

# Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

## Lecture six

### 1 Introduction

In the last lecture, we began to look at the rule-following considerations. There are a number of different questions which it is important to distinguish. One question is: what was Wittgenstein getting at – how what problems were in *his* sights, and how did *he* hope to deal with them? This question is primarily a question of Wittgenstein scholarship. But in the secondary literature, arguably the most influential and important writer on this topic is Saul Kripke and arguably the most influential and important book on rule-following is Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke himself isn't concerned with Wittgenstein scholarship. He isn't attempted to give a faithful interpretation of Wittgenstein. Instead, he's describing a train of thought that was prompted in him by reading the *Investigations*. His book "should be thought of as expounding neither 'Wittgenstein's' argument nor 'Kripke's'". Rather, the book expounds "Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him" (p.5).

Here's one way to think of what's at stake. Forget what Wittgenstein himself thought, and focus on this question: what distinctive and important philosophical problems can be extracted from his discussion of rule-following? Kripke, for his part, thinks that we can extract a serious philosophical problem from Wittgenstein. And whilst it might turn out that the problems which Kripke extracts from Wittgenstein are not those with which Wittgenstein himself was grappling, it's worth reading Kripke very closely for at least two reasons: (i) because the problem which Kripke extracts from Wittgenstein is arguably one of the most pressing issues of all philosophy, and (ii) because it will be instructive to see how the real Wittgenstein departs from Kripke's image of him.

### 2 Kripke's skeptical paradox

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. (*PI*, §201a)

This passage is Kripke's starting point. It's clear enough that Wittgenstein thought that his discussion of rule-following had unearthed a paradox of some sort. And the second chapter of Kripke's book is devoted to presenting and developing Kripke's understanding of the shape that this paradox is meant to take. In a sense, one can view this chapter as a more focused version of *PI* §§138-201.

Like Wittgenstein, Kripke initially develops the problem with respect to a mathematical example, and only generalizes the problem later. Kripke begins by asking us to consider the word 'plus', and its corresponding symbol '+'. The intuitive picture is that competent speakers of English use these expressions to denote a certain mathematical function, defined for all pairs of integers. Our mastery of these expressions manifests our "grasp" of a certain rule, the addition rule. But two points should be clear:

- Each of us has only computed a finite number of sums in the past, but
- The rule determines the correct answer for infinitely many sums

Now, suppose that you have never computed a certain sum – say, you've computed any numbers above 57, and, in particular, that you've never added 68 to 57 before. (If you have, pick some higher numbers. The point is that the first point above ensures that there is some sum that you've computed before.) You perform the computation, and you obtain the expected answer: '125'. Intuitively, your answer is correct in at least *two* senses. Firstly, it's correct in the sense that 125 is the sum of 68 and 57. Secondly, it's correct in the "metalinguistic" sense that 'plus', as intended by you previously, denoted a function which yields the value 125 for the pair of numbers called '68' and '57'.

But now Kripke asks: suppose you encounter a bizarre skeptic, who questions whether your answer was correct in the metalinguistic sense outlined. Perhaps, he suggests, your previous intentions of the term 'plus' determined that the answer to '68+57' should be 5! And then ask yourself: how would you respond?

Your initial response, as Kripke points out, might be that the skeptic should go back to school and learn to add. But the problem is deeper than you've allowed. For if you are confident that, as you used the symbol '+', your intention was that '68+57' should turn out to denote 125, this cannot be because you explicitly gave yourself instructions that 125 is the result of performing the addition in this particular instance. You didn't. The idea is that, in this new instance, you should apply the very same function or rule that you applied so many times in the past. But now the skeptic asks:

Who is to say what this function was? In the past, you gave yourself only a finite number of examples instantiated this function. All, we

have suppose, involved numbers smaller than 57. So perhaps in the past I used 'plus' and '+' to denote a function, which I shall call 'quus' and symbolize by ' $\oplus$ '. It is defined by:

$$x \oplus y = x + y \text{ if } x \text{ or } y \text{ are less than } 57 \\ = 5 \text{ otherwise}$$

Who is to say that this is not the function you previously meant by '+'? (Kripke, pp.8-9)

So the skeptical idea is that you are *misinterpreting* your previous uses of 'plus'. You always meant quus!

Kripke makes two subsequent points. Firstly, that wild and fantastical as the skeptic's suggestion is, it is not logically or a priori impossible. Secondly, that if the skeptic's suggestion is wrong, then there must be some fact about your previous usage that you can use to refute him. The challenge is to say what this fact is.

Kripke's bizarre skeptic poses two distinct but equally puzzling questions (p.11):

- (A) The skeptic can be understood as asking whether there is any fact of the matter as to whether you meant plus rather than quus
- (B) The skeptic can be understood as asking whether you have any reason to be confident that you should should answer '125' rather than '5'.

These two questions are related: your confidence in your initial answer is grounded in your confidence that the answer '125' accords with what you meant previously. And the skeptic will concede the conditional claim that '125' is the right answer *if* you meant plus rather than quus. This means that an adequate answer to the skeptic must do two things. Firstly, it must give an account of what fact it is in virtue of which I meant plus rather than quus. Secondly, it must show how I am justified in answering '125' rather than '5'. As we shall see, these conditions are distinct. This will be illustrated when we consider some candidate answers to the skeptical challenge – they'll fail because whilst they entail that you meant plus rather than quus, they fail to explain your confidence in your answer.

One final remark is needed. For as Kripke points out (p.12), one might worry that we can't even set up the problem unless you and the skeptic are speaking a common language. And that means we need to assume that 'plus' means plus. But this just brings into prominence what's fundamentally at stake. Kripke allows that your *present* usage of the word 'plus' is such that it denotes the addition function. His skeptic doesn't question that. Rather, the question is whether your present usage accords with your *previous* usage. The skeptic is questioning whether 'plus'

as you used it in the *past* is such that it denoted the addition function. If you previously meant *quus*, then your present usage doesn't accord with your previous usage. At this stage, Kripke is allowing that it might be impossible to doubt your present usage; the point is that you can doubt that your past usage of 'plus' denoted the addition function.

### 3 Rules for interpreting rules

On pp.15-18, Kripke considers an important objection: that the skeptical problem arises only because of a ridiculous model of the instruction I gave myself regarding 'addition'. Kripke presents the objection as follows:

I learned – and internalized instructions for – a *rule* which determines how addition is to be continued. What was the rule? Well, say, to take it in its primitive form: suppose we want to add  $x$  to  $y$ . Take a huge bunch of marbles. First count out  $x$  marbles in one heap. Then count out  $y$  marbles in another. Put the two heaps together and count out the number of marbles in the union thus formed. The result is  $x+y$ . This set of directions, I may suppose, I explicitly gave myself at some earlier time. It is engraved on my mind as on a slate. It is incompatible with the hypothesis that I meant *quus*. It is this set of directions, not the finite list of particular additions I performed in the past, that justifies and determines my present response. (pp.15-6)

This line of thought is seductive – surely its conceivable that we did internalize some rule when we learnt to add, and it is our grasp of this rule that settles that we should give the answer '125'.

Unfortunately, Kripke points out that the skeptic's response is all too obvious. Sure, if 'count', as you used it in the past, referred to the act of counting, then 'plus', as you used it in the past, referred to the addition function. But now the skeptic will challenge you on the question of whether your previous usages of 'count' referred to the act of counting. In particular, the skeptic can claim that by 'count' you referred to the act of *quonting*, where to quont a heap is to count it, unless it was formed by the act of union resulting in a heap with more than 57 items, in which case you should answer '5'. The point is perfectly general: "if 'plus' is explained in terms of 'counting', a non-standard interpretation of the latter will yield a non-standard interpretation of the former" (p.16). Specifying a rule for counting is of no help, obviously. For that rule will be open to reinterpretation too.

## 4 Conclusion

The skeptical challenge, then, is this. If you are to be justified in answering one way, rather than another, to a question is “what do you get when you add 68 to 57?” then there must be some fact in virtue of which your answer is justified. You might say that your answer is justified because ‘add’ as you meant it in the past, denoted the addition function. But the skeptic points out that previous usage is consistent with a wide variety of hypotheses – you might have meant quus rather than plus in the past. So you need to be able to give an account of the fact in virtue of which you meant plus rather than quus. Pointing to your previous behavior clearly isn’t enough. And pointing to rules isn’t enough, for they are open to reinterpretation too. It begins to look like there *isn’t* a fact in virtue of which you meant plus rather than quus. This is the skeptical scenario.

In the coming lectures, we’ll begin to look at a number of responses to the Kripke’s skeptic, and also try to get clearer on the extent to which Kripke’s skeptic was getting at something that Wittgenstein took seriously. But before we get to that, there are two final points to make in this lecture.

Firstly, though we’ve focused primarily on the mathematical example, the point is perfectly general. Suppose you’ve never been to Argentina. You go there and you see a cut furry creature that purrs. Someone asks you what it is. You reply: a cat. But how can you be so sure your answer is correct. Perhaps by ‘cat’, as you used that word in the past, you meant quat, where x is a quat if it is a cat, unless it is Argentina. Or suppose you go to the Eiffel Tower and see a table at its base. A table, right? But what if your past uses of ‘table’ picked out *tabairs*, where x is a tabair if it is a table that isn’t at the base of the Eiffel Tower (Kripke, p.19).

Secondly, it’s important to realize just how worrying the skeptical scenario is. If Kripke’s skeptic is right, then the very notion of meaning seems to vanish into thin air. When I wrote these words, and when you now read them, the feeling is that there are instructions that we are respectively following. But when one looks at what is in one’s mind, what instructions can be found there? After all, our puzzle is formulated in terms of new cases that we haven’t ever considered. If you genuinely take the problem seriously, it’s hard not to share the sense of eerie unease that Kripke describes himself as feeling when he contemplates the situation.