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Paper 2, Prompt #10

Recount Kripke's argument from *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* that one's grasp of a word's meaning cannot just be a disposition to use the word correctly. Evaluate this argument.

In *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* by Saul Kripke, Kripke questions how and why humans follow rules, and presents a skeptical challenge to how and why we follow these rules. Kripke then discusses a response to the skeptical challenge centered around the idea that maybe we are disposed to follow certain rules over others (Kripke, pg. 22 – 37). But Kripke argues that meaning cannot just be a disposition for two main reasons: 1) meaning is normative and dispositions do not reflect this, and 2) meaning is infinite and dispositions are finite. In this paper, I will first explain the skeptical challenge. Then, I will argue that dispositions can express the normative nature of meaning because we are disposed to follow the simplest rule and this simple rule is often demined as correct. And finally, I will argue that just because our dispositions are finite does not entail that we have no meaning.

To begin this discussion, I will start with the example that Kripke uses. Imagine you are asked to compute 68 + 57. You will, of course, give the answer 125. You say this is correct because arithmetically 68 + 57 = 125 and because you followed the rule of addition, denoted by the symbol '+', as you had intended (Kripke, pg. 8). But what if the symbol '+' had actually denoted a different rule, called quaddition, and you should have instead given the answer 5. The skeptical challenge is that I actually have no idea if my past intentions algin with the rule of addition or quaddition. All my past usage could very possibly have been quaddition instead of addition. So how do I know what rule I should follow now? To say the skeptical challenge is false is to say that "there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it" (Kripke, pg. 9).

The skeptical challenge takes two forms. The first is metaphysical. The skeptic "questions whether there is any *fact*" that I meant addition and not quaddition (Kripke, pg. 11). The second is epistemological in that the skeptic "questions whether I have any *reason* to be so confident that now I should answer '125' rather than '5'" (Kripke, pg. 11). These forms are closely related because if there is some fact to pick addition instead of quaddition then that fact is the reason that I use addition. Conversely, if I have a reason to pick addition instead of quaddition then this reason will accord with my intention to mean addition. However, there can be a fact to use one rule over the way, but I do not have the ability to know that fact. And similarly, I can have a reason that does not connect to a fact.

Let us think back to 68 + 57. When I think about answering 68 + 57, I am in a certain mental state. An answer to the skeptic must say what *fact* there is "about my mental state that constitutes my meaning" addition and not quaddition (Kripke, pg. 11). Is there something about that mental state that determines what I mean by addition? And the answer to the skeptic must also say what there is about my mental state that determines what rules I *should* follow (i.e., what is my justification for saying 68 + 57 = 125). So, the goal in answering the skeptic is to give a fact to why I use rule X verses rule Y, and to give a reason that justifies using rule X over rule Y.

One response to the skeptical challenge is to say we are disposed to follow certain rules. A disposition is sort of like a characteristic an object has. For example, when I drop a glass cup, the cup has a disposition to break when hit with impact. This disposition may be because of certain physical properties the cup has (weight, physical material, the force of the impact). On the other hand, the behavior of the cup nor its properties do not make up all its dispositions. Even if I never saw a glass cup break, it would still be disposed to break when hit with impact. Furthermore, even if a glass cup has never been hit with impact, and thus, never broken, the glass cup would still have the disposition to break. So, dispositions are not just observable, physical properties and they exist regardless of whether or not they have been actualized (Choi).

To answer the question of what fact there is that I meant addition instead of quaddition is to say that we are disposed to mean addition. As Kripke writes, to mean addition is to be disposed "to say '125' when queried about '68 + 57'", and to mean quaddition is to be disposed "to answer '5' when quired about '68 + 57'" (Kripke, pg. 23).

Kripke's first objection to the dispositional argument is to question how our dispositions justify the answer we give. Even if I am disposed to answer addition over quaddition, that does not say whether or not addition is the correct rule to use. "Whatever in fact I am disposed to do, there is a unique thing that I should do" (Kripke page 24). There is the rule and I apply it incorrectly or correctly. I could have been disposed to use the incorrect rule all my life. For example, when I do math and I make an arithmetic mistake, what justifies me in saying I have made a mistake. Maybe the rule I followed to make that mistake was the actual rule I was disposed to do, and thus the rule that I meant. But this is not the case in practice. It seems there is a rule I should follow, and when I do not follow said rule correctly, a mistake occurs. As we can see, my disposition did not express to me that rule X is the rule I should follow. Even further, maybe all of humanity has been disposed to use an incorrect rule. So, our dispositions cannot justify what rule we should use.

When using addition, we think there is only one unique answer to 68 + 57 but, as the skeptic has shown, there could be an infinite amount of rules that give us an infinite amount of answers. Kripke gives an example: When determining the next number in the sequence 2, 4, 6, 8,… you may think to answer 10, but actually there are an infinite amount of numbers that could come next and an infinite amount of rules to correspond (Kripke, pg. 18). So why do we pick 10?

I claim that we answer 10 because we are disposed to follow the rule with the highest probably of being the true rule (even if we may never know what the true rule is). When picking 10 as the next number in the sequence, I am following the rule of even numbers, and this rule is the one with the highest probability considering the examples we have seen so far. I claim that I know that I should pick 10 because the rule of even numbers has the highest probability of being the rule of my past intentions (because it is the simplest rule that could produce the already seen sequence). Given a sequence of numbers, we can calculate which rules are most probable in describing that sequence using a Bayesian statistics model and that we tend to follow this most probable rule (Tenenbaum, 2000). This can be evidence to show that we are disposed to follow the most probable rule and this rule is the one that we should follow. Nothing can for sure tell me that I should use addition verses quaddition, but there's a higher probability that I used addition in the past because it's the simpler rule and the one I am most familiar with. Although my claim has objections too. As Kripke writes, "what does it mean to say that one [rule] is 'more probable' because it is 'simpler'?" (Kripke, pg. 38).

The next objection Kripke makes to the dispositional argument is that dispositions are finite, but meaning is infinite. "The totality of my dispositions is finite" (Kripke, pg. 26). There are infinitely many cases where we add numbers or determine whether or not something is green.

There is no rule that will capture what we mean in all possible cases because there are infinitely many cases.

Imagine a very large number, so large that your brain (or mind) cannot grasp it. A good example of this is a googolplex, which is the name of the number $10^{10^{100}}$ (introduced by Edward Kasner in *Mathematics and the Imagination*, 1940). This number is so large it has been estimated that writing it out (i.e., “10,000,000,000…”) would be impossible, since it requires more space than is physically available in the knowable universe (Sagan). A googolplex is so large that my mind could not have any disposition to what the answer of $10^{10^{100}} + 10^{10^{100}}$ would be. Thus, meaning cannot be formed in our dispositions since there are many things we seem to be unable to be disposed to do (example: $10^{10^{100}} + 10^{10^{100}}$).

One reason I am not satisfied with this argument is because even if I have no disposition to know the answer of $10^{10^{100}} + 10^{10^{100}}$, I may still have dispositions to discover other facts that will help be reason about $10^{10^{100}} + 10^{10^{100}}$. I may not be able to grasp a googolplex in my mind, but I can grasp smaller numbers. And through understanding how these smaller numbers behave, I can build theories about larger numbers. For example, using Fermat’s and Euler’s Theorems (Fraleigh, pg. 184 – 188), I can show that the remainder when a googolplex is divided by 39 is 16 (i.e., $10^{10^{100}} \equiv 16 \ (mod\ 39)$). The point I want to make here is just because meaning is infinite does not mean we have no ability to understand meaning. I am not able to hold all of every I intent to mean in my mind, but I can hold some of it.

However, my argument is not complete and heavy faulted. Mainly because if I use smaller or simpler numbers to understand larger numbers, the operations (or functions) I use on these smaller numbers is still in question. I can still question what justifies me to say 5 + 6 = 11. And if I can still question the smaller numbers, it seems I could not be justified in generalizing these operations to larger numbers. There’s still the question of if I mean addition when dealing with numbers I can actually hold in my mind.

In conclusion, I find the question of, what is it right now in my mind that tells me what rule I should follow or make use of, a very fascinating one. If the skeptic is right and there is no fact that determines whether I mean addition verses quaddition, then it seems that there would also be no fact that determines what anything means (Kripke, pg. 21). How do I know that the meaning I am giving right now is in fact the meaning I intended to give? After reading *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* by Saul Kripke, I am left wondering what conditions are necessary and sufficient for meaning to form in language and thought. And if I can never be certain in my intended meaning, as the skeptic says, how can I communicate my meaning? Obviously, I, and humans in general, do communicate meaning well because we have built a whole society from being able to communicate our ideas and understand each other. It is so weird (and amazing) that humans can understand each other’s meaning but can’t understand how we understand meaning.

Works Cited

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