

PAUL HOFFMAN

KRIPKE ON PRIVATE LANGUAGE

(Received 6 February, 1984)

INTRODUCTION

In his recent book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*, Saul Kripke gives a new interpretation of the private language argument. Kripke's Wittgenstein argues that a private language is impossible because it falls prey to a sceptical paradox whose force is to question the very intelligibility of any language, public or private. But the possibility of a public language is restored by means of what Kripke characterizes as a sceptical solution to the paradox.

Although Kripke praises Wittgenstein's sceptical hypotheses as the "most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date" (p. 60), as far as I can determine, he does not reveal his judgment on the merits of the sceptical solution. In this paper I shall argue that the sceptical solution is a dismal failure and that it cannot do the work of distinguishing between a private and a public language. My own conclusion is that in attributing this solution to Wittgenstein, Kripke's interpretation fails the test of charity.¹

THE PARADOX

The sceptical paradox Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein is that "[w]hen I respond in one way rather than another to such a problem as '68 + 57', I can have no justification for one response rather than another" (p. 21). He concludes from this paradox that "if the sceptic is right, the concepts of meaning and of intending one function rather than another will make no sense" (p. 13). More generally, "[t]here can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word" (p. 55).

This paradox arises because, as the sceptic argues, nothing about me indicates that in using the symbol '+' I meant plus and not the following function

called ‘quus’ and symbolized by \oplus :

$$\begin{aligned}x \oplus y &= x + y, \text{ if } x < 57 \\ &= 5 \text{ otherwise.}\end{aligned}$$

Therefore, there is no fact of the matter which justifies my responding ‘5’ or ‘125’ to the problem ‘68 + 57’. The reason there is no fact of the matter whether I meant plus or ‘quus’ is that neither we nor an omniscient God can read off a function from a finite number of examples, and I have performed only finitely many computations in the past using the symbol ‘+’.

As Kripke points out, this sort of paradox is similar to Goodman’s grue-green paradox (p. 58). For our purposes, it will be useful to point out that Wittgenstein’s paradox is equivalent to the following paradox: for any finite number of tokens, there is no fact of the matter what type they are tokens of, so there is no fact of the matter whether another token is or is not of the same type.

THE SOLUTION

Kripke distinguishes between two kinds of solutions to sceptical problems – straight and sceptical.² A straight solution “shows that on closer examination the scepticism proves to be unwarranted” (p. 66). A sceptical solution concedes that the sceptical hypothesis cannot be refuted and argues instead that our ordinary belief or practice can be justified without refuting the sceptical hypothesis. To illustrate this distinction he cites Descartes and Berkeley. Descartes offers a straight solution to the problem of our knowledge of bodies by directly attacking the sceptical hypotheses which seem to stand in the way of such knowledge. Berkeley, in contrast, offers a sceptical solution. He concedes to the sceptic that there can be no bodies existing independently of the mind, but denies that this interferes with our claim to know that bodies exist.

According to Kripke, Wittgenstein offers a sceptical solution analogous to Berkeley’s to solve his sceptical paradox. A straight solution to Wittgenstein’s paradox would be to show that our responses can indeed be justified because the sceptic is mistaken in thinking that we cannot determine the type of a finite number of tokens. A sceptical solution concedes to the sceptic that we cannot determine the type of a finite number of tokens, but proceeds to find another foundation for language.

The foundation for language proposed by Kripke's Wittgenstein is, in a nutshell, agreement in responses. Even though there is no fact of the matter which justifies one response over another, the mere fact that we agree in our responses is sufficient to make language possible. A wrong response is one that does not agree with those of the community, a correct response is one that does agree. If there were no common consensus, there could be no language.

Although agreement of responses is possible in a community of speakers, according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, there can be no such agreement in responses of an individual considered in isolation (p. 89). Thus private language is impossible, public language possible.

THE FAILURE OF THE SOLUTION

The problem with this sceptical solution is that it underestimates the power of Wittgenstein's sceptical hypotheses. According to Kripke, the hypotheses generate the paradox that there is no justification for responding one way or another to a problem such as '68 + 57'. What Kripke fails to acknowledge, in either an earlier published version of his essay or the body of the text of this version, is that the hypotheses support equally well the more powerful paradox that *there is no such thing as responding one way or another to a problem such as '68 + 57'*.³ What I am alleging is that the sceptical hypotheses which support the view that '125' is no more justified than '5' as a response to the problem '68 + 57' support equally well the view that there can be no such thing as the response '125' being different from the response '5' to the problem '68 + 57'.

This can be seen from the following considerations. That '125' and '5' as uttered or written on specific occasions are different responses cannot be a primitive fact about the token '125' and the token '5'. '5', 'five', '𠄎', and 'V' are different, but they are not different responses to '68 + 57'. What this example demonstrates is that we cannot differentiate token responses without reference to types of response. In order for two token utterances to be the same response to '68 + 57', it must be the case first, that there is a type of utterance such that every token of that type is the same response to '68 + 57', and second, that the two token utterances are tokens of that type. In order for two token utterances to be different responses to the problem '68 + 57', it must be the case first, that there are types of utterance such that each

token of one type is a different response from each token of another type, and second, that one token is a token of one type and the other is a token of the other type. But the point of Wittgenstein's sceptical hypotheses is that the second condition cannot be met in either case. There is no fact of the matter which type a token is a token of.

If there is no such thing as responding one way or another, then there can be no such thing as agreement in responses, and hence, no public language. Therefore, the sceptical solution Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein is no solution at all, because it is subject to the very sceptical hypotheses it is designed to circumvent. This contrasts sharply with Berkeley's sceptical solution. The sceptical hypotheses which lead us to doubt the existence of bodies when they are considered to be mind independent entities lose their force once it is realized that bodies are mind dependent.

One reply to this objection to Wittgenstein's sceptical solution is that public language can get off the ground even if there is no fact of the matter that our responses agree. It is sufficient merely that we judge them to agree. This reply fails on two counts. First, the sceptical hypotheses can be applied again to show that there is no differentiating between judgments of agreement and disagreement. This might not seem so bad. It is only from a foundationalist point of view that one should care whether there is some ultimate fact of the matter which grounds language. But the other problem is that once we abandon the claim that there is a fact of the matter that our responses agree, then we abandon the distinction between public and private language. Even in the public language, we are seen merely to "act unhesitatingly but *blindly*" (p. 87). If a public language is possible so long as it seems to us that our responses agree, then by the same token, the mere fact that my present responses seem to be in accord with my past responses should be sufficient to insure the possibility of a private language. Thus the sceptical solution cannot do the philosophical work it is intended to do of distinguishing between a public and a private language.

Now Kripke has apparently come to recognize the greater power of the sceptical hypotheses, because in an enigmatic footnote added in proof, he states:

If Wittgenstein had been attempting to give a necessary and sufficient condition to show that '125', not '5', is the 'right' response to '68 + 57', he might be charged with circularity. For he might be taken to say that my response is correct if and only if it agrees with that of others. But even if the sceptic and I both accept this criterion in advance, might

not the sceptic maintain that just as I was wrong about what ‘+’ meant in the past, so I was wrong about ‘agree’? Indeed, to attempt to reduce the rule for addition to another rule – “Respond to an addition problem exactly as others do!” – falls foul of Wittgenstein’s strictures on ‘a rule for interpreting a rule’ just as much as any other attempted reduction...

What Wittgenstein *is* doing is describing the utility in our lives of a certain practice. Necessarily he must give this description in our own language. As in the case of any such use of our language, a participant in another form of life might apply various terms in the description (such as “agreement”) in a non-standard ‘quasi-like’ way. Indeed, we may judge that those in a given community ‘agree’, while someone in another form of life would judge that they do not. (p. 146)

His response to this appears to be contained in the very next sentence when he says, “[t]his objection cannot be an objection to Wittgenstein’s solution unless he is to be prohibited from any use of language at all”. True, but what is lacking in Kripke’s response is an account of why, if we can make use of the notion of agreement in spite of the sceptic’s challenge, we cannot or should not go all the way and accept the notion of justified responses, when the only objection raised against that notion is the very same sceptical challenge.

Even more damaging, his response does not indicate how or why public agreement should succeed in a way private agreement cannot. If proceeding blindly is good enough for public language, why is it not good enough for private language? It may be that Kripke is on to this objection as well, because he does concede that, “[m]any things that can be said about one individual on the ‘private’ model of language have analogues regarding the whole community in Wittgenstein’s own model”. However, in what follows he does not explicitly concede that public language and private language are equally well off. The closest he comes is in his closing remark:

I feel some uneasiness may remain regarding these questions. Considerations of time and space, as well as the fact that I might have to abandon the role of advocate and expositor in favor of that of critic, have led me not to carry out a more extensive discussion. (p. 146).

But I would say that by providing an interpretation of the private language argument which is a non-starter, he has not been much of an advocate.

NOTES

* I would like to thank Warren Goldfarb for his helpful suggestions on revising earlier versions of this essay.

¹ In his introductory, Kripke makes the following disclaimer: “So the present paper should be thought of as expounding neither ‘Wittgenstein’s’ argument nor ‘Kripke’s’:

rather Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke, as it presented a problem for him" (p.5).

² Ken Winkler has pointed out that Kripke's claim to use the notion of a sceptical solution in Hume's sense (p.4) is misleading. According to Winkler, Hume's sceptical solution "is what we would call a psychological explanation, part of an empirical theory of human nature with (for Hume) a philosophical point. It is *not* a solution to a 'sceptical philosophical problem' in Kripke's sense, because it does not show that 'ordinary practice or belief is justified' – at least not in any sense of 'justified' that has anything to do with reason or argument. Of course Hume doesn't *blame* us for forming inductive expectations, ... but there is no justification in the text for inflating Hume's unwillingness to oppose common sense in this case into an alternative analysis of 'justification' – one that allows us to say that an expectation is 'justified' even though it is incapable of being supported by argument".

³ The earlier version is found in I. Block (ed.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, xii + 322 pp.)

Harvard University,
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138,
U.S.A.