

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 8

1. Perhaps the most influential and important work in the entire secondary literature on Wittgenstein is Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke himself isn't consciously trying to give a faithful interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations: instead he is describing a train of thought that was prompted in him by the reading of Wittgenstein. Still, it will be worthwhile to look at Kripke's reading: partly because it brings out with unusual vividness one strand in Wittgenstein's argument, and partly because it will be instructive to see how the real Wittgenstein departs from Kripke's image of him.
2. Consider therefore Kripke's sceptic: a bizarre character who introduces you to the function *quus* as follows. There is some pair of numbers higher than any that you have added: we can suppose without any harm that 57 and 65 form such a pair. Then  $x \text{ quus } y$ , written  $x * y$ , is a function that takes  $x + y$  as its value if  $x$  and  $y$  are both below 57. Otherwise it takes the value 5. Now the sceptic raises the following challenge. Look back at all of your past uses of the '+' sign: include if you like everything that was said to you in training and also the introspectible contents of your mind. What *fact* is there in this, the sceptic asks, in virtue of which you meant *plus rather than quus* by the '+' sign? That is the 'sceptical challenge'.
3. Chapter 2 of Kripke's book is a slightly less rich but also more focused version of *PI* 138-201. He goes through a number of different answers to the sceptical. To give just two examples: (i) We cannot say that you meant plus in virtue of the fact that you associated '+' with a certain verbally expressed rule: for that rule too is open to reinterpretation. (ii) We can't say that you meant plus in virtue of some past disposition: for that only settles the facts about what you would in fact have done and not the facts about whether it would have been in accordance with what you then meant.
4. Kripke's conclusion is that there is no fact about what you then meant by '+'. And this easily generalizes: there are never any facts about what anybody means by any word. This is the 'sceptical paradox'; and Kripke sees *PI* 201a as a concise statement of it. His Wittgenstein *accepts* the paradox. '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' (K 54).
5. But we have already seen that for Wittgenstein it is perfectly all right to say things like 'I meant addition by "plus" all along' (*PI* 195). Kripke accommodates this by proposing what he calls (following Hume) a sceptical solution to the sceptical paradox. The solution is sceptical because it accepts the paradox; it is a solution because it makes a place for talk of meaning, as follows. Kripke's Wittgenstein rejects the truth-conditional reading of meaning ascriptions in favour of an *assertibility*-conditions analysis (K 73, cf. *PI* 180). When we say that you mean such-and-such by so and so we are not even attempting to describe any facts; but what we say is *assertable* just in case your use of (say) 'plus' has agreed with mine hitherto (K 91). But my

license to make such an assertion will expire if you go on to use ‘plus’ in a deviant way (K 92-3). And we have seen that there is nothing in either your past training, your past utterances, or the contents of your mind that will prevent this (*PI* 234-5; cf. M. Burnyeat ‘Wittgenstein and Augustine *de Magistro*’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 1987).

6. If that is the role that meaning ascriptions play in our lives then there is no place for such ascriptions except in a community. That, Kripke says, is the conclusion of Wittgenstein’s private language argument: the argument is essentially over by *PI* 202 and the later discussions of it (e.g. *PI* 258, 265) are simply elaborations or special cases of the basic point that there is no idiolectic basis for meaning ascriptions (K 3).
7. There are two reasons for doubting that this is really what Wittgenstein can have meant. The first is to do with his theory of truth. According to Wittgenstein (see lecture 5 no. 2) the aptness or otherwise of a statement for truth-value carries no metaphysical weight; and the same is presumably true about ‘factuality’ (it would have been entirely in character for him to say that ‘It is a fact that  $p = p$ ’; cf. *PI* 136). Hence if Wittgenstein really thinks that it’s all right to say ‘I meant addition then’, he must also agree to ‘It’s a *fact* that I meant addition then’. But then he cannot be represented as accepting the sceptical *denial* of just this claim. (Kripke is aware of this point. His response is that *his* ‘Wittgenstein’ does not share the quietism of the real one: K 86.)
8. But the more important reason is that Kripke’s Wittgenstein would not have written the paragraph that *immediately follows* the statement of the sceptical paradox (*PI* 201b) which begins: ‘It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here...’ What this suggests is that Wittgenstein does not accept the sceptical solution. But this brings us back to the difficulty at the end of the lecture (lecture 7 no. 11): how *can* he make room for anything recognizable as meaning?
9. McDowell’s paper cites *PI* 201b as evidence against Kripke’s reading (M 331) and goes on to answer the next question. The natural response to the positive suggestion in *PI* 201b is to say: ‘But surely all we have here is brute behaviour!—How can *that* add up to meaning?’ (cf. the discussion of strict finitism at M 353-4). McDowell clearly has some sympathy with the second part of this protest (M 350) but not with the first. Brute behaviour—vocalizations and feelings of constraint or freedom—is *not* all that we have here.
10. For you *can* say something and mean it; and what makes it true that you can mean it is that you have been trained in what McDowell calls a communal practice or *custom*. Acting within a community *is* what it is for your linguistic activity to owe allegiance to some pre-existing standard; and that is what makes an utterance into a genuinely meaningful judgment (and not the hidden goings-on in an inner or mental realm): M 352. In favour of this interpretation McDowell cites *PI* 208-10. There Wittgenstein appears to say that you don’t *guess* the next step in the sequence and even (perhaps) that your knowledge

really *does* reach beyond any of the particular instances. But how can this be true? It can be true of you *if* your training, and your utterances, take place in the right context (M 354).

11. Again, McDowell thinks that it is true that one can grasp the whole meaning of a word 'in a flash': but he gives that passage a third-personal reading at odds with the one I suggested in an earlier lecture (lecture 5 no. 5; see also lecture 6 no. 9). For McDowell Wittgenstein is saying (and this is clearest at *PI* 151) that you can see *somebody else's* meaning in a flash: and he really thinks that it is true too (M 354-5).
12. But how can this be: don't we see the *same* behaviour whether it takes place in a communal context or any other? No, says McDowell: we can really be said to experience what somebody means if we belong to the same community as him. 'Shared membership in a linguistic community... equips us to make our minds available to one another, by confronting one another with a different exterior from that which we present to outsiders' (M 350). It is here that McDowell makes contact with Hegel; here too that he reaches a polar opposition to Quine.