

Wittgenstein's Rule-Following Paradox and the Objectivity of Meaning

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1. The past few years have seen a revival of interest in Kripke's controversial reading of Wittgenstein's remarks about rule-following.¹ Thus, on the one hand, George Wilson has tried to defend Kripke's claim that Wittgenstein can be understood as providing a sceptical solution to a sceptical problem about meaning – a solution which, though sceptical, can nonetheless, according to Wilson, yield a kind of semantic realism.² On the other hand, John McDowell and other 'new Wittgensteinians' have attempted to show that Wittgenstein intended to dissolve, rather than solve, all philosophical problems about meaning and so intended to leave no room for any philosophical account of meaning whatsoever.³ It seems to me, however, that Wilson's sceptical solution is more scepticism than solution and that McDowell's quietism also leaves untouched a problem that really needs to be addressed. Moreover, I believe that Wittgenstein himself recognized this need.⁴

The problem I have in mind concerns the normativity and objectivity of meaning; it is different from the rule-following paradox, though we are led into the paradox by certain ways of trying to solve it. Contra McDowell, I shall argue that dissolving the paradox leaves the problem, and hence the need for constructive philosophy, still standing. But I shall also argue, contra Wilson, that it is only by

1. Kripke 1982 is commenting on sections 138–242 of Wittgenstein 1958.

2. See Wilson 1994 and 1998. Other recent sympathetic discussions of Kripke's interpretation include Byrne 1996, Zalabardo 1997 and Soames 1998.

3. See McDowell 1992. The 'new Wittgensteinians' – so called because of their stress on the continuity of Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical thought between his early and later work – are well represented in Crary and Read 2000.

4. Contra Wright, who also thinks that Wittgenstein's quietism is not warranted, but who thinks that it is nonetheless real. See, e.g., Wright 1989.

dissolving the paradox that the problem can be solved, and hence a kind of semantic realism made room for.^{5,6}

2. 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.' (1958, #201) 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, 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, p. 22)

This truly devastating, indeed self-defeating, conclusion can be avoided, however. All this takes is to recognize, as Wittgenstein immediately tells us, that the paradox is based on a misunderstanding, which is to think that there is no way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation. He writes:

It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another one standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation. (1958, #201)

Presumably, the suggestion here is not that grasping a rule never is an interpretation – after all, an expression is sometimes understood by being interpreted, i.e., by being explained in other, familiar words – but the suggestion is that not every expression could be understood in this way. Now since, according to Wittgenstein, the paradox

5. Thus I also do not think that a straight solution is a serious contender, contra Millikan 1990 and Heil and Martin 1998, to cite but recent attempts to argue so.

6. I shall not take a stand here on the question how, exactly, Kripke interprets Wittgenstein, nor, a fortiori, on the question whether Kripke's interpretation is accurate to Wittgenstein's text. My focus will be directly on Wittgenstein himself. (I have discussed aspects of Kripke's interpretation and of McDowell's criticism of it in Verheggen 2000.)

lies in the idea that every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule, the suggestion is that it stems 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. And so the paradox does seem to stem from the idea that grasping a rule always is an interpretation. This part of the diagnosis is not disputed by the commentators I am considering. But it is only the preliminary stage of Wittgenstein's diagnosis. What must be investigated next, and what *is* controversial, is the reason why anyone would think that grasping a rule is always an interpretation in the first place. What conception of a rule would have to be in play?

3. According to McDowell, that grasping a rule is always an interpretation is something we would think if we conceived of a rule in such a way that there is always a gap between 'the instruction one received in learning [an] expression and the use one goes on to make of it' (1984, p. 332), between 'the expression of a rule given in training' and 'an action in conformity with it' (1984, p. 340). And we would open such a gap if we conceived of a rule as a mere sound or inscription, something which is in itself devoid of meaning and thus 'normatively inert' (1992, p. 42), that is, something which in itself cannot contribute to determining what course of action is the correct one. As David Finkelstein has recently put it, the paradox 'has its roots in the thought that there is always a gulf between the statement of a rule – a string of words – and the rule's execution or application' (2000, p. 62); it comes from thinking of 'signs as dead' (2000, p. 67). Then, interpretations are required to bridge the gaps between rules and their applications. However, Finkelstein continues, these interpretations will not do, for they themselves are conceived of as mere signs and so they too need to be interpreted. (2000, p. 54) Or, as McDowell puts it, following Wittgenstein more closely, we may be content with an interpretation for a moment, until we think of the interpretation itself and realize that it could be interpreted 'in such a way that acting in conformity with it would require something quite different.' (1984, p. 331) We then start looking for something that would convince us that the first interpretation was appropriate, but this in turn may content us only for a moment, until . . . No matter how we think of that first interpretation which is required by the conception of a rule under consideration, this soon seems to embark us on an infinite regress of interpretations, which

makes it impossible for there to be such a thing as a rule or meaningful expression.

Obviously, the only way to avoid this radical sceptical conclusion is to give up the idea that grasping a rule is always an interpretation and so it is somehow to deal with the thought that motivated such an idea in the first place. This thought is something we could either repudiate or show not to entail the erroneous idea and hence the paradox. Thus, having accepted the 'new Wittgensteinian' diagnosis, we could either stop thinking of signs as dead or show that this thought does not entail that grasping a rule always is an interpretation and so does not entail the paradox. According to McDowell et al., the paradox is avoided if we give up the thought that there is always a gap between a rule and its applications, which is to say, according to them, if we start thinking of signs as used and alive, not always in need of interpretation. Then there is no longer anything problematic about how rules or linguistic expressions determine their applications. They just do, as we discover as soon as we reflect on our everyday linguistic practices. This is what it is for them to have meaning; it is to be used and shared by members of a linguistic community. This is not to say however that Wittgenstein is 'offering another account of the connection between words and their meanings.' (Finkelstein 2000, p. 69) Rather, once we give up the thought that grounded the idea that grasping a rule is always an interpretation, not only is the rule-following paradox dissolved but with it also all other problems about meaning. In particular, '[the] problems about the normative reach of meaning, . . . since they depended on a thesis that we have no reason to accept, stand revealed as illusion.' (McDowell 1992, p. 49)

But is it really true that we have *no* reason to think of linguistic signs as dead? Why then is Wittgenstein so concerned to repudiate this thought? What we must ask at this stage, which the quietists fail to ask, is why anyone should think of signs as dead to begin with, and why anyone should find interesting the question how dead signs can have meaning, that is, something that gives them normative power. What prompts Wittgenstein to consider this question? Is this in fact the question he himself asks when he *starts* the process of reasoning that leads to the paradox?

4. I do not think that the question how dead signs can have meaning is Wittgenstein's starting point. Given his statement of the paradox –

no course of action could be determined by a rule – we may safely surmise that he has at some point asked how a rule could determine a course of action. And I believe that when he considers this question he has in mind, not the mere expression of the rule, which might be regarded as something dead, but the rule itself, something indisputably meaningful and alive. Wittgenstein has reason to wonder how a sign that is meaningful can determine its applications, for he has been developing the view that all there is to the meaning of a word is its use in a language.⁷ To see how this view may create a problem, let me first make more explicit than I have so far what is involved in the claim that a rule or meaningful expression determines its applications.

First of all, it implies that an expression's applications are governed by standards of correctness and that the distinction between correct and incorrect applications depends, at least in part, on what is meant by the expression.⁸ Thus what, to begin with, is at stake in the question how a rule or meaningful expression can determine its applications is what I have called above the *normative* aspect of meaning, the fact that, given what I mean by an expression, I should use it in some ways rather than others if I want to speak truly (or falsely, for that matter). Now, the normative aspect of meaning seems to be incompatible with the claim that meaning is use. How indeed could meaning be use if it is the meaning of an expression that determines how it should be used in given circumstances? As Wittgenstein puts it, if meaning is use 'how is it decided what is the right step to take at any stage?' (1958, #186) How can use, which is finite, determine a potential infinity of applications? (1958, #147) This last question points to a further aspect of meaning, which is also involved in the claim that a rule or meaningful expression determines its applications. What it points to is the *objective* aspect of meaning, according to which, whether the standards of correctness that govern the applications of an expression are met or not, is, at least sometimes, independent of anyone thinking that they are or not. That is, whether I

7. He has done this, in an admittedly unsystematic way, in the first 100 sections of Wittgenstein 1958. Having made some metaphilosophical remarks, he then proceeds, starting in section 138, to address in a sustained way objections to the view that he has sketched earlier. Subsequently, he considerably refines the slogan 'meaning is use'. (See Verheggen 2000 for more on this.)

8. Obviously, for many expressions, it also depends on the way the world is. (Note that I do not want to suggest that there is always an easy or unique way to draw the line between the two factors contributing to the distinction.)

have spoken truly or not on a given occasion is, at least sometimes, an objective matter, independent of what I or anyone may think of it, indeed independent of my or anyone's actually establishing whether or not I have spoken truly.⁹ Now, the objective aspect of meaning, too, seems to be incompatible with the claim that meaning is use. For how can people's activities somehow establish the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of their expressions if this distinction is supposed to be drawn objectively? There are thus two sides to the problem Wittgenstein initially considers, and I believe it is crucial to keep them separate, for, as we shall see, not every account of meaning that makes room for its normative aspect also makes room for its objective aspect.¹⁰ For now, let me stress that, in my view, the problem Wittgenstein initially considers – call it the determination problem – and which will eventually end up in the paradox, stems from thinking of signs, not as dead, but precisely as used. And, to anticipate, this is not a problem which will simply disappear as soon as we remove the direct source of the paradox, that is, the thought (whatever exactly it is) that generates the idea that grasping a rule always is an interpretation.

How then does Wittgenstein start addressing the determination problem? He does this by examining a traditional philosophical answer to it, an answer which we might as well call semantic Platonism.¹¹

Given the problems that the view that meaning is use seems to generate, it may be tempting to reconsider those theories that postulate something outside of use to play the role of providing objective standards for the applications of words, something to which applications must conform if they are to be correct. This is precisely the kind of conception of meaning Wittgenstein examines in the sections preceding the paradox. According to this conception, to grasp a rule or the meaning of a word is to grasp an ideal model, in the form of, e.g., a picture or sample (1958, #73), of what the word is to be applied to, if it is to be applied correctly. Thus a word derives its meaning from its connection to some kind of extra-

9. As McDowell has put it, following Wright, the patterns of application of our linguistic expressions are 'ratification-independent'. (1984, p. 325)

10. McDowell would say, rather, that it is important to keep the objective aspect in mind, for normativity without objectivity really is illusory normativity, and so meaning that is normative but not objective really is illusory meaning. (1984, p. 336)

11. Following, among others, Pears 1988, and McDowell 1992.

linguistic, abstract entity, indeed, a rule or meaning, which may be said to contain 'the whole use' of the word whose meaning it provides (leading Wittgenstein ironically to observe that grasping such a thing must be a 'superlative' fact (1958, #192)). Now it is a short step from this conception of meaning and rule-following to the paradox. Wittgenstein is indeed at pains to argue that, if this is the picture, then we can never mean anything by any sign, we can never follow any rule. That is, far from accounting for meaning and rule-following, semantic Platonism in fact leads to the paradox and semantic scepticism. This is so, Wittgenstein argues, because whatever it is that may come before the mind when we allegedly grasp one of the abstract items that Platonism postulates, it is something which is in itself semantically opaque or indeterminate, say, a drawing or a formula.¹² That is, it is something which needs to be interpreted before it can sort out correct applications from incorrect ones, and something which could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus, to use one of Wittgenstein's examples, a sample of pure green could be understood as a sample of pure green, but it could also be understood as a sample of all that is greenish. (1958, #73) As Wittgenstein continues in #201, each interpretation that we give may content us for a moment, until we think of yet another one standing behind it. Moreover, each interpretation needs itself to be connected with some extra-linguistic entity that provides it with meaning. What this shows, Wittgenstein concludes, is that 'any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning.' (1958, #198) In effect, they do no better than the items of which they are interpretations. In short, then, if abstract entities were to provide words with meaning, for any application of a given expression, there would always be a way to count this as correct, or incorrect, as the case may be. So there would be neither correctness nor incorrectness here, no standard, hence no meaning.

The way to avoid this radical scepticism is, again, to give up the idea that grasping a rule is always an interpretation. However, the exact way in which, I am arguing, Wittgenstein recommends that we do this is significantly different from McDowell's. And this is due to our deeply different understanding of why one would think that

12. Moreover, nothing that may come before the mind when we understand a word is either sufficient or necessary for us to understand the word. See Wittgenstein 1958, sections 139–55, for the full argument.

grasping a rule is always an interpretation in the first place. For McDowell et al., it is because, for whatever reason, we think of signs as dead; and so the faulty conception of what it is to grasp a rule is abandoned, and the paradox has disappeared, as soon as we think of signs as alive in our linguistic practices. I, on the other hand, believe that we are committed to thinking that grasping a rule is always an interpretation if we endorse semantic Platonism. So the only way to relinquish this conception of what it is to grasp a rule is to give up semantic Platonism. Thus, contra McDowell et al., Platonism is not invoked as 'a desperate attempt to block the infinite regress of interpretations' by 'positing special items [which are] intrinsically significant' (Finkelstein, 2000, p. 55) and which thus provide 'the last interpretation' (McDowell, 1992, p. 48). Rather, Platonism is the view that generates this regress in the first place. Moreover, it is not the only view that generates this regress. So no diagnosis of the rule-following paradox will be complete until all the culprits have been identified.

Platonism is not the only culprit because it is not the fundamental culprit. The fundamental culprit is a certain conception of what it takes to solve the determination problem. Platonism is simply one instance of an attempted solution of that type. Recall that for Wittgenstein the determination problem arises because he has started developing the view that meaning is use. This view seems to be incompatible both with the idea that it is in virtue of its meaning that a word determines what use is either correct or incorrect and with the idea that whether a given use of words is correct or not is independent of what anyone deems it to be. These aspects of meaning suggest that the ultimate source of meaning cannot be the way people use their words but must be something that is completely independent of it. And thus they have prompted some philosophers to conclude that the determination problem could be solved only by maintaining that things that are completely independent of linguistic activities could provide the standards of use and hence the meanings of our words.

Wittgenstein focuses on Platonism as the most familiar attempt to solve the problem in this way. But Platonism is not the only solution that one could offer along these lines. Instead of postulating abstract entities to provide words with standards, one could appeal to the various features of objects and events that surround us. These would fare no better, however. For what leads to the conclusion that

grasping a rule is always an interpretation, and hence what leads to the paradox, is not the claim that entities of some specific kind should provide standards of correctness. It is the claim that entities of any kind, conceived of in total independence of linguistic practices, could perform that task. This claim is the real culprit, that is, the real source of the idea that grasping a rule is always an interpretation and hence the real source of the paradox. Wittgenstein's repudiation of all items conceived of in that way is at bottom the same for all. The very idea of meaning resting solely on the association of words with extra-linguistic entities is incoherent because we in fact need a language to be able to do what is alleged to provide us with one in the first place. We need something to do the grasping or associating, something that fixes what it is that we are connecting the word with, and that something cannot be in need of interpretation. But any non-linguistic or non-conceptual item that we may think of, needs to be interpreted. Thus the association between words and extra-linguistic entities cannot take place. And so connections of this kind cannot be what ultimately provides our words with meaning.

The quietists are right, then, in maintaining that it makes no sense to ask how dead signs can have meaning. And this may suggest that there is after all no deep disagreement as to what the quietists and I take to be the source of the paradox, since the Platonist conception, which, I believe, is the main instance of the kind of conception that leads to the paradox, forces us to think of linguistic signs as dead. In response, let me stress that, for one thing, the quietists consider Platonism as a possible solution to the paradox and not as the direct source of it. To repeat, the quietists never say what motivates the question how dead signs can have meaning in the first place. Second, considering Platonism and thus conceiving of linguistic signs as dead is not gratuitous and initially without merit; it is prompted by reflection on the determination problem, which itself arises when we think of signs as used (contra McDowell et al. for whom thinking of signs as used is part of the dissolution of the paradox). But then the determination problem still needs to be addressed after we have abandoned the faulty conception. Thus my way of reconstructing the argument that leads to the paradox also does not make it immediately obvious whether the paradox is to be solved sceptically or simply dissolved. For McDowell et al., it is obviously dissolved since the conception of a rule that leads to it has

been revealed as faulty, and this conception was the only source of all problems about meaning. In my view, it is much less obvious since, even though the demand for extra-linguistic items that would, by themselves, provide the standards, and hence the meanings, of our linguistic expressions has been shown to be unmeetable, still, as I have just said, the question that first prompted our examination of the Platonist kind of items remains. We still want to know how a rule, that is, a sign which is used, can determine its applications. We cannot be content simply with showing that it is a mistake to think that entities of some kind could, by themselves, provide standards of application for our expressions. Nor of course can we forego these standards altogether. But before I address this, I look briefly at Wilson's reading of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the paradox. Since his has much in common with mine, expounding it will help to clarify the reasons why I think Wittgenstein intended the paradox to be dissolved rather than solved sceptically, as Wilson thinks.¹³

5. Wilson distinguishes between two sceptical conclusions, one of which, he maintains, Wittgenstein accepts, the other of which he rejects. Wilson argues that Wittgenstein rejects the paradox, which is the expression of a '*radical* sceptical conclusion', according to which 'no one ever means anything by any term'. (1998, p. 106) However, Wilson continues, Wittgenstein accepts the (alleged) source of the radical conclusion, which he calls the '*basic* sceptical conclusion', according to which there are no individual facts (i.e., facts about an individual, including social facts about her) that fix any set of properties or objective and exemplifiable conditions-in-the-world as the standard of correctness for the individual's use of a given general term. (1998, pp. 106–7) According to Wilson, such facts are needed if one subscribes, as does the semantic sceptic, to a 'classical realist' account of meaning. According to classical realism, if someone means something by a term, then there is a set of properties that have been established by facts about that individual as the meaning-constituting standard of correctness for the application of that term. (1998, pp. 106–7) However, as stated in the basic sceptical conclusion, such facts cannot be obtained. For 'if a set of mind and language-independent properties were to be established as the standard of correctness for a

13. Let me stress that Wilson takes his Wittgenstein to be Kripke's, but I am interested in his reading qua reading of Wittgenstein.

term “T”, then users of “T” would have to have some kind of pre-linguistic “grasp” of properties-in-the-world that allowed them to form the semantical intentions that purportedly establish certain of the properties as the standard in question.’ (1998, p. 109) Wilson does not make explicit why this condition would have to be satisfied, but presumably it is because, if the grasp were linguistic, the question would then arise, what fixes the meaning of the terms involved in that grasp? Now, Wilson continues, Wittgenstein thinks that ‘we can make no sense of the idea that properties can be pre-linguistically “singled out” in this way, nor of the standard-fixing *de re* intention that classical realism invokes.’ (1998, p. 110) Again, Wilson does not explain why Wittgenstein thinks we can make no sense of this idea, but presumably it is because whatever pre-linguistic candidate we may consider would be open to various interpretations and so hopeless as something that can fix the relevant properties. As I have said, the very idea of standards being provided by extra-linguistic entities conceived of independently of linguistic practices makes no sense (though Wilson himself never draws this conclusion explicitly).

Thus, according to Wilson, Wittgenstein is a kind of sceptic, since he accepts the sceptical conclusion that there can be no standard-fixing individual facts. He is not, however, a radical sceptic, since he rejects the conclusion that no one ever means anything by any term. Rather, he solves the paradox sceptically by showing that the lack of standard-fixing individual facts does not entail it. It would entail it if we endorsed the classical realist account of what provides standards of application for an individual’s terms. But we need not do this. We can dismiss this account and come up with an alternative one, which, according to Wilson, is exactly what Wittgenstein does, by appealing to the linguistic practices of the individual’s community (on which more shortly).

For Wilson’s Wittgenstein, then, the real culprit or source of the paradox is classical realism. This is what lies behind the claim that grasping a rule is always an interpretation. As Wilson puts it, it is the idea that the rules an individual follows, that is, the contents of the intentions that are to determine the correct applications of her terms, demand classical realist ‘interpretations’ which would be represented by properties-in-the-world. (1998, p. 110) This is the misunderstanding upon which the paradox is based.

Once we see through the truly unwittgensteinian jargon Wilson employs, his reading of Wittgenstein’s diagnosis of the paradox has,

as I have said, much in common with the one I have offered. To begin with, his classical realism is identical with my semantic Platonism.¹⁴ Both claim that the standards governing the applications of our words are to be provided by extra-linguistic, abstract entities. And both Wilson and I believe that Wittgenstein's claim is that this view can only lead to the paradox since such entities, even if they existed, would be of no help. Further, we both stress that the initial question which, given the Platonist or classical realist kind of answer, leads to the paradox, does not simply disappear once these answers have been revealed as hopeless. The question how a rule or meaningful expression can determine its applications is not a product of the conception of meaning that leads to the paradox and so to be rejected together with the paradox. Rather, it is the very question to which the conception of meaning that leads to the paradox is an answer, and so still remains to be dealt with after we have discarded that conception. Wilson acknowledges this when he calls the question, 'What is it for a formula or the meaning of a formula to determine the next step?', Wittgenstein's 'central question' in the rule-following remarks¹⁵, and when he maintains that Wittgenstein's aim is to replace the (radical) sceptic's conception of normativity by another one. (1994, pp. 385–6) There are however also important differences between Wilson's and my readings of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the paradox.

I start with a difference that may at first appear innocuous but which, I believe, is a symptom of some substantial disagreement. This has to do with our explanation of why standards of correctness cannot be provided by abstract entities. Wilson thinks that what we have here is an indeterminacy problem, whereas I think it is a regress problem.¹⁶ Wilson contends that the problem is one of indeterminacy because no individual fact can determine which 'interpretation' or property among an 'indeterminate number of possible alternatives' is the one that is to provide the standard for the rule under the individual's consideration. (1998, p. 111, fn 12) As mentioned earlier, that

14. Wilson himself has told me so in correspondence. See also Wilson 1994, where he claims that "Pears's 'meaning Platonism' does not differ essentially from Kripke's 'classical realism' about meaning." (p. 375)

15. As we shall see, however, his understanding of what is at stake in the question is different from mine.

16. As many commentators have thought; as we have seen, McDowell and Finkelstein among others.

individual fact would have to be pre-linguistic, since it is supposed to consist in the grasping of things that provide some terms with meaning in the first place. And, to repeat, the reason why we cannot make sense of individuals' singling out properties pre-linguistically is that whatever pre-linguistic fact or way of grasping we may consider would itself have to be interpreted, i.e., could be taken in different ways, so that different applications could all be said to be correct or incorrect, as the case may be. Now this in itself already suggests to me that it is a mistake to think of the allegedly standard-providing properties as interpretations which cannot be established because we cannot settle on any particular one. The problem rather seems to be that these properties cannot be fixed because whatever way we may think of doing this is something that would need interpretation. And this, as we know, would soon lead to an infinite regress of interpretations.

Now I further think that, regarding the problem with Platonist or classical realist entities as one of infinite regress, not only fits better the letter of Wittgenstein's text, specifically in sections 198 and 201 quoted earlier (see also §§86–7). It also fits better the spirit of what I take to be Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the paradox, identifying the basic culprit, not as Platonism or classical realism, but as an entire conception of how standards, and hence meaning, can be given. According to this conception, not just abstract items but all the items we can think of, by themselves, fail to provide standards and meaning. They all fail for the same basic reason: we need a language to determine which aspect of the internal or external item we are settling on. That is, we need to interpret the things that we are somehow apprehending for them to be able to provide standards and meaning. But it is not as if we can keep doing this until we reach the last interpretation, for there is no such thing. Thus one main difference between Wilson's reading and mine is his failure to realize how deep is Wittgenstein's criticism of what leads to the paradox. It is not just classical realism which is the culprit and reduced to absurdity, but the general conception of meaning – the conception of how to solve the determination problem – of which classical realism is but an instance.

The second main difference concerns the structure of the argument that leads to the paradox. Though Wilson recognizes that the determination problem does not simply disappear once the direct source of the paradox, i.e., for him, classical realism, has been

rejected, he makes no mention of the reason why the problem is an urgent one for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's positive view that semantic standards are grounded in linguistic practices is not merely the solution, sceptical or otherwise, to the determination problem, but it is the view that generates the problem to begin with. I believe this, and the other difference I have discussed between our readings of Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the paradox, contribute to explaining why Wilson favours a sceptical solution and I a dissolution as Wittgenstein's treatment of the paradox, to which I now turn.

6. Since the problem of how a rule or meaningful expression determines its applications remains after we have rejected the conception of meaning that leads to the paradox, what we need is a conception of meaning that would allow us to solve that problem. According to Wittgenstein, we will be able to do this if we have 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 distinction between correct and incorrect applications of words cannot be made a priori by invoking abstract entities or external items to which they conform or not. But it is something that can be ascertained only a posteriori, on the basis of actual applications. The standards of use are not to be found outside of use, after all, but within it. Thus we must address the determination problem by looking more closely at our linguistic practices. This much, the proponent of the sceptical solution and I agree on.

But before I discuss in more detail the results we gather respectively by so looking, let me explain why I think that this replacement of one conception of meaning by another constitutes a dissolution of, rather than a sceptical solution to, the paradox. As I have said, this may not be immediately obvious. For my reading could be construed as if I did after all, like Wilson, take Wittgenstein to accept a sceptical conclusion, the conclusion, as I see it, that no extra-linguistic items of any kind could supply the standards of application and hence the meanings of our words. And it could be construed as if I did take him to go 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 the above suggests.

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 extra-linguistic items that would provide words with standards and hence with meaning independently of any linguistic activities. That is, the proponent of the sceptical solution thinks that there is only one fully satisfactory way to solve the determination problem and so to fulfil the demand that meaning be normative and objective. And she thinks that anything short of her way of doing it can only be a poor substitute – otherwise, there would be nothing to be sceptical about. I believe this assessment of the position held by the proponent of the sceptical solution is confirmed by Wilson when he claims to understand the sceptic who finds the classical realist account of meaning to be 'natural, powerful, and intuitively persuasive'. Wilson also doubts that there is much substance to the dispute between those who would rather see Wittgenstein as a therapist dissolving the paradox and those who would rather see him as a sceptic solving the paradox sceptically. (1994, p. 385) The suggestion here is that this will not affect whatever positive claims we subsequently make about meaning. It is just that, depending on our initial attitude, we will be content enough with what we have, or we will think that we are missing something. This is precisely where, I believe, Wilson errs. And this is due to his failure to recognize the power and ramifications of Wittgenstein's criticism of classical realism. Once this is fully acknowledged, that is, once it is acknowledged that the sceptic really is making an incoherent demand and thus approaching the determination problem in the wrong way, we should lose any sympathy we might have had for classical realism and start thinking harder about other ways of addressing the problem. Once we do this, it will turn out that the disagreement between the sceptic and Wittgenstein does not concern simply the kind of attitude to adopt towards the same account of meaning, but that the disagreement is a substantial one, concerning the very kind of account of meaning that can be given. What then, to begin with, is the sceptic's account?

7. 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. Thus meaning-ascriptions have assertibility conditions captured by what Wilson calls 'normative conditionals' of this type: if someone means something by a term at a given time, then she must apply the term to instances of the item that competent members of her community agree to apply the term to. (1994, p. 383) 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 these standards is a linguistic community's view about them. 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. No wonder, indeed, that she persists in calling her solution sceptical. To call it straight would sound like cheating, so far short does it fall of what she was originally seeking. What we have here 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. But then it looks as if 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 approach altogether, confirming the conclusion already reached above.

Wilson appears to disagree with this, however, when he maintains that solving the sceptical problem sceptically does not commit Wittgenstein to non-factualism about meaning-ascriptions. That is, according to Wilson, the sceptical solution does not commit Wittgenstein to saying that there are no facts in the world that meaning-ascriptions correctly describe (and indeed, since classical realism concerns all meaningful sentences,¹⁷ it does not commit him to saying that there are no facts in the world that declarative sentences

17. Note that this inference is not obvious to everyone. For discussion, see, e.g., Wright 1984 and Boghossian 1989.

correctly describe). (1998, p. 114) For these facts are different from the individual standard-fixing facts that the sceptic was hopelessly seeking. That is, the facts that make it true that someone means such and such by her utterances are not to be confused with facts about her that would purport to establish the meaning-constituting standards of the terms contained in those utterances. Surely, Wilson argues, Wittgenstein did not wish to say that the fact that 'game' does not have classical realist satisfaction conditions entails that sentences containing 'game' cannot describe facts. (1998, p. 115) I heartily agree with Wilson here. But the question is, what account of meaning will enable us to maintain that? Obviously, if the sceptical solution does not commit Wittgenstein to non-factualism, he must give us an account of what it is for a sentence correctly to describe a fact which is different from that of the classical semantic realist. The latter holds that a descriptive sentence is true if the truth-condition or possible fact that supplies the meaning of that sentence and the standard of truth for its uses actually obtains. (Wilson 1998, p. 106) But what kind of account is available to the proponent of the sceptical solution?

Recall that, according to the sceptical solution, an ascription of meaning to an individual's utterance is justified if the applications of her words agree consistently with those made by competent members of her community. Such ascriptions are further justified in terms of the role and utility they have in people's lives. Now, Wilson contends, using these resources, Wittgenstein could 'offer his own account of what uses of language can count as fact describing.' (1998, p. 114) It is no doubt not difficult to imagine utterances which it would be useful to characterize as fact-describing. But, as Michael Kremer has recently argued, the crucial question is, in what sense of 'fact' do declarative sentences describe facts? In particular, to focus on Kremer's primary concern, in what sense of 'fact' do meaning-ascriptions describe facts? If it is in the deflationary sense of 'fact' recommended by Wittgenstein (1958, #136), then there is no way we can have semantic realism. For, 'if to call something "true" or "a fact" is to do nothing more than assert it, and if the assertibility conditions for meaning-attributions are those given by the sceptical solution, then there is no sense in which, given two communities, endorsing two different norms of meaning, one of them can be said to be right and the other wrong.' (2000, p. 582) An individual may justify the use of her words by appealing to its conformity to her

community's use. But the community itself can look no further than itself in order to ground or justify its own practices. These are based 'on the brute empirical fact that the members of a community *agree* for the most part in their inclination to "go on"'. (2000, p. 578) But, Kremer continues, quoting Kripke, 'there is no *objective* fact . . . that explains our agreement in particular cases.' (2000, p. 580) Thus, Kremer rightly concludes, the 'facts' correctly described by meaning-ascriptions can only be 'quasi-subjective'.¹⁸ Which facts they are depends on the community in relation to which the ascriptions are made. And, as I said earlier, which of a word's applications are correct or not depends on which applications the community using the word deems to be correct or not. Thus it looks as if, for Wilson, giving up the sceptic's quest for extra-linguistic items is tantamount to renouncing any serious notion of objectivity. What this also shows is that, as I warned earlier, it is possible to give an account of meaning that makes room for its normative aspect without thereby making room for its objective aspect.

8. There are those who might think that renouncing any serious notion of objectivity is precisely what Wittgenstein is doing. He does say after all that it is a mistake 'to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules' (1958, #81), that 'the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules.' (1958, #84) But, he asks, 'are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to [a] word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it?' (1958, #80) The answer of course is that we are not to say that. Now, I take it that these remarks are part and parcel of Wittgenstein's attack on semantic Platonism and, more generally, on a certain conception of what provides words with meaning. They come early in his investigations, when he is still trying to persuade us that the meaning of a word lies in its use in a language. The above remarks acknowledge the consequences of this view. If meaning is use, it is not as if there always are clear and fixed rules that determine how to apply a word on each and every occasion of use. The absence of extra-linguistic entities that could, by themselves, provide words with

18. Kremer's criticism is limited to the incompatibility of Wilson/Kripke's sceptical solution with semantic realism. He presents no diagnosis of the paradox and is also non-committal as to what Wittgenstein's views are.

standards entails that standards may not be rigid. At the same time, though, a vague rule is still a rule; bumpy rails are still rails. But how can this be? If meaning is use, in what way can we still say that a meaningful expression determines its applications? Wittgenstein confronts this question head-on only after having already loosened the grip we might have had on the idea of fixed rules.

That Wittgenstein does wish to offer a substitute solution to the determination problem, and that he wishes to offer a solid one, and not a sceptical one, is confirmed by the following remarks. Of course, he insists, there is a sense in which you mean now that, say, when you give the order '+2' to a pupil, he ought to write 1002 after 1000, even if you do not think of that step now. (1958, #187. See also #693.) Of course there is a sense in which, when you grasp the meaning of a word, its future use is already present in what you grasp. (1958, #195) But in order to figure out what that sense is, how this is possible, we have to scrutinize our linguistic practices and 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)

I find these remarks suggestive, both against the proponent of the sceptical solution and against the quietist. Against the quietist, they suggest that Wittgenstein did not intend his positive remarks to serve merely as a reminder that in everyday linguistic life everything is perfectly in order and that we should not be frightened by the sceptic into thinking that our linguistic life is merely an illusion. There is also certainly no suggestion in the paragraph of #201 in which he contrasts both ways of grasping a rule, one that relies on interpretation, the other on linguistic activity, 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 account of meaning is philosophically acceptable. I think that we should regard Wittgenstein's positive remarks, rather, as an answer to the determination problem, on equal footing with the sceptic's attempted answer, but of course encouraging a radically new way of dealing with the problem. The last observation also tells against the proponent of the sceptical solution. For it suggests that the incoherence of the sceptic's demand does not entail that we must forego the claim that meaning is objective, that nothing but the linguistic practices of a community can ground linguistic standards. Again, it

only entails that we must look more closely at our linguistic practices, in particular, at what it is that makes them possible, to find out how meaning can be objective. This is something that lies in front of our eyes, not behind or beyond them.

What we must pay closer attention to, is not something that stands completely independent of our linguistic practices in the sense that by itself it can somehow provide our words with standards and meaning. Nor is it our linguistic practices themselves, divorced from the environment in which they take place. What we must pay closer attention to, is the relation between the use of words and the various items to which they are applied. Only then will we be in a position to understand how linguistic standards can be objectively grounded. Let me elaborate on this a bit, starting with some of Wittgenstein's positive remarks about meaning and rule-following.

9. These remarks are admittedly sketchy, which explains why they have been taken in different ways by different commentators. Central among them, though, are two crucial notions: that of custom – to obey a rule is a custom (1958, #199) – and that of agreement – ‘the word “agreement” and the word “rule” are related to one another’ (1958, #224). Now, as a description of our actual linguistic practices, these remarks are uncontroversial. People's use of words does tend to conform to the linguistic norms of their community. The question is, what is the philosophical significance of this observation? For the quietist, as we know, strictly speaking there is none. Wittgenstein's positive remarks are only meant 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. However, while there may be no problem, we should still like to understand why this is so. As I have argued, Wittgenstein does not come up with the claim that language is a practice in order to dissolve a problem about meaning. That claim is what creates the problem to begin with. Having acknowledged this, it will not do, I think, simply to declare that there is no problem after all. So much against the quietist's reading of Wittgenstein's positive remarks. As for

the reading offered by the proponent of the sceptical solution, it may initially seem more plausible. Wittgenstein's positive remarks may initially be construed as saying that a community's agreement as to how to use words is necessary because it is only against shared practices that an individual's applications can be judged to be correct or not. On reflection, however, as we have seen, this reading cannot be right. For, though it makes room for the normativity of meaning, it makes no room for its objectivity. It leaves no room for the possibility of a community as a whole being mistaken, something for which Wittgenstein definitely wants to leave room. (He does deny explicitly that it is human agreement that decides what is true and what is false. (1958, #241)) What this suggests to me is that the notion of agreement is meant to play a different role in Wittgenstein's positive remarks. And understanding this is the key to understanding how standards, and hence meaning, can be objective.

Though there is ample recognition, among commentators of all kinds, of the emphasis Wittgenstein puts on the notion of agreement, there is little discussion of what makes agreement, that is, shared linguistic practices, possible. And this, I think, is what blinds them to the source of objectivity. Let us then ask what makes shared linguistic practices possible, what is this 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 of us. Now I find this observation extremely significant. For what it underlines is that the ways in which we use our words are not just up to us; in the first instance at least, they are dependent on the various external objects and events to which we apply our words. Thus, while reflecting on our shared linguistic practices, we should not lose sight of their crucial connection to an independent world. And this is what should form the basis of a new approach to the question how a meaningful expression can determine its applications. Nothing can do this job without our contribution; but then our contribution, insofar as it is shared, is itself not possible without something that is independent of it. As a result, not only does it make no sense to think of meaning as being grounded by something independent of

our practices, it also makes no sense to think of our practices as being independent of what makes them possible. It is from this indispensable relation that objective linguistic standards emerge.

Now, one may wonder why this apparently simple observation has escaped the proponent of the sceptical solution or, as is more likely, if it has not, why she still believes that only a sceptical solution to the paradox can be provided. The above observation may indeed be what Wilson has in mind when he emphasizes the role of the external items to which a community agrees to apply its words. (1994, p. 383) This is presumably what makes room, in his view, for a kind of factualism and thus semantic realism. But why then does he still think of his account as a sceptical one? I suspect it is for this reason. Once the role of external items in grounding our shared linguistic practices is acknowledged, one may start asking why it is *communal* practices which are necessary for the possibility of standards. Why could linguistic standards not emerge from the relation between an *individual's* practices and her environment?¹⁹ Why does Wittgenstein keep insisting on agreement? The usual answer to this is that, once the human contribution to linguistic standards, as well as that of one's environment, is recognized, there is no making sense of a socially isolated individual distinguishing between what is and what seems right to her. However she feels inclined to apply a word is the right way to apply it. So, if our contribution is as indispensable to the possibility of linguistic standards as the contribution of the world surrounding us, human contribution must be communal contribution. For then we have the agreed upon community's practices to provide the standards against which any individual's use of words can be assessed. But this means that we are left with a kind of sceptical position after all. For however a community will feel inclined to apply a word will be the right way to do it.

There is, to my mind, no doubt that Wittgenstein thought that some kind of agreement is necessary to provide linguistic standards. But, as we have seen, he also seemed to think that the very standards that govern the individual use of words do govern their communal use as well. In effect, to deny this is still not fully to appreciate the contribution of the world surrounding us in determining our linguistic standards. Once we do appreciate this we should recognize

19. A view advocated by Pears 1988. Individualistic readings of Wittgenstein include McGinn 1984 and Baker and Hacker 1984.

that the very things that make it possible for us to say anything at all also make it possible, at least on occasion, for all of us to be wrong.

Thus, again, the above remaining scepticism should encourage us to reexamine the role that Wittgenstein wants the notion of agreement to play in his positive account. Rather than thinking of actual communal practices as necessary to provide any individual's use of words with standards, perhaps we should ask what makes such practices possible in the first place. Why is it that, where an individual by herself fails, a community succeeds? Both interact with the same independent world. Why then does it take a community to talk about it? It is not because a community can be of one mind, for this would not quite generate talk about *it*. If we really are to talk about independent facts, we cannot have this talk ultimately depend on a community's agreement as to what the facts are. To stress, as Wilson does, the importance of the facts that ground community agreement is not sufficient to account for objectivity. What needs to be addressed is the question how facts can be regarded as objective if they are necessarily filtered through human responses to them. How exactly does community agreement enable us to achieve this? What kind of agreement is needed?

These are not questions I shall take up here.²⁰ The aim of this paper has been to diagnose properly the problem that prompts Wittgenstein's positive remarks about meaning and rule-following and, in particular, the role the paradox and its treatment play in his overall argument. Only once this is done can we hope to reject the false choice between scepticism and quietism and so can we hope to say something both robust and illuminating about meaning. Wilson is right in suggesting that Wittgenstein may occupy a position between classical realism and quietism. But the position he himself suggests still succumbs to scepticism in the end. This is because he pays insufficient attention to one thing the quietists are right about, which is that Wittgenstein rejected all traditional philosophical theories and assumptions. It is only by following Wittgenstein down this new road that we can come to understand how meaning is objective and thus have a kind of semantic realism.

On a final note, let me add a few more words about how my anti-sceptical and anti-quietist reading of Wittgenstein is compatible

20. For possible answers, see Williams 1999, especially chapter 6.

with his claims that philosophy 'may not advance any kind of theory' and that all philosophical problems are to be addressed by examining our ordinary practices and beliefs. (1958, #109) It is pretty straightforward how these claims tell against the sceptic's stance. Our ordinary beliefs about meaning are in no way sceptical; rather, ordinary practices betray our belief that linguistic standards are objective. And this belief is not one that can be explained with theories that postulate something that is hidden to ordinary, public view. However, against the quietist's stance, it is a belief that does need explaining.²¹ What motivates this need is not a philosophical fabrication; the determination problem stems from a clash between perfectly ordinary beliefs, as do many classical philosophical problems, to be sure.

21. Perhaps I should add that this is what distinguishes my position from McDowell's, not only, as should be obvious, his later position but also his earlier position. McDowell has indeed not always regarded Wittgenstein as a full-blown quietist. In his earlier paper, he found in Wittgenstein's writings a problem about 'how a performance can be not an attempt to act on an interpretation and be a case of going by a rule.' The solution, McDowell continued, was 'to situate our conception of meaning and understanding within the framework of communal practices.' (1984, p. 342) This he called a 'middle position' in that it makes room for objectivity while rejecting Platonism. (1984, p. 353) McDowell now thinks that his former article was 'too hospitable' to constructive philosophy and he urges us to take all the positive remarks Wittgenstein makes about meaning as purely descriptive of our linguistic practices. (1992, fn 8) Now I too recommend that we scrutinize our linguistic practices in order to address problems about meaning. So what is the difference between us? Well, obviously, as I have been insisting, the difference is that this kind of scrutiny is not merely therapeutic but in some way explanatory of what makes meaning possible. What I believe examination of our linguistic practices, and in particular our training practices, may yield are not *sufficient* conditions for any expression meaning what it does – this would require a reductionist account of meaning which, I agree with McDowell, cannot be obtained since there is no explaining meaning in terms of the association of 'dead' signs with something non-linguistic. Rather, what we may seek are *necessary* conditions for the possibility of there being any meaningful expressions at all. These are conditions of the kind the earlier McDowell seemed to accept when he said that 'acting within a communal custom' was the only way to achieve understanding without interpretation. (1984, p. 352) However, it has always remained mysterious just what about this communal picture makes objective standards possible. Statements such as this cut no ice for me: 'the response to Wittgenstein's problem works because a linguistic community is conceived as bound together, not by a match in mere externals (facts accessible to just anyone), but by a capacity for a meeting of minds.' (1984, p. 357) In other words, the early McDowell addressed the question what makes it possible for an individual to understand words without interpretation. The answer was: membership in a linguistic community. But he never asked what makes it possible for a community to engage in linguistic practices to begin with, why shared practices, as opposed to individual ones, make objective standards possible. But this, I have argued, is the kind of constructive philosophy Wittgenstein calls for. I have said more about this in Verheggen 1995 and 2000.

Wittgenstein's innovativeness lies in his advice as to how to deal with that clash, not by looking away from what caused it, but by looking more closely at what caused it, 'not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.' (1958, #109) Thus by reflecting on our linguistic practices, we do not simply remind ourselves that they are unproblematic, but we can gain a better understanding of what makes them possible.²²

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