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Wittgenstein and the “Skeptical Paradoxes”

Saul Kripke (1982) reads out of Wittgenstein’s later writings two skeptical paradoxes and a skeptical solution of each of them. A skeptical solution consists in “conceding that the sceptic’s negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because—contrary appearances notwithstanding—it need not require the justification the sceptic has shown to be untenable” (p. 66). One paradox, discussed in chapters 1 and 2, is concerned with rule following, although Kripke notes on page 7 that it would apply equally well to all meaningful uses of language. The other paradox, discussed in the Postscript, is concerned with the ascription of mental states.

I shall argue here that Wittgenstein intended no skeptical paradoxes or skeptical solutions; rather, he was attempting, successfully in my opinion, to clarify confusions which underlie the appearance of paradox.

I shall refer only to the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* (PI). There was sufficient evolution of his view from 1929 up to the writing of PI that it would be a mistake to interpret PI uncritically in the light of earlier writings (which, moreover, Wittgenstein did not choose to publish).¹ However, on the topics under discussion here, there is a clear doctrine in PI which does not essentially changed in subsequent writings, and I wish to consider only this. Unless otherwise stated, page references will be to Kripke’s book and numbered section references to PI.

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Kripke begins his discussion of the paradox concerning rule following with a quote from PI, section 201:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with the rule.

He writes that this is the paradox that he will develop (p. 7). The skeptical paradox, thus developed, is summed up on page 21:

When I respond in one way rather than another to such a problem as “ $68 + 57$ ”, I can have no justification for one response rather than another. . . . there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning plus [by “plus”] and my meaning quus. Indeed, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by “plus” (which determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all.

I don’t think that this is a correct development of the paradox of section 201. Moreover, I believe that it is at best a misleading formulation of Wittgenstein’s view. In whatever sense it is true or Wittgenstein would hold it to be true, it is not paradoxical. The appearance of paradox arises from the failure to sort out a number of different ideas: my *understanding* of a rule or, in general, expression; the *meaning* of the expression; what *I mean* by the expression; and the source of *warrant* for the expression (i.e., what *justifies* its utterance).

Note that in section 201 Wittgenstein says that this *was* our paradox. He has already resolved it in section 198, and he repeats the resolution in the paragraph of section 201 following the above quote. He explains that the paradox arises from thinking that understanding a rule consists of having an interpretation of it, since no interpretation is forced on the rule more than diverse other interpretations. The rule does not determine any course of action because it does not determine any one interpretation of it. But he notes that, in any case, we can see that the view of understanding a rule as having an interpretation is wrong from the circumstance that “every interpretation, together with what is being interpreted, hangs in the air” (section 198). In other words, whatever the interpretation is, we can ask for an interpretation of *it* as well. He concludes in section 201 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.”

So the particular paradox to which Wittgenstein refers is resolved by not taking understanding to consist ultimately of having an interpretation. It is true that another paradox would arise if there were no other way to account for understanding, but the last quoted passage from section 201 suggests that Wittgenstein does not believe this to be the case. We shall see that, in fact, he has an entirely satisfactory conception of understanding a rule. For the moment I want only to point out that the sole purpose of this “paradox” is to conclude that, ultimately, understanding is not having an interpretation. Of course, we may come to understand one expression, for example, one in German, by having an interpretation of it, for example, in English. But at the end of the line there must be a kind of understanding that cannot be described as having an interpretation.

At the end of section 201, an interpretation is defined as the “substitution of one expression of the rule for another.” But we should understand

“expression of the rule” fairly broadly here. For Wittgenstein’s paradox obtains when we include as interpretations not only what we would regard as explicit and well-defined statements of the rule but also such things as formulas, finite lists of instances of the rule, pictures, and mental images. For all these things are themselves capable of different interpretations.

There is, however, one other candidate for understanding that Wittgenstein considers and rejects and that does not fall under the description of understanding as having an interpretation. This is the idea that understanding is a state of mind, which he discusses, for example, at section 149. He says that we are thinking here of the “state of a mental apparatus (perhaps of the brain) by means of which we explain the *manifestations* of that knowledge [of the ABC].” His argument against this idea is that, if we accept it, then we have two criteria for understanding: that the apparatus is actually in the required state, and that it manifests the required behavior. The second of these criteria corresponds to his view that understanding a rule is exhibited in obeying it or going against it. Thus, his argument in section 149 is that, by identifying understanding with a state of mind, we are adding another criterion to the proper one, which concerns how we actually behave. I will return to this argument. But for the moment I wish only to point out that it is quite different from his argument against understanding as having an interpretation. This is clear from the fact that the paradox of section 201 does not in the least argue against the possibility that there might be, for example, a quite reasonable computer model of the brain. His point in section 149 is only that understanding cannot correctly be *identified* with a state of the computer, not that it couldn’t be *explained* in such terms.

Understanding the rule as having an interpretation (in the broad sense mentioned above) and understanding the rule as being in a certain mental state: these seem to me to be the principle views of understanding that Wittgenstein, on different grounds, is arguing against. But his discussion of understanding is by no means all negative. I have already shown that in section 201 he takes it to be exhibited in what we do. In section 150 he relates it to mastery of a technique. In section 180 he says that we judge whether the words “now I can go on” are rightly employed by what a speaker goes on to do. And at section 199 he says that to understand a sentence is to understand a language and that to understand a language is to be master of a technique.

So, Wittgenstein is not at all arguing that we do not have something that can rightly be called “understanding of the rule,” and so there is for him no real paradox, once we have given up the wrong view of what understanding is. Understanding the rule is being master of a technique. Now this is a *dispositional* notion. But there is a difficulty in using the term “disposition,” because Wittgenstein and Kripke use it in a sense that does not seem to me to be the proper sense, and in any case, they do not use it in the sense in which I want to use it. For one should distinguish between what I shall call the *disposition* and the possible underlying state

and causal mechanism (governing the evolution of the states) in terms of which we may explain in the disposition. Thus, a machine might be disposed to print out 0, 0, 0, . . . some number of times, and we can account for this in terms of the initial state of the machine and the laws governing the evolution of its states. But we should not confuse these two things, for, otherwise, we would have two criteria for the disposition: what the machine actually does and its internal structure. This seems to me the point of section 149—though, as I have noted, Wittgenstein uses the term “disposition” there to refer to the state.

Thus, to understand a rule is to have a certain disposition, and the criterion for having that disposition lies in what we do. This seems to me right—it is in any case the way we test students in school for their understanding of the rule of addition, for example. (Note that “understanding addition” may have a wider meaning than simply understanding the rule of addition. E.g., we might require that the student be able to apply mathematical induction to derive general laws involving sums. But that, too, is a question of mastery of a technique, only a more comprehensive one.) Of course, in this sense, there is no precise boundary between understanding the rule and not understanding it. In the first place, there is no sharp boundary between when the student is following the rule of addition and when he is working by rote, from memory, following another rule which coincides with the given one sufficiently far, and so on. (See the discussion of reading in section 156ff.) Also, there is no sharp boundary between when the student fails to understand and when he is simply making slips (section 143). Moreover, there can be no “complete” test, since there are infinitely many numbers to sum.

Thus, there are no precise “truth conditions” for the proposition “*X* understands the rule of *R*.” But neither are there for the proposition “The coin has half a chance of turning up heads” or “The book is red” or even “The post is 3 feet tall.” Each, in its way, lacks a precise boundary of truth. We should not on that account consider ourselves skeptics about chance, color, or size. There is perhaps a tendency to read Wittgenstein’s observations concerning the lack of precise boundaries in the case of terms such as “understanding” as undermining the idea that we do understand the rules. But, in fact, what he is doing is counteracting a view that such terms have *more* precise boundaries than terms for color, size, and so on, have.

Of course, I am not claiming here that Wittgenstein has a *theory* of meaning or that, in saying that understanding is dispositional, I am giving a complete key to the grammar of the term “understanding.” For example, whether or not we count what the student does as evidence for his understanding the rule will depend on the circumstances. “[T]he game with these words . . . is more involved . . . than we are tempted to think” (section 182). It was not Wittgenstein’s intention to present a theory of understanding or meaning, but rather to show that certain “theories” or pictures of how language works, which lead to philosophical problems such

as the skeptical problems we are discussing here, cannot be coherently applied. Nor, in spite of his occasional expressions of an antiscientific bias and of skepticism (e.g., in *Zettel* (Wittgenstein, 1970), section 608), does it seem to me that his explicit position is contrary to the possibility of a science of language and language competence based on a theory of the mind or of the brain and nervous system. His remark on this is the eminently just: “Now, ask yourself: what do you *know* of such things?” (section 158). One might even find an explanatory model of understanding rules in terms of brain states (just as we have of the machine printing out zeros). But, of course, the term “understanding” as we now use it would have no place in this model, any more than the notion of a physical object as we normally use it has a place in our explanatory models of the motion of physical objects. And this would be so too of our ordinary notions of thinking, meaning, perceiving, and so forth. The very imprecision of these notions precludes their analysis in a precise theory.

I conclude from this discussion that Wittgenstein intends no skeptical paradox in section 201. He is arguing *for* a particular and, to my mind, correct conception of understanding by arguing against another which is ultimately incomprehensible, though it still persists in the form of taking understanding to mean “knowing truth conditions” (where this “knowing” is not taken to be a competence).

2

What, then, of Kripke’s skeptical paradox? The first thing to note is that it concerns not the notion of understanding a rule, which is what Wittgenstein was discussing in section 201, but the notion of ‘meaning’ some function or other by “plus.” Of course, understanding, on Wittgenstein’s view, presupposes meaning in one sense: understanding is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule,” and so on, and one can obey a rule “only insofar as there exists a regular use of [it], a custom” (section 198). Thus, my understanding of the rule presupposes that it has a regular use—a meaning. Indeed, it is a rule only insofar as there is a regular use of it. But, in any case, this concerns the meaning of the expression *in our language* and not the notion of *my meaning* when I use the expression.

However, Kripke’s formulation of the “skeptical paradox” in terms of “my meaning” functions does not seem entirely essential. At least part of his point can be made without recourse to that notion of meaning. The last sentence of the quote (opening of section 1 of this chapter) and, in particular, the phrase in parentheses indicates that we can make his point in this way: no fact about me determines my responses in new cases. And, as the first sentence of the quote, as well as Kripke’s discussion (pp. 22–37) of dispositional accounts of meaning (*not*, one should note, dispositional accounts of *understanding*), indicate, “determines” here means “justifies” or “warrants.” For example, on page 24 he writes: “So it seems that a

dispositional account misconceives the sceptic’s problem—to find a past fact that *justifies* my present response.” Thus, it seems reasonable to formulate Kripke’s paradox in this way:

No fact about me warrants my response “ $68 + 57 = 125$ ” (nor, for that matter, would invalidate my response “ $68 + 57 = 5$ ”).

Properly understood, this formulation seems to me both true and faithful to Wittgenstein’s views. I say “properly understood” because it is a fact about me that I speak English and “ $68 + 57 = 125$ ” is a true English sentence, and so one might, in this sense, say that my response is warranted by a fact about me. But the kind of fact that Kripke has in mind includes such things as having an interpretation (in the extended sense mentioned above), being in a certain mental state, or having a certain disposition in my sense. Strictly speaking, Kripke does not have this kind of fact in mind because his notion of disposition is Wittgenstein’s, not mine. But his argument that my having a disposition to assert *A* is not a warrant for *A* is as valid for my notion of disposition as for his. It is, of course, a consequence of this discussion that my understanding of the rule does not warrant my correct application of it. It is indeed a fact about me that I understand it: that means no more than that I understand it. But my understanding consists in having a certain disposition, and that does not warrant my applications of the rule.

The notion of warrant for my response *A*, as opposed to the notion of warrant for *A* itself, seems to be a misleading notion which has two sources. One is that I may say one thing *A* and mean something else, *B*—as when I misname something. There is a sense in which we might say that what I meant is correct, even though, given the conventional meaning of the words, what I said is false. But the sense in which my response is warranted in this case is that *B* is warranted, which is not warrant for a response, but warrant for a sentence. Of course, one may ask in this connection whether it is a “fact about me” that I meant *B* when I said *A*. But the answer seems clearly to be that it is and that it consists in my being disposed in certain ways. For example, normally in the given circumstances I would have said *B*, or, if someone pointed out to me my slip or my misuse of conventional words, I would accept the correction, and so forth. But, again, this fact about me, that I meant *B* when I asserted *A*, is a warrant for my assertion only in a derivative sense that depends on *B*’s being warranted.

The other source of the notion of warrant for my response is perhaps contained in Kripke’s remark (pp. 21-22): “Even now as I write, I feel confident that there is something in my mind—the meaning that I attach to the ‘plus’ sign—that *instructs* me what I ought to do in all future cases.” Thus, to the extent that I follow the instructions, my response is warranted. This perhaps appears more plausible in the case of following the rule of addition than it would in cases of assertions about the external world. But we know that, even in the arithmetic case, our internal “instructions” are

not an infallible guide to truth. We may have every sense of doing the right thing and yet end up, in retrospect, realizing that what we have done is nonsense. Moreover, we frequently compute without any consciousness at all of what we are going, and it is only in retrospect that we have the sense of having been instructed. Is there to be a different warrant for our response in such cases? Of course, there is something in me, my linguistic competence and very likely an underlying causal mechanism, which determines what I will do in future cases, given that I am engaged in what we call following the rule. I also have another level of competence, namely, to judge of something whether or not it is in accordance with the rule and so to judge such things as whether I *ought* to assert *A*. But the statement that I ought to assert *A*, like the statement *A* itself, is not warranted by my dispositions or my mental state or my feelings. There may indeed be something in my mind which determines, in a causal sense, what I say on a given occasion, but it doesn't determine that what I say is correct.

So maybe some fact about me does warrant my response *A*. But this would be in the sense that I really meant *B* (which is a fact about me) and *B* is warranted. But that nothing about me warrants *B* is scarcely a paradox. The air of paradox is created when we hold that the meaning of a sentence must be the meaning conferred on it by some fact about us when we utter it. *That* is when we seem to be faced with the "incredible conclusion" that "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air" (p. 22). For, if some fact about me determines its meaning, then it can hardly be independent of me that it is true. But it does not seem a reasonable view, and certainly Wittgenstein does not hold it (e.g., section 358), that the meaning of an expression is the meaning conferred on it by something about us when we utter it. It seems to me that Wittgenstein is correct in holding that, when we speak about the meaning of an expression, we must ultimately be speaking about the role that it plays in our language.²

Thus, to the extent that Kripke intends either to be formulating a paradox or to be ascribing this intention to Wittgenstein, I think that he is mistaken. There is nothing paradoxical about the fact that nothing about me on the occasion that I utter *A* determines whether or not *A* is true or anything else about the meaning of *A*. My linguistic competence, including my understanding of rules, is indeed a fact about me: it consists in the fact that I am disposed to use and react, linguistically and otherwise, to expressions in more or less suitable ways. One might say that it consists in the fact that I am disposed to *conform* to the meanings of the expressions. But it doesn't determine these meanings.

3

On page 86 Kripke writes:

Wittgenstein's sceptical solution [of the skeptical paradox] concedes the sceptic that no "truth conditions" or "corresponding

facts" in the world exist that make a statement like "Jones, like many of us, means addition by '+' " true. Rather we should look at how such assertions are used.

Let "A" be any sentence. "A" is true just in case A, and presumably in that case corresponding "truth conditions" exist. And I perhaps can, but I really ought not to, express A by saying that there exists a "corresponding fact." What is this fact? It is the fact that A; and the fact that A is just that A. There is nothing wrong with using the term "fact," and sometimes it is very natural. But to assert, on the one hand, *that A* or *that "A"* is true and, on the other, that there is no fact in the world that A, is just to take the word "fact" on holiday. I find no evidence that Wittgenstein did or would use the word "fact" in this way. Since it is also unlikely that he believed that we are never warranted in saying of someone that he means addition by "+," it follows that Kripke's concession on his behalf is unjustified.

Thus, that Jones means addition by "+" is a fact about the world and, indeed, is a fact about Jones. But this fact is not warrant for what he says. Rather, it is what he says that is a criterion for the fact that he means addition by "+."

One can have no quarrel with Kripke's "sceptical solution," namely, that "we should look at how such assertions are used." But this is not a skeptical solution of a skeptical problem, but a special consequence of a general view of language that Wittgenstein begins developing at the very beginning of PI. Expressions *are* expressions only in virtue of being part of a language, and any question about what they mean can be answered only by reference to the role they play in that language.

One may nevertheless feel that the problem that Kripke poses is not resolved simply by noting that the real locus of meaning and warrant is in the language we speak. For what is that language other than what is determined by our common dispositions to use and react to symbols? But, if my disposition is limited by the complexity of what symbols I can process, then the same is true of the finite community of people who share my language. So how can it be that our language determines that by "+" we mean plus and not quus? The answer is, of course, that our language does not determine any such thing, and it is not clear what it would mean for it to do so. It is *in* our language that expressions mean this or that. The statement that "+" means plus is a statement in English which correctly describes the meaning of a certain symbol, "+". That there is just one numerical function that satisfies the definition of + and that it is not the function quus, defined on page 9, is a theorem of mathematics, not a statement whose warrant consists of what our actual practice, individually or collectively, will discriminate.

The picture that seems to me to be behind Kripke's problem in this form is of a creature ET, who has the same language that we have but doesn't know it initially. He also has complete information about our dispositions, about what we would do under various conditions. ET has progressed a

long way toward correctly translating our language, and in particular he knows that “+” denotes a numerical function. But he doesn’t know which one, because of the finitude of our common disposition. Now we abandon ET and ‘go domestic.’ We step outside our language and ask how *we* can determine what we mean by “+” on the basis of our common dispositions. But this doesn’t make sense: ET’s problem was one of *translation*, from our language to his. We know that “+” means plus in our languages, that is, that “+” and “plus” are synonyms. (‘Going domestic’ is a method for turning legitimate questions about methodology of building translation manuals into philosophical nonsense.)

4

Before turning to Kripke’s skeptical paradox about ascribing states of mind to others, let me remark on a disagreement I have with his understanding of the “private language argument.” He writes that an individual *considered in isolation* cannot be said to be following a rule (110). I do not find this in PI, nor does it follow from Wittgenstein’s point of view. What does follow is that, to follow a rule, one must have a language, and to have a language is to have certain dispositions to use and react to symbols (i.e., to things that function as symbols in the language). A language is, to be sure, the language of a community, that is, a community of like-disposed people. (This is in fact too restrictive if we take account of the Slab language of section 2, since the builder’s and the assistant’s roles in the language game are not symmetrical, and so they need not have the same dispositions. But we can ignore this complication.) But there is nothing in PI or in good sense that excludes the community from being a “community of one” (though good sense might dictate that we not use this term). We can certainly conceive of someone growing up in isolation and developing a primitive language, for example, to keep records. The sense of private language that Wittgenstein is rejecting does not seem to me to apply to this case. Rather, it applies to the case of one act or of one grunt or mark, in isolation from an existing language, counting as a linguistic act or a symbol, respectively. This is the point of the “E” game of section 258, which I discuss below and which Wittgenstein, at section 259, indicates is an instance of what he means by a private language. It is also the point of section 199, where he asks, clearly intending a negative answer: “Is what we call ‘obeying a rule’ something that it would be possible for only *one* person to do, and to do only *once* in his life?” The “only once in his life” is crucial here.³ Note that the argument at section 202 that one cannot obey a rule “privately” is that, otherwise, to think that one is obeying the rule would be the same thing as obeying it.⁴ This is an argument not against a linguistic community of one, but rather against the idea that an act can be a linguistic act without the background of a language. In the linguistic community of one, the one could make mistakes on occasion.

5

Let me turn now to the skeptical problem and skeptical solution concerning the ascription of mental states to others which is contained in Kripke’s postscript, “Wittgenstein and Other Minds.” One version of the skeptical problem and skeptical solution is this:

[I]t seems impossible to imagine the mental life of others on the model of our own. It is, therefore, meaningless to ascribe sensations to others, at least in the sense that we ascribe them to ourselves. (p. 133)

Let us abandon the attempt to ask what a ‘self’ is, and the like; and let us *look*, instead, at the actual *role* ascriptions of mental states to others play in our lives. (p. 134)

It is true that Wittgenstein points to difficulties in imagining the mental life of others on the model of our own (e.g., PI section 302). But he is not questioning that we can imagine this in *some* sense, and Kripke’s point that it would be hard to distinguish this case from imagining ducks that are not in Central Park on the model of those which are (p. 116) is not relevant. Wittgenstein’s point is more specific: it is aimed at those who would account for the possibility of discourse about other minds—other people’s sensations, feelings, thoughts, and so forth—in terms of such imagining. My ability to speak meaningfully about another person’s pain cannot be explained by my imagining his pain on the model of my own. How would such imagining work? That is Wittgenstein’s challenge, and the discussion of identity criteria for sensations, cited by Kripke, is part of Wittgenstein’s argument that the notion of imagining *in this role* is empty.

But Wittgenstein’s point goes further. How can *I* imagine *my present* pain, and so on, on the model of *my past* ones? He is questioning the picture that I am supposed to have learned in the past to speak of my sensations by having them and giving them names, and now I speak about my present pains, and so forth, on that basis. This is the point of the “E” game in section 258. I “baptize” my sensation by writing “E” in my calendar when I first have it. But, when I have “it” again, how does the prior baptism justify my writing “E” again in my calendar? What shows that it is the same sensation? And what can I do with “E”? For example, I cannot call E a pain unless I already understand the term “pain.” And so on.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of sensation language is, in my opinion, closely allied to his discussion in sections 1–32 of the ‘Augustinian’ view of language. In both cases, he is arguing against a picture of language to the effect that learning a language consists in learning to put names to things—in the earlier case, to sensible objects and their properties and, in the later case, to sensations and their properties. Just as, in his discussion of pointing, he argues that naming can take place only in the context of a language,

so he is arguing the same point (e.g., at section 257) in connection with baptizing pains, and so forth.

Thus, I don't think that Wittgenstein is making an essentially new point in connection with sensation and language. He is arguing in a new context for an old point, namely, the inadequacy of the "Augustinian" view of language. In particular, it is not clear to me in what sense he is calling on us to "abandon the attempt to ask what a 'self' is, and the like." It *is* certainly so that he calls on us to "*look . . . at the actual role ascriptions of mental states play in our lives,*" but this does not distinguish such ascriptions from any other kind of expressions, when we are asking what these expressions mean. It certainly does not mean that there are no such things as other minds, other people's pains, and so on. For example, when he says that pains are not somethings, but not nothings either (section 304), he is referring to their beetle-in-the-box character (section 293) as far as our *expression* of them is concerned. "[I]f we construe that grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant." But Wittgenstein makes a clear distinction between *expressions* of sensations and *ascriptions* of them. He is not denying that the sentence "He has a pain" refers to pains any more than he would deny that the sentence "There is a chair in the room" refers to chairs. My pain is not a "something" only in the sense that it does not play the same kind of role in our discussion of my pain (which I *have* and you perceive the expression of) that the chair (which we both perceive) plays in our discussion of the chair.

6

Kripke gives a second formulation of the skeptical paradox:

Here the paradox is solipsism: the very notion that there might be minds other than my own, with their own sensations and thought, appears to make no sense (p. 141).

and the skeptical solution:

[W]hen people actually use expressions attributing sensations to others they do not really mean to make any assertion whose intelligibility is undermined by the sceptic (solipsist). (pp. 141–142)

Thus, according to Kripke, Wittgenstein is conceding solipsism. But look at what Wittgenstein says about solipsism at section 402:

[W]hen. . . we disapprove of the expression of ordinary language . . . we have got a picture in our heads which conflicts with the picture of our ordinary way of speaking. In consequence we are tempted to say that our way of speaking does not describe

the facts as they really are. . . . As if the form of expression were saying something false even when the proposition *faute de mieux* asserted something true.

For *this* is what disputes between Idealists, Solipsists and Realists look like. The one party attack the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement, the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognizable by every reasonable human being.

Now this is hardly conceding solipsism. Kripke is certainly right that Wittgenstein is criticizing the Realist here, too (p. 142). But the Realist he is criticizing is one who defends our form of expression as though he were stating a fact, just as the Solipsist attacks that “statement of fact.” In both cases, there is the presumption that there are “facts” which transcend the language in which we express them and which adjudicate the correctness of our forms of expression.

But there is another sense of ‘realism,’ which finds its expression in section 10:

Now what to the words of this language signify?—What is supposed to show what they signify, if not the kind of use that they have?

I think that this is one of the most important passages in PI and that it is a refinement of Frege’s context principle (Frege 1884, section 60). That a word ‘*X*’ is a name is shown by the role it plays in our language. “What does it name?” is a question asked in our language and can be answered only there: “The word ‘*X*’ names *X*”—or something equivalent, possibly involving gestures such as pointing in the case of sensible objects. Terms referring to sensible objects and sensations do play the role of names in our language. And the assertions that sensible objects and sensations exist are unassailable—as long as we remember that these are assertions *in* our language and do not think of them as somehow mysteriously transcending our language and serving as justification for our normal form of expression.

Thus, the solipsist’s argument depends on just the picture of language that Wittgenstein is arguing, correctly I think, has no coherent application. What is being said when one denies the existence of other minds, of others’ pain, or of tables and chairs, or of numbers?

7

One may be inclined to doubt my “Fregean” reading of Wittgenstein on the grounds of his rejection of set theory and of Cantor’s diagonal argument. For here he seems to have been rejecting forms of expression that were part of a common mathematical practice, contrary to what I take to be his attitude toward idealism and solipsism. But I believe that he was

being perfectly consistent here and that the explanation for his view was his ignorance of the mathematics of his time. His exposure to set-theoretical ideas seems to have been limited to the works of Frege and Russell, and he thought that talk about sets and functions and the like was language on holiday because he did not know that such talk—and, in particular, the ideas involved in Cantor’s argument—already had a clear role in mathematical practice. The attempt to account for his views about set theory while assuming that he knew something about it has, I think, led to a more radical and less sensible reading of his general discussion of language than it warrants. And even then a contradiction remains, namely, between his apparent revisionism in mathematics and his view that philosophy “leaves mathematics as it is” (section 124).

Notes

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I presented an earlier version of this chapter in the autumn of 1983 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and at the Philosophical Forum at Great Expectations Bookstore in Evanston, Illinois. Essentially the present version was presented in the winter of 1985 at the University of Illinois at Urbana. I am grateful for the many helpful comments I received on each of these occasions, as well as from the many students and colleagues at the University of Chicago, especially Michael Forster, Steve Gerrard, and Leonard Linsky, with whom I have discussed these matters. Timing prevented me from taking account of Colin McGinn’s *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984). There is sufficient agreement that, had it been available when I wrote, I would have written a different paper. But there is sufficient disagreement that it seems useful to offer this chapter.

¹Steve Gerrard, who is writing his dissertation at the University of Chicago on Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mathematics, documents this evolution in the case of mathematics and shows that no coherent reading of “the later Wittgenstein” can accommodate both his early remarks about consistency and Gödel’s theorem, for example, and the doctrine of PI. [Added in December 2001: Gerrard’s work is published in Gerrard (1991).]

²Of course, the notion of our language in this sense has no precise boundaries. For sufficiently complex expressions, it will be less a matter of us having no clear disposition to do this rather than that, than it will be that, for example, the question of what is given will be hazy. In actual fact, long before we arrive at this point, new concepts are introduced which enable us to solve problems in terms of simpler expressions. An exception to this is the use of computers to solve mathematical problems.

³It is true that one finds in the revised edition of *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), VI section 45: “Could there be only one human being that calculated? Could there be only one that followed a rule?” But he did not publish this passage, and he did publish the one quoted above. In any case, what he intended aside, his *argument* by no means excludes a community of one.

⁴One should note that the translation “And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule” of section 202 is not quite right. The second “a rule” should be “the rule” (“*der Regel*” occurs in both places). Thus, the ambiguity that Christopher Peacocke [“Reply: Rule-following: The Nature of Wittgenstein’s Argument,” in S. Holtzman and C. Leich, eds., *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 72–95] finds in this passage exists only in the translation. Unfortunately, Peacocke devotes some effort to establishing a reading of the passage which is not compatible with the German text.