us with nothing but Jones’s blind inclinations, feelings of confidence, natural propensities and the like. The central point of the sceptical solution, however, is that we can still treat others and ourselves as rule-followers if we bring in the notion of a speech-community. This is the reason why Kripke claims it is a *consequence* of the sceptical solution, rather than a self-standing argument, that a private language is impossible: the assertability conditions have no application in the absence of others agreeing in their basic natural propensities.

People naturally have certain inclinations to respond to things in the world in one way rather than another. But, as it happens, their inclinations converge: they all respond by ‘green’ to emeralds, by ‘red’ to red roses and so forth. As KW emphasizes, it is only an empirical, ‘brute fact that we generally agree’ (1982, p. 97). Suppose that Smith, a member of such a community, observes Jones’s responses when using ‘plus.’ What does justify Smith to assert that Jones means the same thing as he does by ‘plus.’ KW’s answer is: ‘*Smith* will judge Jones to mean addition by ‘plus’ only if he judges that Jones’s answers to particular addition problems agree with those *he* is inclined to give’ (1982, p. 91). If Smith observes, in enough cases, that Jones’s responses agree with his, he has all the justification he needs – and there is – to assert that Jones means *plus* by ‘plus.’ If Jones responds differently, Smith would try to correct him. But, ‘[o]ne who is an incorrigible deviant in enough respects simply cannot participate in the life of the community and in communication’ (1982, p. 92). This is the general picture that the sceptical solution offers. But, why is it that the assertability conditions have no application in the absence of others?

Consider the case of Robinson Crusoe, a solitary person isolated from birth in an island. There is no one else but Crusoe himself to decide whether his application of a word is correct. For such a person, as Wittgenstein famously states, ‘whatever is going to seem right to ... [him] is



right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right" (1953, §258). This is the reason why Wittgenstein claimed that 'to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule' (1953, §202). However, if Crusoe is considered as a member of a speech-community, although he may be inclined to apply 'green' to a red rose, others disagree: the community is uniformly inclined to apply 'green' to green objects only. Under these conditions, they can assert that Crusoe's application is incorrect.<sup>9</sup>

All these may still seem to hang in the air, but KW has a story to tell about why we participate in such a form of practice: our lives depend on it, on our success in passing the tests of our speech-community, so that they can count us as a reliable member of their community. In this sense, the sceptical solution can accommodate three important themes in Wittgenstein's later remarks: the fundamentality of the existence of 'public criteria,' 'language-games,' and 'form of life.' If assertability conditions essentially rely on others' judgements about my use of words, there must be certain observable evidence, i.e. observable behavior, on the basis of which they can make such judgements. A child, when feels pain, cries. As Wittgenstein continues, 'adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. ... [T]he verbal expression of pain replaces crying' (1953, p. 244). If the child learns such expressions, if she utters 'I am in pain' when she is in pain, the adults can judge that she has mastered the use of the term 'pain.' The case of checking the child's mastery of using the terms like 'table' is even easier. Therefore, the sceptical solution 'depends on agreement, and on checkability – on one person's ability to test whether another uses a term as he does' (1982, p. 99).

The practice of attributing meaning under certain assertability conditions is a language-game: 'our license to say of each other that we mean addition by '+' is part of a 'language game' that sustains itself only because of the brute fact that we generally agree' (1982, p. 97). Such games exist only within a community whose members are uniform in their responses. But, there is still *no* fact as to why they are in such agreements: any attempt to cite some fact about them explaining the uniformity of their responses leads to the sceptical problem because if there is no fact as to what a person means by her words, there would be no fact as to what a group of them means by them either. On the other hand, '[t]he set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave with our activities, is our *form of life*. Beings who agreed in consistently giving bizarre quus-like responses would share in another form of life' (1982, p. 96). Again, there is no fact as to why we have this rather than that form of life: all this is a *primitive* aspect of our speech-community (see Kripke 1982, p. 101).

#### **4. On the Sceptical Solution**

Suppose we embrace KW's sceptical solution. What happens to the commonsense notion of meaning, which as Kripke emphasizes, 'avoid[s] the danger of a denial of any ordinary belief' (1982, p. 70) and 'defend[s] our ordinary conceptions' (1982, p. 63)? The commonsense conception of meaning had it that we are ordinarily confident that we meant something specific by our words and that, in some way, our confidence in the correctness of our past, present and future uses of them has its roots in the former. We expect the sceptical solution to respect this belief, of course without falling into the sceptical problem.

The picture that the sceptical solution offers seems to be this: a creature – I deliberately avoid using a 'speaker' yet – produces certain strings of sound in accordance with its confidence, blind inclinations or natural propensities. This alone, however, is insufficient to allow us to consider its responses as correct or incorrect; it would rather result in the vanishing of the

notion of correctness: the seems right/is right, right/wrong or correct/incorrect distinction simply disappears. In order to deal with this problem, the sceptical solution adds that the creature's basic inclinations to respond, as it happens, agree with *ours* – i.e., other creatures of the same species – and this contingent fact enables us to count those produced sounds as *correct* and as *linguistic expressions with a meaning*. But, the sceptical solution does not even make this latter claim. Its claim, more accurately, is that our natural propensities to verbally respond to things around us happen to be similar and this *similarity* is all that we have because, otherwise, we have to ascend to a more fine-grained semantic level, to *meanings* – more generally, to the sounds' alleged semantic properties – and assume that we all have grasped those already determined, similar meanings, rules, concepts, etc. – which we are now attributing to one another. Doing so, however, leads to the sceptical problem: nothing can constitute the fact that we meant *anything* by those sounds. We are, thus, back to natural propensities and their contingent uniformity and similarities.<sup>10</sup> Two worries about this picture.

The first is that the commonsense conception of meaning is lost in it: the sceptical solution gives us no semantics. For one thing, the sceptical solution is not built on our confidence in what we *meant* by our words; rather, on the current similarity between responses. For another, the sceptical solution does not establish any connection between our confidence in the correctness of our current use of words and the history of what we did by them in the past. The only connection, if any, is the similarity between my current use of words and *others'*. This is, however, far from the way we ordinarily think of such practices: this is to radically depart from the commonsense conception of meaning. In this sense, the sceptical solution is *revising* our ordinary beliefs about meaning, while Kripke denied that his Wittgenstein aims to do so. Does Wittgenstein really want to commit to such a revision?

Before answering this question, let me consider an objection, according to which we need to keep two things separate: (1) our ordinary practice of employing the words like 'mean,' 'understand,' etc., and (2) our 'commonsense conception' of what meaning and understanding are, according to which there is a *fact* about my mind which constitutes my meaning *addition* by '+' and which determines in advance what I should do with the symbol in order to remain faithful to that meaning.<sup>11</sup> It is the second claim that comes under KW's sceptic's attack; the first is safely preserved by the sceptical solution. It seems then that it all boils down to what we take to be the 'commonsense conception of meaning.'

My reading of the commonsense or ordinary conception of meaning has been broader and, in a sense, covers both (1) and (2). First of all, we are *within* the sceptical solution and on board with the sceptic's rejection of the classical realist claim that there are facts about my mind – or, more generally, about any other aspect of my life – which can constitute the fact that I mean *addition* by '+' and which can determine the correctness conditions for the application of '+' for me. Thus, a properly revised version of (2) remains compatible with the central point of the sceptical solution, that is, that the solution is *not* committed to any claim about the existence of such classical realist facts. My characterization of the commonsense conception of meaning in this paper made no claim about the existence of such facts. For another, the sceptic's sceptical problem *applies* to (1) too because the same or similar classical realist explanation of (1) can be given: what does sustain our success in employing the words like 'mean,' 'understand,' etc. in the ordinary way we use them? The realist's answer is that since, as a matter of fact, we all grasped the same meaning for these terms, or the same rules governing their application, we now apply them as we do, i.e., in agreement with one another. This means that both (1) and (2) can be the target of the sceptic's argument: the sceptic's concern is the (classical realist) *explanation* of this notion, not the notion itself. Consequently, since KW, as Kripke claimed and I tried to clarify, aims to preserve the commonsense conception of meaning

in this broader sense, (1) and (2) must both be accommodated in the sceptical solution, without falling into the domain of the sceptical problem: they must not be regarded as *explainable* in the classical realist way. If I am right, the challenge for the sceptical solution is to preserve more than just (1), but also (2). My point was that what the sceptical solution offers, i.e., (occurrent) similarities in responses without ascending to semantics, would not suffice to accommodate the commonsense conception of meaning. In this sense, KW's sceptical solution is revisionary, altering the commonsense notion of meaning.

The second worry concerns an answer to the previous question: does Wittgenstein really submit to such revisionism? It does not seem so. What does sustain our ordinary belief that we are not creatures like parrots, which are at most trained – and, let us assume, corrected – to be disposed to produce certain (similar) responses to certain (similar) things? One answer might be that, as an empirical fact, our trainers (i.e., adult human beings) have much more complex dispositions than adult parrots do. But, our trainers and the parrots' are, *ex hypothesi*, the same: certain human beings. There is still a huge difference between a speaker and a parrot. One may claim that, not just their trainers but these creatures themselves, i.e. humans or 'speakers,' possess such highly complex dispositions. This sounds hopeless too: an infant is not a rational creature yet – and in this sense, she is not that different from a baby parrot. At some point, however, one becomes a *rational* creature with a *language* and the other does not. Since parrots are not considered to possess *feelings of confidence* or *certainty* when responding, I take all these to gradually emerge, but only for one species: once the child masters her first-language, she is said to have become a rational creature possessing a language, or meaningful responses, and contentful propositional attitudes. The problem, however, is to elucidate what distinguishes mere prompted verbal responses to something and *linguistic* responses to that thing. By the latter we ordinarily have *meaningful* responses in mind. Again, what does make a (verbal) response meaningful? An answer to this question seems to require successful possession, and consistent applications, of *concepts*, a grasp of *meanings*. What makes us different is that, at some point, we come to possess a properly-called 'language,' that is, our responses would no longer merely be noises; rather, *meaningful utterances*.

I believe, and I agree with Davidson (1993, 2000), that, for Wittgenstein too, the difference between the above two cases is deep and significant. Having a set of dispositions to discriminate between things that are such and such and having the ability to *judge* that certain things are such and such are different: 'the power to discriminate does not imply possession of the corresponding concept' (Davidson, 1993, p. 608). The ability to judge requires possession of specific concepts and it would not be clear what else but the creature's grasp of certain (already determined) concepts can turn a mere disposition to react to an object into an act of judging that the object is such and such. For Davidson, 'the step from mere conditioned response to what Wittgenstein called "following a rule"' (2000, p. 71) is the crucial step, which makes *us*, not parrots, 'speakers,' i.e., rational agents whose verbal responses and their mental counterparts have a determinate content.<sup>12</sup>

Wittgenstein seems to agree: 'Our criterion for someone's saying something to himself is what he tells us and the rest of his behaviour; and we only say that someone speaks to himself if, in the ordinary sense of the words, he *can speak*. And we do not say it of a parrot' (1953, §344). Whatever makes *us* different from parrots cannot then merely consist in a possession of more complex dispositions, being subject to training and correction. It is rather *our ability to speak*, which parrots lack and which, in the light of the above Davidsonian considerations, involves the ability to *judge*, to *think*, to apply a *concept*. These are all in line with the commonsense conception of meaning, speaking and understanding. If so, there is then this tension: while the sceptical solution prevents us from loading people's responses up with already determined

meanings, Wittgenstein sees the difference between us and parrots as resting on the very fact that our responses are so loaded.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is customary to call the Wittgenstein presented by Kripke 'Kripke's Wittgenstein' or 'Kripkenstein' because of Kripke's own confession that he does not necessarily agree with all facets of the sceptical argument and the sceptical solution. Not only this, but he also declares that perhaps even Wittgenstein himself might not approve such a reading. See, e.g., Kripke (1982, pp. ix, 5).

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<sup>2</sup> By ‘facts about the speaker’s social life’ I mean *facts of a certain sort* (i.e., as we will see, of the *classical realist sort*) about the speaker’s membership in a speech-community, which are supposed to *constitute* the meaning fact that she means this rather than that by a word. The sceptic’s focus is on facts about an individual speaker rather than the context and membership. Nonetheless, the sceptical argument undermines the existence of any fact (at least of the sort we will consider) as to what a group of speakers mean by their words as well.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Boghossian (1989, 2003, 2005), Gibbard (1994, 2013), Ginsborg (2011, 2018a), Glüer and Wikforss (2009), Hattiangadi (2007, 2010), Horwich (1990, 2012), Kusch (2006), McGinn (1984), Miller (2010, 2018), Whiting (2007, 2013), and Wikforss (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Colin McGinn (1984) interprets the normative feature of meaning as essentially involving temporality. For him, an explanation of normativity requires an account of two things: “(a) an account of what it is to mean something at a given time and (b) an account of what it is to mean the *same* thing at two different times – since (Kripkean) normativeness is a matter of meaning now what one meant earlier” (1984, p. 174). See Wright (1989) for a criticism of this reading. Whether or not Kripke’s way of introducing the normativeness of meaning is temporality-involving is a matter of controversy. For, KW’s sceptic does not begin by questioning the meaningfulness of our words as they are currently used because he wants to converse with us in *our* language. At least, as a tactical move, he only casts doubt on the relation between what we meant by our words *in the past* and the correctness of our *current* or *future* uses of them. His ultimate goal, however, is to reveal that there is no fact as to what we mean by our words now or in the future. Thus, we can take his view to be compatible, ultimately, with the temporality-neutral way in which Boghossian characterizes the normativity of meaning. I thank Marie McGinn for her comment on this controversy.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Boghossian (1989), Ginsborg (2011), McGinn (1984, Chapters 2 and 4), Miller (2018, Chapter 6), Soames (1997), and Wright (1984).

<sup>6</sup> On this way of constructing the sceptical problem, see Miller (2006). For a debate on this, see Ginsborg (2018b) and Miller (Forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> For Kripke, the early Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* held such a view too. See Kripke (1982, pp. 71-73).

<sup>8</sup> KW is replacing the problematic, classical realist, truth-conditional approach to meaning with an alternative one. But, is there an *unproblematic* version of the truth-conditional conception of meaning that the sceptical solution can accept? It seems there is because (1) KW endorses the redundancy theory of truth (1982, p. 86) and (2) the sceptical solution does not aim to deny the ordinary use of the phrases like ‘it is a fact that’ or ‘it is true that’. On this, see Blackburn (1984a, 1984b), Byrne (1996), McGinn (1984), Soames (1998) and Wilson (1994, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> For KW, it is possible that Crusoe is considered as a rule-follower *if* his responses agree with ours: ‘if we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him’ (1982, p. 110). On this, see Baker and Hacker (1984), Blackburn (1984a), Boghossian (1989), Hanfling (1984), Hoffman (1985), Horwich (1984, 2012), Kusch (2006), McDowell (1989), McGinn (1984), Peacocke (1984, 1992) and Wright (1984, 1986).

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<sup>10</sup> One immediate objection is that I have missed KW's claim that, for a creature's expressions to be meaningful, we do not need to assume some already constituted meanings; rather, meaning emerges as the result of others' judgement that my use of the expressions agrees with theirs. Nothing more is needed to justify the legitimacy of meaning-attributions. This would not work as we will see.

<sup>11</sup> I am thankful to Marie McGinn and Penelope Maddy for bringing this objection up to me.

<sup>12</sup> I have developed this Davidsonian reading of Wittgenstein in Hossein Khani (2019, 2020).

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