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Linguistic Normativity and Kripke's Sceptical Paradox

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1.

The most influential interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy to be proposed in the last decade is undoubtedly the one presented by Kripke in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke's book not only led to a renewed interest in Wittgenstein's view on rules and rule-following, but also kindled a lively systematical discussion of Kripke's "community view" on linguistic normativity. In this paper I want to examine the account of rule-following Kripke presents from a systematic point of view. I will argue that the community view fails to meet Kripke's own terms, and therefore does not resolve the "sceptical paradox" it was meant to be a solution of. I will then consider several approaches to the challenge presented by this paradox and compare these with similar positions in the Philosophy of Mind. It will be argued that the only viable stance towards Kripke's paradox is to regard it as a refutation of the reductionistic presuppositions generating it. With an appeal to Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* it will furthermore be suggested that semantic notions should best be explicated in praxiological, rather than in mentalistic terms.

2.

According to Kripke a sceptical problem about the factuality of individual meaning and rule-following is the pivot of the *Philosophical Investigations*. This problem arises when it is admitted that any set of facts constitutive for semantic competence should meet two conditions:

- i. a normativity condition; the facts in question must show why specific applications are justified, and should in particular account for intuitively valid conditionals of the form *If a speaker s means such-and-such with a term t, then he should use term t so-and-so.*
- ii. a reduction condition; the facts in question must be explicable in non-semantic terms.

The reason Kripke adduces for accepting the first condition is that normativity is an essential component of our semantic concepts. The second condition is motivated as a methodological restriction on the investigation.

Kripke argues that no set of mental, physiological or dispositional facts about an individual speaker can meet both requirements simultaneously. Time and again his meticulous scrutiny of theories invoking such facts reveals that they fail to meet the normative condition.

To avoid the “obviously absurd” conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning anything with a word, Kripke proposes a sceptical solution. This solution consists in specifying justification conditions for the ascription of semantic competence in terms of communal agreement of linguistic inclinations within a speech community. Thus Kripke accepts that no fact about an individual language user “taken in isolation” constitutes his following a rule or could give a truth-conditional account of semantic predicates such as “meaning”, which we suppose to apply to this language user. However, when we regard such an individual as a member of our speech community, then we can find a justification for ascribing semantic predicates to him in the agreement between his blind linguistic inclinations and those of the speech community. In doing so we use the conditionals mentioned in the first restriction in their contrapositional form, e.g. “If Jones does *not* come out with “125” when asked about “68+57”, we cannot assert that he means addition by “+”.”¹ Such conditionals thus function as a restriction on our “game” of attributing semantic competence to someone.

3.

Although as an exegesis Kripke’s interpretation of Wittgenstein is disputable², I do not want to pursue that point. Instead I want to focus on Kripke’s sceptical solution taken on its own merits, which, as I will argue, suffers from an internal inconsistency.

As was already pointed out, the normative conditionals embodied in restriction (i) are regarded by Kripke as expressing an essential component of our semantic concepts. For that reason their explication is a global constraint on any account of meaning, be it in terms of truth conditions or in terms of justification conditions. The former kind of account was ruled out of court by the sceptical paradox, which showed that no fact could explain the normative consequences of meaning. Kripke’s assessment of dispositional theories of meaning pungently illustrates this point:

“The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this relation [between meaning and responding]: if ‘+’ meant addition, then I will answer ‘125’. But this is not the proper account of the relation, which is *normative*, not descriptive. The point is *not* that, if I meant addition by ‘+’, I *will* answer ‘125’, but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of ‘+’, I *should* answer ‘125’.”³

In Kripke’s own exposition of the “community solution” such *normative* conditionals have however tacitly been replaced by *descriptive* conditionals. A recasting of the original normative conditional would give us justification conditions of the following kind: “If it is not the case that Jones *should* reply ‘125’ when asked about ‘68+57’, we cannot assert that he means addition by ‘+’. The justification condition featuring in Kripke’s exposition of the community solution is however: “If Jones does not *come out* with ‘125’ when asked about ‘68+57’, we cannot assert that he means addition by ‘+’.”⁴ But it is obviously beside the point whether Jones “does not come out with ‘125’”, “[...] will [not] reply ‘125’”⁵ or

“fail[s] to come up with the particular responses”⁶. In order to comply with our normative intuitions about meaning, the question must be how we are justified to ascribe semantic competence to Jones on the basis of what he *should* reply. Considered within the framework of the community solution this means that we would need to find justification conditions for asserting that Jones means plus by ‘+’ in terms of mutual agreement between what he should reply and what the members of the linguistic community should reply. This however is impossible. As the sceptical paradox showed, there is no fact at all as to what Jones or the other members of the community *should* reply, and so neither can there be any fact about agreement or disagreement here.

Kripke’s tacit replacement of normative conditionals by descriptive conditionals thus proves to be more than a minor oversight. Justification conditions which allow for the original normative conditionals can *in principle* not be specified within the framework of communal agreement. Thus the sceptical solution only seemingly complies with a restriction which Kripke explicitly deemed a prerequisite for any adequate answer. Since the community view can not do justice to the normative character of ascriptions of semantic competence, it fails as a solution to the paradox on Kripke’s own terms. This leaves the sceptical paradox unresolved and in need of further attention.

4.

Since the paradox resulted from the combination of a normative and a reductionist restriction the following approaches to it are open:

1. *Both the normative and the reductionist restriction are accepted as valid*, in which case either:

- i. one looks for new facts which could give a “straight” solution to the paradox, or
- ii. the paradox is accepted.

2. *One of the restrictions generating the paradox is rejected as invalid*, in which case either:

- i. the normative restriction is rejected, or
- ii. the reductionist restriction is rejected.

I now want to take a short look at these respective positions, compare some of them with similar positions in the Philosophy of Mind and signal some of their inherent difficulties. It will be argued that the last position, which consists in rejecting Kripke’s reductionist presuppositions, is the only viable one.

I think we can be brief about the first approach, which accepts both Kripke’s conditions and tries to meet them with a dispositional or physiological fact not yet considered. The principled nature of Kripke’s arguments makes the prospects of this endeavour rather bleak.⁷

A second approach would be to accept both Kripke’s conditions, while trying to live with the sceptical paradox. In that case it is conceded that our ordinary semantic concepts are

intrinsically normative in nature. But they are also held to be quite empty, because there is just nothing in the world to which they apply. This I think comes down to embracing a notion of “folk semantics” which is very similar to the notion of “folk psychology” in the Philosophy of Mind. Just as we might hold that our mentalistic idiom constitutes a folk psychology because it commits us to mental items which science shows to be non-existent, so we might hold that our semantic idiom constitutes a folk semantics because the normative phenomena to which it commits us likewise turn out not to exist.

It should be pointed out that such a view is more drastic than it appears to be on first sight. Kripke conducts his discussion in terms of rule-following and meaning, and therefore formulates the outcome of the sceptical paradox as “there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word”⁸. Now of course there are philosophers of an extensionalist bent who would be quite happy to embrace such a conclusion. Kripke’s choice of words should however not make us think that the paradox only has bearing on intensional notions. The central problem presented by the paradox is to give a factual, reductionist account of normative semantic concepts in general, and therefore it has as much bearing on extensional notions like reference as it has on intensional ones. This leaves the “folk semanticist” in a rather awkward position though. Is he to take an eliminativist approach to such notions as reference, truth and logical validity, or should he rather embrace a “semantical stance”? Both options are profoundly unattractive. The first has devastating consequences for the scientific endeavour itself. If for example the notion of logical validity is really obsolete, it seems hardly appropriate to apply it to scientific theories. The second approach is first of all rather obscure. But even if it could be fleshed out in what sense we can say that holding a sentence to be true is a question of taking a certain semantical stance towards it, such an account would most likely commit us to some weird kind of wholesale irrationalism.

Because the ramifications of accepting the idea of a folk semantics cannot be kept local, it is a considerably less viable position than the corresponding position in the Philosophy of Mind.⁹ As a response to Kripke’s paradox it should therefore be rejected

5.

When it is conceded that no position which accepts both Kripke’s conditions can adequately deal with the sceptical paradox, we are left with no other option but to regard this paradox as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Kripke’s presuppositions. One approach is to hold that the paradox shows the normativity condition to be invalid. This line of reasoning should be distinguished from the one which takes our concepts of meaning and rule-following to constitute a folk semantics. The latter accepts the normative nature of such concepts and deems them wrong, the former denies that such concepts are intrinsically normative in the first place. A position like this is suggested by Chomsky, when he holds that “the term ‘language’ as used in ordinary discourse involves obscure [...] normative factors” which a

more “refined” concept of language could well do without.¹⁰ I think this view leads to rather formidable difficulties. For one thing it seems to cut off the study of grammar in this “refined” non-normative sense from the normative grammaticality-judgements which are its empirical data. For what bearing could such obscure normative judgements have on an essentially non-normative concept of grammar? Similar considerations apply to the study of semantics.

The inadequacy of these three approaches seems to leave us no other option but to reject Kripke’s reduction condition. This means that we have to accept that meaning and rule-following are intrinsically normative phenomena which can not be explained in non-semantic or non-intentional terms. In other words: meaning is primitive.

I think there is no *intrinsic* reason to shun the notion of “primitiveness”. “Mimicry” and “territorial behaviour” for example are impeccable though primitive concepts of ethology. This however is not to suggest that the notions of meaning and rule-following are equally well-behaved and any substance which a non-reductionist view on meaning can have, is exhausted by the actual explications it can offer and limited by the degree to which it is able to specify the criteria regulating the use of such concepts. When declaring meaning to be primitive is not only the first but also the final step, one has given little more but a declaration of one’s ignorance.

Taking normativity to be an irreducible characteristic of semantic phenomena can be underpinned in different ways. The most notable alternatives explicate normativity either in terms of the ‘intrinsic intentionality’ of the mind¹¹, or in praxiological terms.

It should be noted that with the first approach there is a certain difficulty in giving a substantial explication of meaning in mentalistic terms. McGinn for example acknowledges that the proper response to Kripke’s paradox is to reject its reductionist presupposition. In his view meaning something should be regarded as a *sui generis* mental state having “a normative aspect which determines whether an event is correct or incorrect”. If however it be asked how this normativity works, “then the answer is that it is simply in the nature of meaning to have normative consequences.”¹² Searle, though regarding intentionality a mental phenomenon, does not even attempt to give an explanation of it in mentalistic terms. For reasons not explicated he holds that this mental phenomenon can only be elucidated in terms of the “derived intentionality of speech-acts.” The difficulty involved in giving a substantial non-reductionist account of meaning in mentalistic terms becomes clear when it is noticed that such an explication can be given either in terms of introspectively accessible mental episodes, or in terms of underlying mental mechanisms. The former phenomena however seem too ephemeral to enable a substantive explication, while an explication in terms of the latter is difficult to square with the non-reductionist approach.

A second, more principled argument against the view that meaning something is a primitive *mental* state can be found in Wittgenstein’s later work. Wittgenstein convincingly shows

that the criteria regulating our application of such concepts as meaning, understanding and rule-following primarily focus on someone's overt linguistic behaviour and the public circumstances surrounding it. In that case it is quite impossible to present necessary or sufficient conditions for the application of semantic concepts in purely mentalistic terms. Any such set of conditions can in principle be overruled by the public criteria in use, and therefore any associated mental states are at best epiphenomenal.

I think this leads us to the conclusion that Kripke's paradox leaves us with no option but to take a non-reductionist approach to meaning and rule-following, while Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* show that a substantial explication of these notions should be along praxiological rather than mentalistic lines.

Notes

¹ Kripke 1982 p. 95.

² See e.g. Baker & Hacker 1984, McGinn 1984.

³ Kripke 1982 p. 37.

⁴ Idem. p. 95.

⁵ Idem. p. 95.

⁶ Idem. p. 108.

⁷ See Boghossian 1989 for an elaborate review of the difficulties facing specific proposals for a "straight" solution.

⁸ Kripke 1982 p. 55.

⁹ See Putnam 1988 Chapter 4 though, where it is being argued that the idea that our intentional idiom constitutes a folk-psychology commits us to a similar view on semantics.

¹⁰ Chomsky 1988 p. 37.

¹¹ See for a classical expression of such a view Searle 1983, and for such an account as an answer to Kripke's sceptical paradox McGinn 1984.

¹² McGinn 1984 p. 163.

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