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On Misinterpreting Kripke's Wittgenstein

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Saul Kripke's much discussed *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*¹ has, I believe, been widely misinterpreted. The purpose of this note is to offer a correction. As it happens, on my reading of Kripke's text Kripke's Wittgenstein begins to look recognisably like Wittgenstein himself. But I shall not be concerned here with the question of whether Kripke's Wittgenstein *is* Wittgenstein. My only aim is to correct the misinterpretation.

I

Kripke's Wittgenstein asks what makes it the case that I mean a certain thing by a word—addition by 'plus', to take Kripke's example. A variety of candidates to constitute facts about meaning are considered and rejected: facts about dispositions to use words, about a speaker's past history of using words, and about introspectible experiences.

The interim conclusion is that "there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word" (p. 55). That "sceptical paradox" could scarcely be more bizarre or disturbing. One reaction is to take it at face value, and adopt an "error theory" with respect to meaning-facts: all attributions of meaning are false, and that's that.

Kripke's Wittgenstein does not take this straightforward option. What does he do instead?

According to the prevailing interpretation, Kripke's Wittgenstein says that, contrary to appearances, attributions of meaning are not *factual claims at all*. They *look* like statements of alleged fact, being declarative sentences, but really they have some entirely different role.² This interpretation certainly

¹ (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982). Unless otherwise indicated, page references are to this work.

² See, e.g., Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 64; Crispin Wright, "Kripke's Account of the Argument Against Private Language," *Journal of Philosophy*, 81, 1984, 759–78, p. 761; G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 4; Paul A. Boghossian, "The Rule-Following Considerations," *Mind*, 98, 1989, 507–49, pp. 517–18.

seems to be supported by remarks such as: “[i]f Wittgenstein is right, we cannot begin to solve [the sceptical paradox] if we remain in the grip of the natural presupposition that meaningful declarative sentences must purport to correspond to facts: if this is our framework, we can only conclude that sentences attributing meaning and intention are themselves meaningless” (p. 79); and, “since the indicative mood is not taken [by Wittgenstein] as in any sense primary or basic, it becomes more plausible that the linguistic role of utterances in the indicative mood that superficially look like assertions need not be one of ‘stating facts’” (p. 73). This sounds similar to emotivism in ethics.³ An ethical emotivist will say that, contrary to appearances, ‘X is good’ does not purport to state any *fact*, having instead a logical form something like ‘Hurrah for X!’. To borrow some useful terminology from Paul Boghossian,⁴ emotivism is an ethical *non-factualism*: ethical sentences do not make factual claims, which is to say that they have no truth-conditions. And Kripke’s Wittgenstein, on the received interpretation, holds a similar view about sentences of the form ‘*s* means that *p*’; he is a non-factualist about meaning.⁵ Close attention to the way we use such sentences will show that our hunt for the fugitive meaning-constituting facts was entirely misconceived, for those sentences do not have the function of making factual claims in the first place.

II

It must be conceded at once that the standard interpretation is a natural reading of much of what Kripke says. But it cannot be right.

The first point to note is that the attribution of such a view to *Wittgenstein*, of all people, is implausible, as many commentators have pointed out.⁶ So charity should give us pause.

There is another, more important, point. Boghossian claims that non-factualism about any class of sentences *presupposes* a non-deflationary (robust) account of truth:

For on a deflationary understanding of truth, a sentence will be truth-conditional provided only that it is apt for semantic ascent; and it will be apt for semantic ascent provided only that it is a significant, declarative sentence. But it is constitutive of a non-factualist thesis precisely that it denies, of some targeted, significant, declarative sentence that it is truth-

³ As McGinn (*Wittgenstein on Meaning*, p. 65) notes.

⁴ “The Rule-Following Considerations.”

⁵ According to Boghossian, Kripke’s Wittgenstein is a non-factualist about *everything*—no sentence *ever* purports to state a fact (“The Rule-Following Considerations,” p. 519; see also Wright, “Kripke’s Account...,” p. 769).

⁶ See, e.g., Baker and Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, chapter 1, where the objection is made in, well, somewhat *forceful* terms.

conditional. It follows, therefore, that a non-factualism about any subject matter presupposes a conception of truth richer than the deflationary...⁷

Now in fact, Boghossian is arguably mistaken in thinking that a deflationary account of *truth* implies that the conditions under which a *sentence* is “apt for semantic ascent” are themselves deflationary or minimal. That is, a deflationary account of truth does not obviously imply that if a sentence has the “minimal” property of being significant and declarative, then it is truth-conditional. Deflationism or minimalism about *truth* should be distinguished from deflationism or minimalism about *truth aptness*, and it is a substantial question whether one implies the other.⁸ But in any event, deflationism about *truth aptness* is (by definition) incompatible with the claim that some sentences that behave just *as if* they were apt for truth (by being significant and declarative) are nonetheless *not* truth apt. In other words, deflationism about truth aptness is incompatible with non-factualism. But now Kripke’s Wittgenstein looks to have a self-contradictory position, for he *accepts* a deflationary account of truth aptness (intimately conjoined with a deflationary account of truth):

Do we not call assertions like [“Jones, like many of us, means addition by ‘+’”] ‘true’ or ‘false’? Can we not with propriety precede such assertions with ‘It is a fact that’ or ‘It is not a fact that’? Wittgenstein’s way with such objections is short. Like many others, Wittgenstein accepts the ‘redundancy’ theory of truth: to affirm that a statement is true (or presumably, to precede it with ‘It is a fact that...’) is simply to affirm the statement itself, and to say that it is not true is to deny it: (‘p’ is true = p)...We *call* something a proposition, and hence true or false, when in our language we apply the calculus of truth functions to it (p. 86).⁹

At the very least, then, if the “non-factualist” interpretation is right, Kripke has ignored a fairly obvious objection to the internal coherence of Wittgenstein’s position, as he construes it.

But, I submit, Kripke’s Wittgenstein cannot possibly be a non-factualist. As the above passage makes clear, he holds that “Jones means addition by

⁷ “The Rule-Following Considerations,” pp. 525–26.

⁸ For this point, see Frank Jackson, Graham Oppy and Michael Smith, “Minimalism and Truth Aptness,” *Mind*, 103, 1994, 287–302.

⁹ “‘p’ is true = p” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §136). Cf. also “The proposition “It is true that this follows from that” means simply: this follows from that” (Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 38). Baker and Hacker are apparently unaware of the quoted passage (see *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, p. 32, where Kripke is chastised for allegedly not realising that Wittgenstein has no robust notion of truth). McGinn discusses the passage briefly in a footnote (*Wittgenstein on Meaning*, p. 71), suggesting that Kripke does not “draw the right lesson” (that is, the denial of non-factualism) from Wittgenstein’s deflationism about truth. With the correction that the relevant thesis is really deflationism about *truth aptness*, rather than deflationism about *truth*, I am saying that Kripke draws precisely this lesson (see immediately below).

‘+’” *does* (or could) state a fact, in the perfectly ordinary sense of ‘fact’.¹⁰ So what on earth is going on? Why does Kripke apparently flatly contradict himself by saying that “Wittgenstein holds, with the sceptic, that there is no fact as to whether I mean plus or quus” (pp. 70–71)?

The key to interpreting this last remark lies a few pages earlier, where it is apparent that Kripke’s Wittgenstein is only concerned to deny the existence of a “‘superlative fact’...about my mind that constitutes my meaning addition by ‘plus’.” But the lack of a *superlative* fact certainly does not mean, according to Kripke’s Wittgenstein, the lack of any fact at all. That is a “philosophical misconstrual” (p. 65).

Now Kripke appears to take issue with the irenic view—attributed by him to Wittgenstein—that our ordinary notion of meaning does *not* embody a commitment to “superlative facts.” Such claims of the irrelevance of philosophical scepticism to the beliefs of the “ordinary man,” Kripke finds “almost invariably suspect” (p. 65; see also p. 66). So it would appear to be Kripke’s position that if the “sceptical argument” is sound, and hence there is no *superlative* fact, then there is no fact *simpliciter*. That is why Kripke (misleadingly) says that “Wittgenstein holds, with the sceptic, that there is no fact as to whether I mean plus or quus.” More carefully, this is a thesis that Kripke believes that Wittgenstein (given the soundness of the sceptical argument) *ought* to hold. But as Kripke makes perfectly plain in the passage from p. 86 quoted above, he believes that Wittgenstein does *not* hold it.

III

It remains briefly to indicate what I take to be the general drift of Wittgenstein’s argument, as Kripke presents it.

Meaning something by a word can seem a very queer phenomenon. It is true of me *now* that I mean addition by ‘plus’. I intend to apply the word ‘plus’ in accordance with a certain meaning; that is, *correctly*. But how could the unlimited correct applications of this word be somehow stored up or encoded in some state of mine? And surely that *is* the right way to look at the matter—when I add pairs of numbers it appears as if I am pulling an infinitely long string of pearls out of a box, the string being coiled in there from the start.¹¹ A strange state to be in! So what *makes it true* that I now mean addition by ‘plus’? Not my past use, evidently. Not anything before my mind when I use the word. But not my dispositions to apply the word ‘plus’ either. In fact, *nothing interesting whatever* makes it true that I mean addition

¹⁰ Cf. also Kripke’s response to the suggestion that meaning plus by ‘+’ is a “primitive state.” “[T]aken in an appropriate way Wittgenstein may even accept it” (p. 51). But how could there be *any* “appropriate way” of taking this suggestion, if Kripke’s Wittgenstein is a non-factualist?

¹¹ Cf. Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), pp. 39–40, and *Philosophical Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 55.

by 'plus'. I hesitate to employ terminology that Kripke does not use, but I suspect that one moral to be drawn is that my meaning addition by 'plus' does not even *supervene* on my total physical state together with my qualitative experiences. And in any case, that line of thought is arguably to be found in Wittgenstein himself.¹² So, the whole idea of meaning something by a word seems to have vanished into thin air. But: "[t]he mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in."¹³ And here, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, the notion of the community is supposed to draw us back from the abyss, by showing us that no substantial meaning truthmaker is needed to legitimate our linguistic practices.¹⁴ We justifiably assert that Jones means addition by 'plus', not because we have evidence of the (mythical) substantial truthmaker, but because we think Jones will "go on" in the same way as the rest of us, as far as addition problems are concerned. That is the way the language-game of attributing meanings works, and all philosophy should or can do is describe it. We were seduced (as usual) by misleading philosophical pictures; but once we see them for what they are, we can rest assured that it is a *fact* that I mean addition by 'plus', albeit not the "superlative" one that our pictures led us to expect.

The central point is that a certain philosophical picture of what it is to mean something by a word leads inexorably to the demand for a reductive explanation. But the picture has led us astray—no account is required, once we gain the correct perspective. The following *analogy* might be helpful. A certain philosophical picture of the way names function leads us to demand some explanation of what makes *fictional* statements—like 'Holmes took cocaine'—true. There surely must be some "fictional person," who takes cocaine, to make that sentence true. But there isn't any such person. A "sceptical paradox" looms—statements about fictional characters are all meaningless, or at best false! But close attention to the role fiction plays in our lives, the Sherlock Holmes language game, and so on, shows us how 'Holmes took cocaine' can be true, and can thereby state a fact, without requiring the existence of any such person as Holmes.^{15, 16}

¹² Cf. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), §§ 608–10.

¹³ *Zettel*, §16.

¹⁴ In Dummett's terminology ("What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)," in *Truth and Meaning*, ed. G. Evans and J. McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 94), Kripke's Wittgenstein is claiming that statements like "Jones means addition by 'plus'" can be "barely true": true and reducible only to trivial variants of the statement itself. That such statements can be barely true is, I take it, a thesis that Dummett would deny.

¹⁵ Cf. Kripke on Wittgenstein's remarks about numbers, pp. 75–77. Of course, I am not attributing this account of fiction to Wittgenstein, or endorsing it myself, come to that.

¹⁶ Thanks to David Lewis, Mark Johnston, Mike Thau, Jim Pryor, David Hilbert, and two anonymous referees for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.