


Kripke against Kripkenstein

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Abstract: What was Saul Kripke's personal stance on the sceptical challenge that he famously attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein? It will be argued that despite his statements to the contrary, we can, in fact, outline at least a rough sketch of Kripke's own views on the challenge and its aftermath on the basis of the remarks he left in the text. In summary, Kripke (a) rejected the sceptical solution to the challenge and (b) leaned towards a non-sceptical primitivist solution. If this is correct, it follows that there is a way in which Kripke's view makes his causal-historical picture of reference potentially able to solve the sceptical challenge.

Key words: Kripke's Wittgenstein, causal-historical theory of reference, philosophy of language, meaning, scepticism

This paper starts with the question: what was Kripke's personal stance on the sceptical challenge that he famously attributed to Wittgenstein in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982; hereafter cited as WRPL)? I argue that despite his statements to the contrary, we can, in fact, outline at least a rough sketch of Kripke's own views on the challenge and its aftermath, based on the remarks he left in the text. In summary, Kripke (a) rejected the sceptical solution to the challenge and (b) leaned towards a non-sceptical primitivist solution.

There are at least two reasons it matters to know what Kripke's take on Kripkenstein's sceptical challenge was, aside from pure exegetical interest. It is sometimes thought that WRPL stands in conflict with the causal-historical account of reference inaugurated in *Naming and Necessity* (1980; cited as NN) in the sense that the causal-historical account cannot solve the challenge (Boghossian 1989; Kusch 2006; Miller 2023). However, if my reading of Kripke is right, the alleged conflict can only be apparent. Second, after clarifying Kripke's own ideas about the sceptical challenge, it becomes possible to reconstruct his reasons for them, which gives us a better grasp of the nature of the sceptical challenge.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I summarise the sceptical challenge as Kripke presented it, with an aim to remain neutral on various interpretive issues ongoing in the secondary literature. Next, I discuss the textual evidence for ascribing to Kripke the position mentioned above, after which I attempt to reconstruct his reasons for holding this stance. Finally, I argue that if this interpretation is broadly correct, it shows that the assumed incompatibility between WRPL and NN is much less severe than what, e.g., Kusch (2006) and Miller (2023) have argued.

INTRODUCING WRPL

WRPL is a contested work, not only regarding its arguments but also what those arguments are supposed to be and to whom the credit for making them should fall. This is not the place to engage

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with the vast commentary literature wholesale. My introduction to the sceptical argument aims to be as neutral as possible on the various controversies surrounding it.

In the broadest terms, WRPL comprises two main parts. In part one (i.e., chapter 2), Kripke presents a sceptical argument attributed to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, according to which there are no facts that could determine what anyone means by any word. In part two (Chapter 3), Kripke presents a sceptical solution to the challenge also attributed to later Wittgenstein.

What are the arguments of the sceptical challenge? Much ink has been spilled over this question. Most commentators accept that the main challenge consists of three interrelated problems: the problems of finitude, error, and normativity. Especially the normativity problem has been much discussed in recent years. I proceed by presenting each problem briefly.

The problem of finitude can be presented as analogical to an intelligence tester's question of how to continue a series of symbols correctly, say '2, 4, 6, 8 . . .' (WRPL, 18). Obviously, there is no unique correct answer independent of the intention of the intelligence tester—a multitude of equally good polynomial functions are compatible with the set. The basic observation that any finite set of symbols is in principle compatible with an indefinite number of functions, or more broadly rules, governing the continuation of the set forms the core premise of the problem of finitude. Kripkenstein's sceptic turns this into a problem by asking what fact about the intelligence tester herself (or her community, WRPL 111) determines which function she intended the correct answer to be. Any function which she apparently intended must've been learned based on a finite number of examples, after all. The intention itself must also be finite in some sense, for the intelligence tester is a finite being.

The problem of error can be understood as a corollary to the problem of finitude. Suppose there is some way in which the intelligence tester could continue the series potentially to infinity. Would this answer the crucial question of which function she intended? Not so, for it is possible that she makes a mistake somewhere and continues the series wrong. So, the intention that governs the finite series must be determined independently of how the intelligence tester would develop it, supposing she could develop it arbitrarily long.

The problems of error and finitude make up the first general constraint that Kripke sets on any 'straight solution' to fulfil (WRPL, 11). The condition is to cite some fact about the intelligence tester which determines the function she meant. There are no epistemic constraints on this condition: one is free to cite facts about her past, current, and future mental states and behaviour under various conditions.

The second general condition 'must, in some sense, show how I am justified in giving the answer "125" to "68 + 57"' (WRPL, 11). (Kripke uses the example of addition throughout the essay.) This condition forms the core of the normativity problem. Just what kind of sense of justification Kripke meant has been intensely debated, with no clear winner in sight. Often Kripkenstein is read as arguing that facts about meaning are normative in nature, hence that no descriptive fact about the speaker can determine meanings (Boghossian 1989). This reading has been contested (Zalabardo 1992; Wilson 1998; Kusch 2006).

The third chapter of WRPL comprises the sceptical solution that Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein. This part of the work also has been extensively debated. I will not discuss that topic here, however, for as we will see, Kripke himself had little interest in the sceptical solution.

KRIPKE'S STANCE ON THE SCEPTICAL CHALLENGE AND SOLUTION

To begin with, any attempt at the reconstruction of Kripke's own views on the sceptical challenge must begin by addressing his explicit statement not to include his own views in the text:

It deserves emphasis that I do not in this piece of writing attempt to speak for myself, or, except in occasional and minor asides, to say anything about my own views on the

substantive issues. The primary purpose of this work is the presentation of a problem and an argument, not its critical evaluation. Primarily I can be read, except in a few obvious asides, as almost like an attorney presenting a major philosophical argument as it struck me. If the work has a main thesis of its own, it is that Wittgenstein's sceptical problem and argument are important, deserving of serious consideration. (WRPL, ix)

Why isn't this conclusive evidence that any reconstruction of Kripke's views, based solely on WRPL, can at most pick out a few minor asides? Evidence to the contrary can only come from further quotes where Kripke apparently expressed his own views on the substantive issues, which do not seem so minor. Consider first the musings following the initial presentation of the challenge:

Sometimes when I have contemplated the situation, I have had something of an eerie feeling. Even now as I write, I feel confident that there is something in my mind—the meaning I attach to the 'plus' sign—that *instructs* me what I ought to do in all future cases. (WPPL, 21–22)

It is easy—and probably correct—to read this paragraph as a dramatic emphasis on the radical conclusion that apparently follows from the sceptical challenge, 'that the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air' (WPRL, 22). But it also reveals, I think, a deep conviction of Kripke that the sceptical conclusion cannot be right simply because it is too incredible. Further evidence for this reading comes when Kripke again considers the broader implications of the sceptical challenge:

Such a state [of meaning addition by '+'] would have to be a finite object, contained in our finite minds. It does not consist in my explicitly thinking of each case of the addition table, nor even of my encoding each separate case in the brain: we lack the capacity for that. Yet ([in *Philosophical Investigations*] §195) "in a queer way" each such case already is "in some sense present." (Before we hear Wittgenstein's sceptical argument, we surely suppose—unreflectively—that something like this is indeed the case. Even now I have a strong inclination to think this somehow must be right.) (WPRL, 52; footnote omitted)

Despite understanding the strength of the sceptical argument, Kripke disagreed with its conclusion. But how could the conclusion *not* hold? To this, Kripke only left the reader with one clear clue:

Personally I can only report that, in spite of Wittgenstein's assurances, the 'primitive' interpretation often sounds rather good to me . . . (WPRL, 66)

By the 'primitive interpretation' Kripke alludes to the straight answer according to which the state of meaning addition by '+' is a *sui generis* state somehow capable of containing the right answers to all future addition problems—an answer which Kripke laments (in Wittgenstein's voice, I believe) as 'desperate' and 'completely mysterious' (WPRL, 51). Yet personally, this is what Kripke found appealing. Although the use of ellipsis leaves room for the interpretation that he was merely joking here, as he does elsewhere in the text, combined with his more serious expressions of anti-sceptical convictions, I believe it is reasonable to hold that Kripke in fact took the primitivist interpretation to be a viable contender despite Wittgenstein's assurances to the contrary.

Further support for this idea comes from Kripke's rather surprising revelation that he is strongly opposed to the sceptical solution. In the paragraph that ends with the citation above about primitivism sounding rather good, he frames Wittgenstein's sceptical solution to the challenge as of type with Berkeley's sceptical solution to his scepticism concerning the reality of the unperceived world. The key to Berkeley's sceptical solution, according to Kripke, is that

the impression that the common man is committed to matter and to objects outside the mind derives from an erroneous metaphysical interpretation of common talk. When the common man speaks of an 'external material object' he does not really mean (as we might

say *sotto voce*) an *external material object* but rather he means something like ‘an idea produced in me independently of my will.’ (WRPL, 64; footnote omitted)

On this strategy, Kripke then comments:

Personally I think such philosophical claims are almost invariably suspect. What the claimant calls a ‘misleading philosophical misconstrual’ of the ordinary statement is probably the natural and correct understanding. The real misconstrual comes when the claimant continues, “All the ordinary man really means is . . .” and gives a sophisticated analysis compatible with his own philosophy. Be this as it may, the important point for present purposes is that Wittgenstein makes a Berkeleian claim of this kind. (WRPL, 65)

So, *mutatis mutandis*, Kripke rejected or at least had severe reservations about the core strategy underlying the sceptical solution, which is that common meaning claims and ascriptions are not really saying what the ‘philosophical’ interpretation leading to the sceptical conclusion says they are. In particular, according to the sceptical solution, there is no commitment to the idea that all the right answers must be contained in the mental state ascribed by the meaning sentence ‘S means additions by “+.”’ But this is exactly what Kripke had a strong inclination to think must be right.

KRIPKE’S REASONS FOR HIS STANCE

From the citations above, we can derive two key features of Kripke’s position on the sceptical challenge. First is that he had at least some sympathy for the non-sceptical primitivist solution. Second is that he had severe reservations about the sceptical solution. In this section, I try to reconstruct at least some of Kripke’s reasons for holding these ideas.

This task is by necessity speculative since there is virtually no direct textual evidence in WRPL (or anywhere else in his published works) for why Kripke might’ve held the stance he expressed. That being said, I think there is at least one relatively safe point we can draw by comparing WRPL to his other works. This is Kripke’s doubtful attitude towards the ‘Berkeleian strategy’ roughly characterised above that seeks to make certain scepticism more palatable by rejecting a so-called philosophical reading of the common discourse which the scepticism apparently threatens, be it discourse on meaning or discourse on external material objects. In NN, Kripke famously objects to Quine’s treatment of modality as a feature of certain descriptions pertaining to objects, not of the objects themselves (NN, 41). Similar sentiments can be found in Kripke’s criticism of the ‘counterpart theory’ and Lewis’s interpretation of possible worlds semantics (NN, 17).

Kripke found non-sceptical primitivism appealing because it aligned more with his interpretation of common meaning discourse. At the same time, Kripke apparently expressed agreement (or at least does not express disagreement) with the sceptical arguments against the various straight solution candidates like dispositionalism, the qualia strategy, and Platonism. So, all things being equal, that only leaves non-sceptical primitivism as the alternative to the sceptical solution.

There is another line of reasoning which may illuminate Kripke’s thinking here, if only tentatively. First of all, the lucidity of his reading notwithstanding, something in the argument form of the sceptical challenge eluded a precise statement even from Kripke. (‘Although one has a strong sense that there is a problem, a rigorous statement of it is difficult.’ WRPL, 5). Moreover, although the discussion of the problem (especially the problem of finitude) involves thorough a metaphysical tenor, at the end of the second part, Kripke concludes:

I think that Wittgenstein argues, not merely as we have said hitherto, that introspection shows that the alleged ‘qualitative’ state of understanding is a chimera, but also that it is logically impossible (or at least that there is a considerable logical difficulty) for there to be a state of ‘meaning addition by “plus”’ at all. (WRPL, 51–52)

I have given my interpretation of what this ‘considerable logical difficulty’ might be in my (2022) and also in (2024). Briefly, it is a version of the regress of rules argument originally made by Lewis Carroll (1895).

The final speculative reason Kripke favoured non-sceptical primitivism comes from his understanding of the deep logical problem inherent in the sceptical challenge. In my (2022) I argued that there are two important ways to understand this core problem, ‘temporal’ and ‘atemporal.’ Here, my aim is to briefly showcase how this distinction may help illuminate Kripke’s understanding of the challenge by showing that he saw something like the atemporal reading as the only viable one. The key to this interpretation comes from footnote 13 on pages 18–19 in WRPL, where Kripke aims to clear what he perceives to be a potential confusion about the nature of the challenge:

The point (which can be fully understood only after the third section of the present work) can be put this way: If someone who computed ‘+’ as we do for small arguments gave bizarre responses, in the style of ‘quus,’ for larger arguments, and insisted that he was ‘going on the same way as before,’ we would not acknowledge his claim that he was ‘going on in the same way’ as for the small arguments. What we call the ‘right’ response determines what we call ‘going on in the same way.’ (WRPL, 19, footnote)

In her review essay of WRPL, Anscombe (1985: 344) notes that this reading of the problem opposes the way Kripke initially presents it, leading up to page 18. In her reading of Wittgenstein, ‘going on the same way’ is not dependent on what the correct continuation of the series is, unlike in Kripke’s reading. In Anscombe’s interpretation, Wittgenstein did not lay out a sceptical challenge that makes the idea of a fact that could determine the correct response in advance a logical impossibility. Her reason Kripke ends up with the reading that he does is that

Kripke thinks—apparently—that an argument that a stretch of a series can’t tell you the continuation of it is correct enough; and he seems to accept the argument that, since a rule can be reinterpreted ad lib. you cannot simply point like Leibniz to the rule or formula or equation. But he is sure that there is *the* right answer to a sum, though this now can’t depend either on previous examples or on the formula $n + m$ with an interpretation. Hence he is driven, as far as I can make out, to think that the required guarantee resides in what he meant or had the “intention to mean” by the plus symbol—that being the example which he chooses for discussion. He might seize joyfully on Leibniz’s word “notion.” (Anscombe 1985: 348)

This reading of Kripke would explain why he leaned towards non-sceptical primitivism: because he accepted that a finite continuation of a series like the addition function *must* have the correct answers set in advance. This is appropriately called an ‘atemporal’ reading of the sceptical challenge because the correct answer is taken to be independent of the history preceding the current calculation, given one’s present intention. If one’s present intention is to add, then it doesn’t matter what else one has done (or for that matter, will do) with the ‘+’ sign, what other functions may have been followed in the past, for the correct answers to be determined. This is what it means for the right answer to determine whether one is going on the same way as before, as Kripke says in footnote 13. From the context, it’s clear that he thinks this to be the only right way to understand the problem of finitude.

In contrast, in the temporal reading of the problem, the same way of going on does not depend on the correct way (relative to one’s intention) to continue a finite sequence. So, someone who continued the series ‘+2’ by writing ‘1004’ after ‘1000,’ while insisting going on the same way as before, would exhibit

a different understanding—and a weird one. For Wittgenstein straightway compares it to a human being’s *naturally* reacting to a pointing gesture of the hand by looking in the direction from fingertips to wrist. (Anscombe 1985: 344)

Why did Kripke opt for the atemporal understanding of the problem? One reason is that this reading seems like the most natural way to understand the relation between ‘going on the same way’ and the correct way to continue a series like the addition function. Like Kripke says in footnote 13, the addition function is identical with itself as is the quaddition function—indeed, as is everything. So, to say that one goes on the same way as before just is to say that one goes on in the way one has gone on before. But that doesn’t say anything about how one *has* gone on before, i.e., *what* function is identical to itself here. And the identity of the function depends on what the correct answers are. And the correct answers depend on what function one *intends* to be following.

To conclude, based on the line of reasoning above, the reasons Kripke found the non-sceptical primitivist solution appealing are that he (a) saw the atemporal reading of the challenge as the only viable one, (b) rejected the core strategy of Wittgenstein’s sceptical solution, and (c) didn’t see any hope for the other straight strategies to solve the challenge.

THE CAUSAL-HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF REFERENCE AND THE SCEPTICAL CHALLENGE

Recently, Alexander Miller (2023) has argued that there is a profound contradiction between the causal-historical picture of reference and the sceptical challenge. Briefly, his idea is that the causal-historical picture is implicitly a species of the semantic dispositionalist strategy rejected in WRPL. Kusch also (2006: 133–136) has considered the case and concluded with a similar verdict, along with Boghossian (1989: 527).

My claim now is that if the reasoning above about Kripke’s stance on the challenge is broadly correct, then there is a straightforward way in which the causal-historical picture can solve the sceptical challenge. All that is needed is the non-sceptical primitivist view of intentions to mean one thing rather than another.

It follows that, contra Miller, Boghossian, and Kusch, the causal-historical picture as Kripke imagined it need not be interpreted as a species of semantic dispositionalism. To see this, recall first that the principal reason to count the causal-historical picture as a species of dispositionalism is that this allegedly is the only way to solve the indeterminacy problem it faces. Consider the standard example of proper name reference fixing. Why is it that the name ‘Kripke’ refers to Kripke and not to *Kripnam*, where ‘Kripnam’ refers to either Kripke or Putnam after some arbitrary moment in time t^* ? I agree with Miller’s (and Kusch’s) refutations of McGinn’s (and Maddy’s (1984)) attempt(s) to solve the challenge:

[T]he causal theory can exclude this possibility by observing that it is Kripke who lies at the origin of the causal chain leading up to my present use of “Kripke”—I need have had no causal contact with Putnam at all, still less the kind of causal contact that determines reference. (McGinn 1984: 165)

This does not work because, as Miller observes, ‘the sceptic can reply that it is irrelevant that Putnam isn’t the causal origin of uses of “Kripke” since it is nonetheless true that *Kripnam* is at their causal origin’ (Miller 2023: 68).

Miller then proposes that the causal theorist would need to rely on some form of dispositionalism to solve the indeterminacy problem (Miller 2023: 68). However, Kripke does not in NN claim that a disposition to apply a name only to its bearer is a necessary condition to refer with the name. In fact, such a condition would seem to oppose the anti-descriptivist arguments he wields with such clarity. Imagine, for instance, someone who has borrowed the name ‘Kripke’ from someone who refers to Kripke by it, but by happenstance comes to associate the physical appearance of Putnam with the person to whom the name belongs. In a conference with both Kripke and Putnam present, this speaker is not disposed to apply ‘Kripke’ to Kripke, but he is disposed to apply it to

Putnam. Still, it doesn't seem that he refers to Putnam by 'Kripke' because he still intends to use the name to refer to whomever the person whom he borrowed the name referred to with it.

The sceptic might now ask, how about the first person who used the name 'Kripke' to refer to Kripke—surely, they must've had a disposition to use the name only of Kripke. (I'm ignoring the ambiguity of proper names here.) We can safely assume that such a disposition was, in fact, present in the naming. But, crucially, Kripke does not argue that a disposition to recognise the referent *must* be present in every successful reference fixing. Although others have made this suggestion on his behalf (Sterelny 1983; Miller 1992), I don't know of any place where Kripke would have subscribed to it.

Based on these reasons, I find it dubious whether Kripke would have relied on dispositions to solve the various indeterminacy problems that the causal-historical picture faces. But surely there must then be another solution. Indeed, there is, and this is where the connection to WRPL is formed. Kripke's answer to why 'Kripke' does not refer to Kripnam is, I think, that the speaker who originally named Kripke did not have an intention to name Kripnam. They only had the intention to name Kripke as 'Kripke.' The intention alone suffices to exclude the sceptical alternative referent for the name. And the reason the intention can do this is given by the non-sceptical primitivist stance which Kripke found appealing in WRPL. Primitivism in this sense should thus not be understood as a theoretical stance, but as holding onto the naïve or commonsensical view of intentions and naming, which Kripke in WRPL finds dear enough to be preserved from philosophical scepticism.

Note that there is no pretension of an explanation here that the sceptic would find satisfying: as Kripke himself says (in the sceptic's and perhaps Wittgenstein's voice), the primitivist proposal is desperate and mysterious. Yet I believe it is the basis of the proposal which Kripke would have invoked instead of the dispositionalist solutions used by Maddy (1984) and McGinn. Of course, we cannot say what more he would have said about the nature of the baptising intention to support the case. Obviously, the intention cannot be described literally as an intention to name Kripke, for that would be circular. How, then, should it be described? Where WRPL and NN are concerned, we do not know.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to achieve what Kripke expressively said should not be done, i.e., read his original views into WRPL. It gets worse: I also speculated on the reasons he might have for holding the views. That being said, it is hard to deny that Kripke (a) expressed sympathy towards the non-sceptical primitivist solution and (b) found the basic strategy of the sceptical solution unsatisfying. As to the reasons I reconstructively ascribed to him, while these should be handled with reservation, I claim that if right, they would bring some new illumination on the sceptical challenge and how Kripke saw it.

At least the (b)-view seems consistent with what Kripke says in NN in criticism of Quine and Lewis. The second major claim I made was that the same should go for the (a)-view as well. Since Kripke worked on the ideas behind NN and WRPL around the same time of 1962–1964 (WRPL, xi; NN, 3), it is plausible to conjecture that he would have accepted non-sceptical primitivism regarding the role of intentions to solve the problem of determination in both contexts. Of course, more exegetical work is needed to confirm that claim.

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