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Kripke's Second Paragraph of *Philosophical Investigations* 201

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The received view of Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* is that it fails as an interpretation because, *inter alia*, it ignores or overlooks what Wittgenstein has to say in the second paragraph of *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*) 201. It is the concern of the present paper to demonstrate that the paragraph in question is in fact fully accommodated within Kripke's reading, and cannot therefore be reasonably utilised to object to it.

What follows, then, is an exegetical note on Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein. It is not my concern to argue for the veracity of that interpretation, nor to argue against (nor indeed to posit) any further objections to it; rather, again, my aim is simply to demonstrate that the objection which states that Kripke ignores or overlooks the second paragraph of *PI* 201 is erroneous.

In part one I characterise the objection; in part two I explain why it fails; in part three I suggest why commentators might have been motivated to offer it; and in part four I claim that two commentators who have offered it also imply otherwise.

Kripke understands the first paragraph of *PI* 201 as presenting a genuine sceptical problem: the apparently paradoxical situation that whilst we seem to use language meaningfully, there is no fact about us that constitutes our meaning one thing as opposed to another, and consequently the possibility of our actually meaning anything seems to disappear.

In the face of this problem, Kripke sees Wittgenstein as having, in principle, two routes to a solution available to him. On the one hand, he could seek a “straight” solution, which would show the scepticism actually to be unfounded; or alternatively, he might pursue a sceptical solution, taking as its starting point the validity of the sceptical problem, but seeking to establish that the *force* of the problem is radically diminished because the justification that it has shown to be unobtainable is actually unnecessary for rule-following behaviour to take place.

Wittgenstein, Kripke has it, adopts the latter strategy, by replacing a view of language centred on truth conditions with one based “on *assertability conditions* or *justification conditions*,” where these describe the “circumstances [under which we are] allowed to make a given assertion” (Kripke 1982, 74).

Now, numerous commentators have claimed that the second paragraph of *PI* 201 clearly and unequivocally gives the lie to the notion that Wittgenstein subscribed to the scepticism of the first paragraph, and they have charged Kripke with some form of negligence for failing to note that this is the case.

In its most basic form, this objection is made by simply quoting Wittgenstein – his view, the thought goes, being so self-explanatory as to require virtually no interpretation whatsoever. Peter Winch, for example, tells us that

... the passage quoted from 201 of *Philosophical Investigations* with which Kripke starts his exposition of Wittgenstein's "scepticism" is in fact only a preparation for the main point Wittgenstein makes in that Section. Having pointed out that it will be impossible to distinguish accord and disaccord with a rule if we suppose that any course of action can be interpreted as being in accord with it, Wittgenstein *then* goes on to say that this whole argument rests on "*a misunderstanding*" (my [i.e. Winch's] italics). The misunderstanding consists in failure to see that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases". (Winch 1983, 400).

More sophisticated examples of the objection offer their own characterisation of the misunderstanding to which Wittgenstein refers:

There are two things to note about this passage [i.e. the second paragraph of *PI* 201] which give the lie to Kripke's interpretation. First, Wittgenstein makes it clear immediately that the stated paradox arises from a "misunderstanding", i.e. a false presupposition; so he cannot really

be *endorsing* the paradox, as Hume embraces his own sceptical claims about causation. Second, when we ask what the misunderstanding is we are told that it is the mistake of assuming that grasping a rule is placing an *interpretation* upon a sign ... (McGinn 1984, 68).

The objection, then, is this: had Kripke paid due attention to the *whole* of *PI* 201, he would have been forced to concede that his attribution of the sceptical problem to Wittgenstein on the basis of the first paragraph is clearly vitiated by the second.

II

Before I show why it fails, it is, I think, worth highlighting the extraordinary nature of the charge. It really is incredible to suggest that a man like Kripke, clearly no fool by anyone's standards, should simply neglect to read a paragraph adjacent to one on which he has based an entire book. Indeed, I am not convinced that it is actually *possible* for one to read the first paragraph of *PI* 201 without one's eye being drawn to at least the first (crucial) line of the second paragraph. The alternative – that Kripke did read the second paragraph but deliberately chose to ignore it – is to accuse him at best of undertaking his work in a questionable philosophical spirit, and leads one to wonder what kind of personal satisfaction he might be expected to have gained from propagating an interpretation that he knew to be deeply flawed.

None of this, of course, itself constitutes an argument against the objection – indeed, arguments like “x was too intelligent to hold that y; therefore, x did not hold that y” are almost invariably suspect. But it should, I suggest, set alarm bells ringing, and prompt us to consider more carefully whether Kripke does in fact accommodate the second paragraph of *PI* 201 within his interpretation.

Wittgenstein says,

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. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases (*PI* 201).

Now, I would suggest, just as Kripke locates Wittgenstein’s sceptical problem in the first paragraph of *PI* 201, so the sceptical *solution* can be clearly identified in

the second. This contrasts with the received view, which has Wittgenstein offering (in Kripkean terms) a straight solution in the second paragraph. Both of these readings understand the “misunderstanding here” as being the interpretation conception of rule-following, but they differ as to the consequences of its rejection. On the received view, Wittgenstein’s rejection of the conception goes hand-in-hand with his dismissal of the paradox which arises from it: according to this reading, interpretation finishes up having nothing substantive to do with rule-following whatsoever. For Kripke’s Wittgenstein, on the other hand, interpretation is the only means by which we could ever secure epistemic access to genuinely normative rules, so its failure constitutes rejection not of the paradox, but instead of the very possibility of genuine rule-following. Crucially, however, Kripke’s Wittgenstein maintains that we can rescue the meaningfulness of “rule-following” behaviour by giving an account in terms of assertability or justification conditions, and it is *this* account that Wittgenstein is supposed to be suggesting when he says “that there is a way of grasping a rule ... which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases”.

III

Having seen that the second paragraph of *PI* 201 can be fully accommodated within Kripke’s interpretation, the natural question to ask is why so many commentators have been so ready to claim that he either ignores or overlooks it. The answer can be found, I believe, in the method and style of Kripke’s

exposition. At the very beginning of the non-introductory sections of the book, Kripke quotes from the first paragraph of *PI* 201, and immediately declares that he intends to develop the paradox mentioned there. He goes on to explicitly characterise this paradox as a problem for philosophy insofar as it constitutes a new kind of scepticism. The reader is therefore left in no doubt that Kripke takes himself, in developing the paradox, to be expounding a sceptical problem that is identified by Wittgenstein in the first paragraph of *PI* 201.

In sharp contrast to this, whilst Kripke does make clear that he finds the sceptical solution in Wittgenstein's text, he does not provide an explicit reference for it. Importantly, however, before he presents the solution to us, Kripke sums up the sceptical problem as follows.

The sceptical argument, then, remains unanswered. There 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. This is what Wittgenstein said in 202 (Kripke 1982, 55).

Here Kripke seems to be suggesting that *PI* 202 itself sums up, and therefore concludes, the sceptical problem; and given this, one is inclined to view him as suggesting that the sceptical solution is rooted in Wittgenstein's text sometime *after* *PI* 202. In other words, Kripke's exposition of the sceptical problem seems

to preclude his locating its solution in the second paragraph of *PI* 201. I suspect that the commentators under discussion are motivated to their criticism by something like this thought. However, I believe that such a view erroneously assumes that there ought to be a correlation between the structure of Wittgenstein's text and the structure of Kripke's account of it. When Kripke says that the sceptical argument remains unanswered, his claim is meant within the context of his own exposition. In other words, he is making the point that none of the responses to the sceptical problem which *he* has considered thus far have been satisfactory; the claim is not that the problem remains unanswered within *Wittgenstein's* text up to and including *PI* 202. Simultaneously, however, Kripke is paving the way for his later claim that Wittgenstein's solution is *sceptical*, insofar as it does not so much *answer* the sceptical argument as accept it and seek to diffuse its impact. In short, I think that Kripke is selective in his presentation of *PI* 201 (and indeed, of *PI* 202) for stylistic reasons, and not as a result of ignorance or error.

This view of Kripke's work is supported, it seems to me, by the following passage.

Sections 138-242 deal with the sceptical problem and its solution. These sections – the central sections of *Philosophical Investigations* – have been the primary concern of this essay. We have not yet looked at the solution of the problem, but the astute reader will already have guessed that Wittgenstein finds a useful role in our lives for a “language game” that

licenses, under certain conditions, assertions that someone “means such-and-such” and that his present application of a word “accords” with what he “meant” in the past. It turns out that this role, and these conditions, involve reference to a community. They are inapplicable to a single person considered in isolation. Thus, as we have said, Wittgenstein rejects “private language” as early as 202 (Kripke 1982, 79).

The claim here is that Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of private language because his sceptical solution involves reference to a community. And given that (for Kripke) he rejects private language as early as *PI* 202, the implication is that the sceptical solution (in at least a basic form) is made available prior to *PI* 202 – i.e. in the latter part of *PI* 201.

IV

Interestingly, two commentators who make the objection under consideration also seem to imply that Kripke does indeed accommodate the second paragraph of *PI* 201 within his interpretation. The first of these is David G. Stern, who tells us that

Kripke contends that this [i.e. his] reading is strongly supported by the fact that the summary *and resolution* of the paradox in section 201 is followed by section 202 ... [my emphasis] (Stern 1995, 177).

This looks very much like the suggestion that, for Kripke, the sceptical problem *and solution* are to be found in *PI* 201; and given that the whole of the first paragraph of *PI* 201 is taken up with the sceptical problem, we are entitled to read Stern as implying that the second paragraph (the “resolution”) is dealt with by Kripke’s interpretation. Nonetheless, Stern later goes on to claim that

... despite the fact that Kripke makes so much of the first paragraph of section 201, where Wittgenstein sums up “our paradox” and his initial reply to it, he never quotes or even refers to the second paragraph, where Wittgenstein replies that the paradox is due to a mistaken conception of understanding as a matter of “interpreting,” providing explanations where one substitutes one expression of a rule for another (Stern 1995, 178).

Similarly, in his 1984 paper “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” John McDowell says that “the paradox of *PI* 201 ... can be attributed to Wittgenstein only at the cost of ignoring, like Kripke, that section’s second paragraph” (p. 357). But in the later paper “Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” McDowell appears to alter his position, suggesting that there is a reading of Wittgenstein according to which

...the way to follow Wittgenstein’s instruction to think of “a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*” is to reconceive what

sort of fact or state of affairs someone's grasping a rule is. Instead of conceiving it as a state of affairs involving her having something in mind, we should conceive it as a state of affairs involving her occupying a position in a community (McDowell 1992, 45).

On this view, McDowell suggests, Kripke's interpretation is erroneous simply because he fails to characterise an agent's rule-following as *consisting in* her social situation. Kripke's Wittgenstein, recall, claims that there are no facts about rule-following, and this leads him to the radically sceptical conclusion that there can *be no* rule-following. His proposed solution is supposed to admit of such scepticism, but provide an account of rule-following regardless by locating justified attribution of it within the behaviour of a community. However, McDowell claims, there seems to be no *substantive* difference between an account of rule-following that locates the facts of the matter in the behaviour of a community, thereby providing a "straight" solution, and another that finds only justified attribution there. And given this, McDowell has to be implying, in the passage above, that Kripke *is* attempting to follow Wittgenstein's thoughts about "a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*."

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