

How Dissolving The Rule-Following Paradox Can Give Philosophy A Future

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1. Two decades ago, Saul Kripke declared the rule-following paradox presented by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* to be perhaps "the most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date". (1982, 60) Yet, for all the ink that has since been spilt on the subject, there is still no consensus on how Wittgenstein treated the sceptical problem. There is not even a consensus on what exactly the differences are among possible kinds of treatment or on whether these differences are significant. Thus, on the one hand, John McDowell (1992) has argued that there is only a notational variance between the straight solution and the sceptical solution to the sceptical problem.¹ And George Wilson (1994) has suggested that there is little of substance to the distinction between sceptical solution and dissolution. On the other hand, some commentators are convinced that the differences among kinds of treatment are so profound, and their opponents so obviously wrong, that they pay scarce attention to alternatives to their own favoured kind of treatment. Most prominent among these commentators are the Kripkean sceptics, who never consider rejecting the sceptical problem altogether, and the deflationist therapists, who take Wittgenstein's claim that no kind of theory should be advanced to entail that all philosophical problems should be dissolved.

I should like to argue that, though as usually understood these different kinds of treatment have more in common than the extremists have recognized, once properly understood they really are different from each other, and dissolution is the kind of treatment Wittgenstein advocates. I also think, however, that the significance of this treatment has not been duly appreciated. Paradoxically, it is the dissolution of the sceptical problem, rather than any kind of solution to it, that gives issues about meaning a philosophical future.

2. I start by describing the sceptical problem, its source and its treatment in as neutral, i.e., Wittgensteinian and jargon-free, terms as I can.

The paradox, in Wittgenstein's words, is that "no course of action could be determined by a rule because every course of action can be made out to accord with the

rule." The notion of a rule Wittgenstein is dealing with here is to be sure paradoxical. For a rule according to which everything one does can be made out to accord with it is not a rule. As Wittgenstein continues to spell this out, "if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here." (1958, #201) Where there is neither accord nor conflict, there is no rule-governed activity. In particular, to focus on one of Wittgenstein's main concerns, there is no linguistic activity. For, if no application of a linguistic expression is either correct or incorrect, then there is no such thing as meaning anything by any expression. Thus the paradox seems to have as a consequence that "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air", as Kripke put it. (1982, 22)

What conception of a rule or meaning could lead to the paradox?

We get a clue to Wittgenstein's answer to this question by looking at the diagnosis of the paradox he offers immediately after presenting it. The paradox, he writes, is based on a misunderstanding, which is to think that there is no way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation. Indeed the paradox seems to stem from the idea that a rule can always be interpreted in such a way that every course of action can be made out to accord, or to conflict, with it, as the case may be. But why would one think that grasping a rule is always an interpretation in the first place? What conception of a rule would have to be in play?

The conception that Wittgenstein has been examining is one according to which to grasp a rule or the meaning of a word is to grasp an ideal model of what the word is to be applied to if it is to be applied correctly. Thus words derive their meaning from their connection to some kind of extra-linguistic entity, an abstract object -- indeed, a rule or meaning. Now it is a short step from this conception of meaning to the paradox. The main trouble is that those extra-linguistic items are in fact not sufficient to endow words with meaning and so to dictate their correct applications. For, whatever exactly it is that the mind grasps when it grasps one of those items, it is something which can be variously interpreted and so something which can always be interpreted in such a way that no matter how one applies a word the application will be correct, or incorrect, as the case may be.

Now Wittgenstein has been examining this particular conception of meaning as the traditional answer to the question how a meaningful expression can "determine the steps [or correct applications] in advance" (1958, #190). This question has in turn received close scrutiny from Wittgenstein, starting in section 138, because he has been developing the view that the meaning of a word is its use in a language. Given this view, several questions arise, central among which is the question how use, which is finite, can determine a potential infinity of applications. (1958, #147) "How is it decided what

is the right step to take at any particular stage?" (1958, #186) It is indeed tempting to postulate something outside of use to solve this problem. Unfortunately, as we have seen, this will not do.

Presumably, though, we cannot give up the idea that a rule determines in advance which applications are the correct ones. But what conception of a rule or meaning will allow us to maintain this? According to Wittgenstein, it is a conception such that grasping a rule can be "exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases." (1958, #201) And "a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom." (1958, #198) Thus to grasp a rule is not to associate the expression for it with something else, but it is to act in a certain way, a way which conforms to an existing practice. The standards of use are not to be found outside of use, after all, but within it.

3. Is this replacement of one conception of meaning by another a sceptical solution to or a dissolution of the paradox? What, to begin with, does a sceptical solution consist in?

A solution to a sceptical problem is itself *sceptical* because it grants that what the sceptic is seeking cannot be obtained. Still, the *sceptical solution* is a solution in that it shows how the sceptic's negative conclusion does not have the devastating consequence the radical sceptic thinks it has. Now, if this is all there is to it, *prima facie* at least it may look as if providing a sceptical solution to a sceptical problem is exactly what Wittgenstein is doing. He accepts the sceptic's conclusion that no extra-linguistic items could supply the standards of application and hence the meanings of words. But he goes on to show that this does not have the devastating consequence that we never mean anything by any word, by pointing out that there is another way to endow words with standards and hence with meaning. There is however more to the sceptical solution than has been mentioned so far.

The proponent of the sceptical solution does not just accept the sceptic's negative conclusion; she takes seriously the sceptic's quest, in this case the quest for a specific kind of determinant of meaning, and she thinks that anything that is produced in its stead can only be second best. Thus the proponent of the sceptical solution takes Wittgenstein to be replacing the unavailable extra-linguistic entities by particular uses agreed upon by members of a community. This is how she reads Wittgenstein's claim that a practice is needed for anyone's applications of words to be subject to standards of correctness. These standards are to be yielded by the linguistic practices of the community one belongs to. In a way there is still the attempt to respect the sceptic's wish to account for meaning in terms of the association of words with something else.

But the sceptic was looking for something that would provide words with standards independently of anyone's opinion of what would count as correct or incorrect applications. Now it looks as if all we have ultimately to ground those standards is a linguistic community's view about them. But surely, once a word is endowed with meaning, whether it is applied correctly or not is independent of what any linguistic community may think about it. No wonder then that the proponent of the sceptical solution considers what she takes to be Wittgenstein's replacement as a poor substitute for the real thing. What we have is not a genuine alternative to the conception of what it is for words to have meaning we were forced to reject, for the very notion of meaning has been degraded, so to speak. Indeed, the proponent of the sceptical solution would have a right to regard it as a cheat for anyone to call this solution a straight one, so far short does it fall from what she was originally seeking. Thus to search for a solution to the sceptical problem, and so to play the traditional philosopher's game, is in fact to abandon any hope for a robust philosophical conception of meaning. The only way this can be obtained is by rejecting the sceptical problem altogether.

Those who would rather dissolve the sceptical problem can still accept the sceptic's negative conclusion -- it could after all hardly be denied. What distinguishes them from those who would solve it sceptically is their refusal to take seriously the sceptic's quest for extra-linguistic entities that are to serve as standards for the application of words. But then, the dissolvers usually continue, since the sceptic's negative conclusion really is a response to an unacceptable demand, we no longer have to show how this conclusion does not entail the end of meaning. Since the problem has disappeared, there is nothing left for philosophy to do.

What then do the dissolvers make of the alternative conception of meaning that Wittgenstein proposes? This, the usual story goes, is not to be considered as a philosophical substitute, good or bad, for what the sceptic hopelessly sought. Wittgenstein's positive remarks are purely descriptive. They function as a reminder that in everyday linguistic life we know perfectly well how to distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of words. These distinctions are made possible by the standards in play in our linguistic community. It is only when we make misguided philosophical demands about what in turn grounds these standards that we run into sceptical worries. Actual linguistic practices confirm that there is indeed no problem here.

Granted, if we dismiss the sceptic's demand, then the sceptical problem evaporates. But there still remains the question that prompted Wittgenstein's examination of these issues, the question how a rule can determine its correct applications in advance, to which Wittgenstein's alternative way of grasping a rule seems intended to be part of an answer. There certainly is no suggestion in the paragraph in which he contrasts both

ways of grasping a rule that the second should not be regarded as part of a conception of meaning which is a philosophical improvement on the first. To deny this seems tantamount to agreeing with the sceptic in thinking that only one kind of answer to the original question is philosophically acceptable. It is as if the proponent of the dissolution thought that, once Wittgenstein rejected the specific question that leads to the paradox, he also rejected the larger question that started the whole enquiry. But Wittgenstein never denies that a meaningful expression determines its correct applications in advance. He only warns us to be careful how we construe this claim and advises us to ponder the question how one means what one does by an expression. "*That* will be how meaning it can determine the steps in advance." (1958, #190)

But now this piece of advice may be construed as confirming the deflationist's view that the original question should be dismissed after all. Wittgenstein's emphasis on training, custom, and conformity to existing practices may seem to suggest that nothing in the end grounds linguistic standards but a community's inclination to use words in certain ways. It is possible, however, to regard Wittgenstein's positive remarks as an answer to the original question, on equal footing with the sceptic's attempted answer, and to take them to be suggesting that we look more closely at what it is about our linguistic practices that makes standards possible at all.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of these practices is that they are shared. We share them with those who teach us our first language and with those with whom we communicate. Thus one question to ask here is how exactly linguistic standards emerge from shared practices. Now shared linguistic practices are possible only if we can agree on the way words are used. One further question to ask then is what this agreement is based on. A little reflection on how first languages are acquired goes a long way towards answering this. We teach children to use words, not in a vacuum, but in specific circumstances, in relation to their activities and objects and events in their environment. What this brings to the fore is that our linguistic practices are themselves based on facts external to us, facts to which we can all have access but which are independent from us. Now the significance of this is something the deflationists seem to miss. For what the above observation underlines is that the ways in which we use our words are not just up to us; they are dependent on the various external objects and events to which we apply our words. Thus, while reminding ourselves of our shared linguistic practices, we should not lose sight of their crucial connection to an independent world. And this should invite us to reconceive our approach to the question how a meaningful expression can determine its correct applications in advance. Nothing can do this job without our contribution; but then our contribution is itself not possible without something that is independent from it. Thus it makes no sense to think of meaning as being grounded by something independent of our practices -- the sceptic's mistake. But it also makes no

sense to think of our practices as being independent of what makes them possible -- the deflationist's mistake. It is from this indispensable relation that linguistic standards emerge.

References

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Endnote

- 1 I discuss McDowell's argument in Verheggen (2000). The present paper builds on some suggestions that I first made there.