

## Yet Another Skeptical Solution \*

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What is it that confers a meaning to a sign? This is no easy question, but quite a number of philosophers seem to concur that the key concept here is that of rule-following.<sup>1</sup> But what is it to follow a rule? This is, once again, no easy question. What is worse, in the literature there is a well-known argument that purports to show that, in fact, there is no such thing. The argument in question is often referred to as “Kripkenstein’s Paradox” for while most commentators believe that Kripke was the first to discuss the argument, Kripke has maintained that its paternity must be ascribed to Wittgenstein. Maybe the argument is Kripke’s, maybe it is Wittgenstein’s, maybe there is also a sense in which it is nobody’s argument: after all, Kripke’s attitude towards it is ambivalent, and among those who agree with him in ascribing its paternity to Wittgenstein some think that though the Austrian philosopher actually discussed the argument, he did not believe it sound. Be that as it may, Kripkenstein’s conclusion has seemed unacceptable to most philosophers, and his attempt to show that the notion that there is no such thing as following a rule should not be regarded as paradoxical, his “skeptical solution”, has not found many followers. My two cents is that while the *pars destruens* of Kripkenstein’s view (that is: the paradox) is basically right, its *pars construens* (that is: the skeptical solution) needs revision. The main goal of this paper is to provide such a revision.

In the paper’s first section I briefly introduce Kripkenstein’s Paradox. Afterwards, in the second section, I explain why I believe that Kripkenstein’s skeptical solution needs revision and how I think it should be revised, and in the next two sections I outline two different strategies to carry this revision out. The paper’s fifth and final section is devoted to a brief discussion of the issue of semantic dis-course.

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<sup>1</sup> As far as I can see, there are two different lines of reasoning that may be developed to support such a view. According to the first one the point is, on the one hand, that a sign having a meaning depends on the fact that people happen to mean something by it and, on the other, that the mental state of meaning something by a sign must be analyzed in terms of rule-following. According to the second line of reasoning the point is that a sign has a meaning only if there are rules for its use and to say that a linguistic rule exists is to say that there is someone who follows it.

### **1. Meaning Skepticism**

You can desire a new job without desiring any particular job, but you cannot follow a rule without following one particular rule. Accordingly, Kripkenstein argues that there is no such thing as rule-following by arguing that there is no such thing as following one particular rule and not another one.

Take, for instance, the rule governing the use of “green”, namely something like:

An application of “green” is correct if and only if it is an application to something whose color is similar enough to the colors the objects of certain paradigmatic applications seemed to have during the relevant paradigmatic application.<sup>2</sup>

Now take the following Goodman-like rule:

An application of “green” is correct if and only if (1) it was performed at or before time T and is an application to something whose color is similar enough to the colors the objects of certain paradigmatic applications seemed to have during the relevant paradigmatic application or (2) it was performed after T and is an application to something whose color is completely unlike the colors the objects of these paradigmatic applications seemed to have during the relevant paradigmatic application (see Goodman 1954, p. 74).

Finally, consider a world W where the last time I used “green” was at T. Kripkenstein claims that at W there is no fact of the matter as to whether the rule I have been following in my use of “green” is the first one I listed, which we would all regard as “the real one”, or the Goodman-like rule. Since Goodman-like rules can easily be put together for any set of applications of a word, if Kripkenstein is right about this case his conclusion can be generalized: there is never a fact of the matter as to whether the rule I have been following in my use of a word is the one we would all regard as “the real one” or some Goodman-like rule. But, as I have noted at the beginning of this section, this would entail that there is no such thing

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<sup>2</sup> Which, among the applications of “green”, are its paradigmatic applications? For the sake of simplicity, let us say that an application is paradigmatic if and only if (1) it is one of those by means of which the meaning of the word was originally determined or (2) it is an application to something whose color seems exactly like the colors the objects of the applications in (1) seemed to have during the relevant application.

as rule-following. Which, as I have stressed at the outset, would entail that there is no such thing as a sign having a meaning.<sup>3</sup> But is Kripkenstein right?

Of course, my having followed the “real” rule in my use of “green” cannot be identified with the fact that I applied this word to certain objects. Since the last time I used “green” was at T, these applications are unable to tell following this rule from following the Goodman-like rule above.

But maybe there is something I said, or even just thought, that is incompatible with the hypothesis that I have been following a deviant rule. Take, for example, the case of “+”, and suppose that, at some point, I gave myself the customary recursive definition of the addition function. Would not this be incompatible with the hypothesis that in my use of that sign I have been following a rule corresponding to some deviant function? Well, only if in my definition “0”, “s”, *etc.*... had their usual meanings. But Kripkenstein’s argument can be run for these signs, too – and so on. Which shows that in order to solve the paradox in its general form,

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<sup>3</sup> Instead of a Goodman-like rule, we could use a Kripke-like rule such as the one that follows: an application of “green” is correct if and only if (1) it is an application to something outside the Eiffel Tower and whose color is similar enough to the colors the objects of certain paradigmatic applications seemed to have during the relevant paradigmatic application or (2) it is an application to something inside the Eiffel Tower and whose color is completely unlike the colors the objects of these paradigmatic applications seemed to have during the relevant paradigmatic application (see Kripke 1981, p. 19). We could then claim that at W, a world where I have never applied “green” to something that was inside the Eiffel Tower, there is no fact of the matter as to whether the rule I have been following in my use of “green” is the one we all would regard as “the real one” or the Kripke-like rule, and so on as before – actually, all Kripke assumes in the passage cited before is that our would-be rule-follower has never entered the Eiffel Tower; however, this assumption is clearly unable to play the role Kripke assigns it in the argument, since I can apply a word to something that is inside the Eiffel Tower even if I have never entered it. Now, Kripke-like rules and Goodman-like rules are built following the very same recipe. We start with the “real” rule governing the use of the word in question: p if and only if q. We then identify a condition that, so far, all the applications of the word have satisfied: let “r” be the name of the proposition that says that the application at issue satisfies the condition. Finally, we modify the “real” rule as follows: p if and only if (1) r and q or (2) not-r and not-q – well, actually, both Kripke and Goodman modify the “real” rule as follows: p if and only if (1) r and q or (2) not-r and s, where s entails not-q. Since the resulting rules always sound very strange, in my 2012a I employed a different recipe. However, I now think that the cons of the strategy I embraced in that paper outweigh its pros. This is why in this article I came back to the classic recipe. This is also the place to note that there is reason to prefer Goodman-like rules to Kripke-like rules, since the former immediately make clear that Kripkenstein’s Paradox applies also to the cases the speaker has already dealt with (see Kripke 1981, note 34).

we must at least in some cases be able to solve it without any reference to what I said or thought.

A less naïve way to try to meet Kripkenstein’s challenge revolves around the notion of a disposition. Consider the rule governing the use of “+”, namely something like:

An utterance of the form “ $X + Y = Z$ ” is correct if and only if  $Z$  is the value of the addition function for the arguments  $X$  and  $Y$ .

And then consider the following, deviant, rule:

An utterance of the form “ $X + Y = Z$ ” is correct if and only if  $Z$  is the value of the quaddition function<sup>4</sup> for the arguments  $X$  and  $Y$ .

Finally, consider a world  $W$  where every time I uttered a sentence of the form “ $X + Y = Z$ ” both  $X$  and  $Y$  were smaller than 57. According to dispositionalists, what makes it the case that the rule I have been following in my use of “+” is the first one I listed is that my dispositions tracked the addition function – I was disposed to answer: “125”, not “5”, if asked for  $68 + 57$ , and so on.

Another *prima facie* more promising suggestion is that the argument can be rebutted by employing the notion of a universal – or, following Lewis (1983, pp. 375-376), that of properties that are more natural than others. A very simple version of this suggestion is that the hypothesis that I have been following a deviant rule can be ignored simply because there are no universals corresponding to such rules – whereas, on the other hand, to the “real” rule for “green”, or to the “real” rule for “+”, there is a corresponding universal.

Given that the focus of this paper is on the *pars construens* of Kripkenstein’s view, there is no need to discuss these other proposals,<sup>5</sup> nor there is any need to

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<sup>4</sup> I.e.  $X \oplus Y = X + Y$  if  $X$  and  $Y < 57$ ,  $X \oplus Y = 5$  if  $X$  or  $Y \geq 57$ .

<sup>5</sup> As far as I can see, the main arguments against semantic dispositionalism are (1) Kripke’s Argument from Finitude and Mistake, (2) the Ought Argument (i.e. Kripke’s Normativity Argument as rendered in, e.g., Glüer and Wikforss 2009), (3) the Non-Inferential Knowledge Argument (i.e. Kripke’s Normativity Argument as rendered in, e.g., Zalabardo 1997 and my 2014), and – finally – (4) the Privileging Problem (for which see, e.g., Bird and Handfield 2008 and my 2012b, pp. 206-207).

As for “the way of universals”, I take it to be clear that the version sketched in the text (which, e.g., Wright 2012 attributes to Lewis 1983) cannot work. If Kripkenstein’s point were, say, that there is no fact of the matter as to whether my next application of “green” is correct because there is no fact of the matter as to whether the color of the object of the application in question *is* similar enough to those of the objects of the paradigmatic appli-

discuss the other ones put forward in the literature. The goal of this section was just to make clear the content of Kripkenstein's thesis. I now turn to the issue I do want to discuss more in depth, namely: let us say that Kripkenstein is right and, in fact, there is no such thing as rule-following; can we live with such a conclusion?

## **2. From Meaning Talk without Meaning Facts to Communication without Meaning**

In Kripke's essay, a skeptical solution to a skeptical problem is defined by two features. First, instead of arguing that the skeptic's conclusions must be rejected, we just try to prove that our ordinary practices do not require them to be false. Second, a good skeptical solution also shows that the notion that the entities the skeptic rejects actually exist comes from a philosophical misinterpretation of common language. Now, the remarks I am about to put forward can no doubt be seen as constituting a skeptical solution in roughly this sense. However, there are two differences between my skeptical solution and Kripkenstein's which are worth stressing. First, in what follows I focus on the first of the two components I have just described, even though what I say in this connection should also make clear what is, in my opinion, the "philosophical misinterpretation of common language" that lies behind the notion that there actually is such thing as following a rule. Second, and more importantly, the ordinary practices of ours I am going to focus on are not the ones Kripkenstein focuses on. Let me say something about this second point.

The ordinary practices Kripkenstein wants to show as being consistent with his skeptical conclusion are those constituting what we can call "meaning talk". The conclusion of Kripkenstein's Paradox is that there is no such thing as following a rule. This entails that there is no such thing as a word or a sentence having a

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cations, well, the proposal in question would have some merit: the color of the object of the application in question is similar enough to those of the objects of the paradigmatic applications if and only if it instantiates the universal green – which, unlike the universal corresponding to our Goodman-like rule, actually exists. But Kripkenstein's point is that there is no fact of the matter as to whether my next application of "green" is correct because there is no fact of the matter as to whether the color of the object of the application in question *should be* similar enough to those of the objects of the paradigmatic applications: there is a fact as to whether there is enough similarity, but there is no fact as to whether enough similarity means that the application in question is correct. The version of the way of universals sketched in the text, therefore, will not do (for a somewhat analogous argument see Wright 2012, pp. 609-612). This is not yet to say, however, that no version of the way of universals can help us with Kripkenstein's argument – for, of course, one can try to develop a less simple version of this strategy (see, e.g., McDowell 1989).

meaning or a person meaning something by a sign. And this in turn seems to entail that all our talk of sentences having meanings and people meaning this rather than that by their words (that is: meaning talk) is completely unwarranted. What Kripkenstein wants to show is that this second entailment does not hold and that meaning talk has a role to play in our lives even if there are no meaning facts. Now, this is – no doubt – a legitimate *demonstrandum* for a skeptical solution. After all, seeing that the existence of meaning talk provides no evidence for that of meaning facts can definitely help one come to terms with Kripkenstein’s skeptical conclusion. The problem is that there seem to be other reasons, reasons which have nothing to do with meaning talk, to believe in the existence of rule-following, meanings, and the like. And one of these reasons seems to be very strong – way stronger, I submit, than the one provided by semantic discourse. The reason in question has to do with the very fact of communication.

The point is that communication seems to require meaning – and rule-following, *etc...* The idea has, I think, a great deal of intuitive plausibility, but it can also be supported with arguments. Consider, for instance, the following scenario. I enter a grocery, take a couple of chocolate muffins, put them in a bag, and go to the counter. When the cashier asks me what is in the bag I answer: “Two chocolate muffins”, and she makes me pay for two chocolate muffins. The cashier understood what I said, so this is a case of communication. But how did that work? Here is a *prima facie* plausible explanation. The cashier knows that a sincere utterance of “Two chocolate muffins” is correct if and only if that expression is applied to, well, two chocolate muffins. She also knows that her clients are extremely likely to, first, answer questions like the one she asked me sincerely and, second, use the expression in question correctly. This is why she concludes that in the bag there are two chocolate muffins. But if this is really the way communication works, then the very possibility of communication relies on the existence of correctness conditions for the use of the words of our language. And the existence of such correctness conditions presupposes that of meaning facts. Hence, it is at least *prima facie* plausible that communication requires meaning.<sup>6</sup>

This is why I believe that the main goal of a skeptical solution to Kripkenstein’s Paradox should be to show that, contrary appearances notwithstanding, communication does not require meaning. More precisely, my *demonstrandum* will be that even in a world in which there are no meaning facts there can be communication, provided that another, quite weak, condition is satisfied. Again: this does not mean that I find the issue of the role of meaning talk in a world without meaning facts uninteresting. In fact, I will have something to say

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<sup>6</sup> Note that even if *Kripke’s Wittgenstein* does not seem that interested in this problem, *Kripke himself* (see, e.g., 1981, pp. 11-12) clearly regards it as a rather serious one. Lewis uses an argument quite similar to the one sketched in the text in his 1980, § 2.

on this topic, too. But the problem of communication is, in my view, the first one to tackle.<sup>7</sup>

### **3. Communication without Meaning, Part One: a Model**

In this section I will develop what I think is the neatest strategy to prove that communication does not require meaning. In the next section, I will present a second argument. Let us start by considering the following example (see Wittgenstein 1953, part 1, § 2). A builder, let us call him “ $\alpha$ ”, is building a house and his assistant, let us call him “ $\beta$ ”, has to pass him blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams in the order in which his boss expects to need them. In order to speed up the work, the two, who up to now had none, build a language. But  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  live in a Kripkensteinian world: there is no fact of the matter as to whether the rules they follow in their use of the words of their language are the ones we would regard as the most natural or rules we would regard as deviant, there is no fact of the matter as to whether their rule for “qlock” – a word that, so far, they have applied only to blocks – is (just like) our rule for “block” or some Goodman-like rule, there is no fact of the matter as to whether what they mean by the words of their language is what we would think or not, there is – finally – no fact of the matter as to whether the meaning they attach to “qlock” is the one we attach to “block” or some deviant meaning. However,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  share what we may call “a common animal nature”;  $\alpha$  shouts: «Qlooock!» if and only if he wants a block,<sup>8</sup> and  $\beta$  brings  $\alpha$  a block if and only if he hears him shouting: “Qlooock!”; as far as the words of their language are concerned,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ ’s dispositions are the same – they both apply “qlock” to and only to blocks.

And now, let me ask a question: is it reasonable to assume that, in such a situation,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  successfully communicate? I do not see why not.  $\alpha$  shouts: “Qlooock!” if and only if he wants a block, and when (and only when)  $\beta$  hears  $\alpha$  shouting: “Qlooock!” he brings him a block. Hence,  $\alpha$  gets what he wants on a consistent basis, and not out of sheer luck, but because his words make  $\beta$  know it.<sup>9</sup> And this seems to be sufficient to conclude that the two builders understand each other and, therefore, that they manage to communicate. To be clear, I am not

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<sup>7</sup> The non-factualist reading of Kripkenstein’s skeptical solution sketched in this section is, of course, not uncontroversial. For a recent and useful discussion of the issue see Boyd 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am assuming that there is no analogue of Kripkenstein’s Paradox in the case of desire. In fact, I believe that some dispositional account of (the content of) desire is correct.

<sup>9</sup> At least in the sense that he has what Sosa (e.g. 2007, pp. 22-24) calls “animal knowledge” of what  $\alpha$  wants. Any other, sufficiently weak, reliabilist notion of knowledge would, of course, do the job.

claiming that the point of  $\alpha$ 's shout is to make  $\beta$  know what is going through his head; making  $\beta$  know what is going through his head is just a means to get his block. Still,  $\alpha$ 's shout makes  $\beta$  know what he wants. And this seems to be all we need to conclude that there is communication.<sup>10, 11</sup> Of course, if  $\alpha$  or  $\beta$  started to find natural some deviant way to use the words of their rudimentary language communication would break down. But, as a matter of fact, this does not happen. So why bother?

Now, if the previous remarks are on target, what I have described is a case of communication without meaning. And if what I have described is a case of communication without meaning, my *demonstrandum* is *demonstratum*: even in a world in which there are no meaning facts there can be communication, provided that another, quite weak, condition is satisfied. Which condition? Well, the inhabitants of the world in question must have sufficiently similar linguistic dispositions. My point is, therefore, that communication does not require that it be objectively correct to use a certain sign in a certain way; all it requires is, roughly, that people use the words of their language in suitably related ways.<sup>12</sup> It is not needed that the other ways to use the signs in question be inconsistent with some past fact; it suffices that speakers rule them out as irrelevant.<sup>13</sup> In Wittgenstein's (1953, part 1, § 140) wording: all communication requires is that we be under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion.

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<sup>10</sup> For a somewhat similar view see Gauker 1995, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> As I stressed in note 8, I believe that there is no analogue of Kripkenstein's Paradox in the case of desire. That being said, readers uncomfortable with my use of phrases like " $\alpha$  gets what he wants" can substitute them with something like " $\alpha$  gets the kind of stone he would have picked had he been working on his own" (for some analogous remarks, see Skyrms 2010, p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the definition of the notion of a signaling system in Lewis 1969, pp. 130-133.

<sup>13</sup> For some somewhat analogous remarks see Lewis 1969, pp. 37-38. For a more recent development of Lewis' game-theoretic approach to metasemantics see Skyrms 1996, chapter 5, 2004, part 2, and 2010. Skyrms (1996, pp. 81-82 and 2004, pp. 49-50) maintains that the game-theoretic approach can be used to answer semantic skeptics, though he does not explicitly discuss Kripkenstein's Paradox. For a discussion of the relation between the game-theoretic approach and Kripkenstein's Paradox see Sillari 2013. I agree with most of what Sillari says; not, however, with his sympathy for straight solutions. My own, somewhat tentative, view on the topic is that (1) the game-theoretic approach cannot provide a suitable supervenience basis for rule-following, (2) if we are willing to break the link between meaning and rule-following, it is very likely that the game-theoretic approach can provide a suitable supervenience basis for meaning and (3) breaking the link between meaning and rule-following is a revisionist but in no sense illicit move. I cannot go into this here, but I hope to be able to come back to the issue in the near future.



When people have or want to communicate, what they face is a coordination problem, and successful communication, when it is achieved, is achieved by achieving one of the problem's coordination equilibria (see Lewis 1969, pp. 122-124). Successful communication is achieved if the participants in the conversation use the relevant signs in roughly the same way. It does not matter whether that is the right way. Actually, it does not matter whether *there is* a right way. The notion that there is an objectively correct way to use the words of our language has no place whatsoever in our story. The cashier understands what I am saying because we use the expression "Two chocolate muffins" in roughly the same way. The idea that the way in question must also be the only one consistent with some alleged meaning fact is, I think, a by-product of a mistaken conception of the nature of the problems human communication raises.

#### **4. Communication without Meaning, Part Two: an Idle Wheel Argument**

The strategy I developed in the previous section is, I think, the neatest and most straightforward way to prove my point. After all, what I did was just try to describe a world in which even if there are no meaning facts, nonetheless there is communication. And this really seems to be the most straightforward way to show that there can be communication without meaning. However, some readers might doubt whether what they have imagined while reading my description of the case of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  was really a Kripkensteinian world, a world in which there is neither rule-following, nor rules, nor meaning facts. More precisely, these readers might suspect that the reason why at a certain point the world they were building in their imagination became a world in which there clearly was communication is that they inadvertently built into the situation the needed meaning facts. I believe such doubts to be ultimately unwarranted. But I find them natural enough to justify devoting some space to developing an alternative strategy, less straightforward but maybe rhetorically more effective, to prove my point. This is the strategy I have in mind. Instead of describing a world in which there is communication even though there are no meaning facts, I will describe a world in which, although *there are* meaning facts, communication *does not depend* on them. This, of course, entails that there can be communication without meaning, so that my point is proved. But nowhere in the argument will I ask the reader to imagine Kripkensteinian worlds, so that the difficulty I sketched is by-passed.

Let us start by taking the case of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  as described in the previous section, drop the assumption that the two builders live in a Kripkensteinian world, and substitute it with the assumption that they always use the words of their language in the wrong way. We assume, for instance, that on day  $D_1$ , the day on which  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  created their language, fact  $F$  (which you can imagine as some kind of ostensive definition, or as some dispositional fact concerning  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , or in any oth-

er way you happen to like – it really does not matter) determined that an application of “qlock” is correct if and only if the object in question is a block. And then we assume that from day  $D_2$  onwards the two builders apply “qlock” only to slabs – note that the assumption that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  have roughly the same linguistic dispositions has not been dropped, so that the idea is that even though the way the two builders use the words of their language is wrong, it is at least the same for both of them.

Here, however, we bump into a difficulty. The problem is this: it seems plausible to assume that after a few days of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  using “qlock” to refer to slabs a new rule will establish itself and “qlock” will just mean *slab*,<sup>14</sup> which would entail that from that moment onwards  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are no longer using the word in question in the wrong way. Therefore, instead of assuming that from  $D_2$  onwards the two builders apply “qlock” only to slabs, it is better to make a slightly more complicated assumption: on  $D_2$   $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  start to apply “qlock” only to slabs, but as soon as fact  $F^*$  determines that, from that moment on, an application of “qlock” is correct if and only if the object in question is a slab they start to apply “qlock” only to blocks, and so on. This way, it is clear that the two builders *always* use the words of their language in the wrong way.

And now let us ask the obvious question: is it reasonable to assume that, in such a situation,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  successfully communicate? Once again, it seems yes, and for more or less the same reasons I gave while discussing our original example. On  $D_2$   $\alpha$  starts to shout: “Qloock!” only if he wants a slab and  $\beta$  starts to bring  $\alpha$  a slab every time he hears him shouting: “Qloock!”. And when  $\alpha$  starts to shout: “Qloock!” only if he wants a block,  $\beta$  starts to bring  $\alpha$  a block every time he hears him shouting: “Qloock!”. Hence,  $\alpha$  gets what he wants on a consistent basis, which, once again, seems to be sufficient to conclude that the two builders manage to communicate.

This time, however, there is also another question that we have to ask ourselves, namely: what grounds communication between  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ ? More precisely: is it the fact that there is a way in which they should use the words of their language? Well, I think it is quite clear that such a question must be answered in the negative. The fact grounding communication between  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  must have something to do with the way in which the two builders actually behave. And the way in which  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  actually use the words of their language has clearly nothing to do with the way in which they should use them. These correctness conditions are nothing more than idle wheels. Just as in the original example, what grounds communication is not the fact that  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  do *what they should* but, rather, the fact

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<sup>14</sup> For some analogous remarks see Lewis 1969, pp. 148-149.

that they do approximately *the same thing*. Their eyes are shut, but they are shut in similar ways.

But if communication between  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  does not depend on, say, the fact that there is a way in which “qlock” should be used but, rather, on the fact that they use this word in suitably related ways, then there must be a possible world in which (1) there is no way in which “qlock” should be used and yet (2)  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  manage to communicate, provided that (3) the two builders use the word in question in approximately the same way. More in general: there must be a possible world in which (1) there are no meaning facts and yet (2) there is communication, provided that (3) speakers use the words of their language in suitably related ways, which was my *demonstrandum*.

Let us take stock. The main goal of Kripkenstein’s skeptical solution is to show that meaning talk has a role to play in our lives even if there are no meaning facts. In section 2 I argued that this should not be the *main* goal of a skeptical solution to Kripkenstein’s Paradox and that the issue of communication, on which I focused in the last two sections, is far more important. However, as I have already noted, this does not mean that the issue of the fate of meaning talk in a Kripkensteinian world is not worth our attention. Furthermore, I believe that what I have said in the last two sections has some implications for this latter issue. This is why I will conclude the paper with some remarks on this topic.

### **5. Back to Meaning Talk without Meaning Facts**

I think it is useful to see Kripkenstein’s remarks on semantic discourse (that is: his skeptical solution) as an attempt to respond to the following line of reasoning, which we can call “the Objection from Meaning Talk”:

Meaning talk is a widespread practice. People often speak of the meaning of a word or of the way a given expression should be used. The best explanation of this is that meaning talk is the only, or at least the best, way to solve some problem faced by us speakers. For the sake of brevity, let us say that the best explanation of the ubiquity of meaning talk is that this kind of discourse is an “optimal solution” to some linguistic problem. What problem? Well, usually, the linguistic problems that require the introduction of a new kind of discourse are what we can call “representation problems”, where a linguistic community faces a representation problem if and only if it currently lacks the expressive resources to talk about a given domain of facts. Therefore, it is very likely that the linguistic problem relative to which meaning talk is an optimal solution is the problem of finding the expressive resources to talk about meaning facts. Hence, the very existence of semantic

discourse provides evidence for the existence of meaning facts and, therefore, for the falsity of Kripkenstein's skeptical conclusion.

Kripkenstein's answer to this objection is that the problem which meaning talk is supposed to solve is not a representation problem:

We say of someone else that he follows a certain rule when his responses agree with our own and deny it when they do not; but what is the utility of this practice? The utility is evident and can be brought out by considering [...] a man who buys something at the grocer's. The customer, when he deals with the grocer and asks for five apples, expects the grocer to count as he does, not according to some bizarre non-standard rule and so, if his dealings with the grocer involve a computation, such as "68 + 57", he expects the grocer's responses to agree with his own. [...] Our entire lives depend on countless such interactions, and on the "game" of attributing to others the mastery of certain concepts or rules, thereby showing that we expect them to behave as we do. [...] When the community denies of someone that he is following certain rules, it excludes him from various transactions such as the one between the grocer and the customer. It indicates that it cannot rely on his behavior in such transactions (Kripke 1981, pp. 92-93).

In other words: the linguistic problem relative to which meaning talk is an optimal solution is not the problem of finding the expressive resources to talk about meaning facts, but that of certifying someone as reliable with respect to certain transactions. Now, in what follows, I want to call attention to two other possible answers to the Objection from Meaning Talk. According to the first, which I will call "the Illusion View", meaning talk is a solution to a representation problem, but (1) it is a suboptimal solution and (2) the representation problem in question is not that of finding the expressive resources to talk about meaning facts. According to the second one, which I will call "the Coordination View", meaning talk is – just as in Kripkenstein's view – an optimal solution to a problem which cannot be viewed as a representation problem, but the problem in question is not that of certifying someone as reliable with respect to certain transactions.

Let us start with the Illusion View. First, let us take a step back. In the previous two sections I argued that communication is a matter of coordination.  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  manage to communicate because they use the words of their language in suitably related ways:  $\alpha$  uses "qlock" if and only if he wants a block, and  $\beta$  brings  $\alpha$  a block if and only if he hears him shouting: "Qlooock!". And the cashier understands what I am saying because we use the expression "Two chocolate muffins" in roughly the same way. But how is such coordination achieved? Well, for the

sake of simplicity, let us focus on the case of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ . Hence, the question is: how is it that both builders apply “qlock” only to blocks – and “shlab” only to slabs and so on? Part of the answer, of course, lies in the fact that the way  $\alpha$  uses “qlock” has been shaped by the same paradigmatic applications which shaped the way  $\beta$  uses that word. But this cannot be the whole of the story, since if Kripkenstein is right these applications are in principle consistent with any way to use the word in question. What we have to explain, therefore, is how it is that the fact that the way  $\alpha$  uses “qlock” has been shaped by the same paradigmatic applications which shaped the way  $\beta$  uses “qlock” leads the two builders to use that word in roughly the same way even though the applications in question are in principle consistent with an infinite number of alternatives.

The solution is that (and, once again, I revert to Wittgenstein’s wording) even though they do not exert any *logical* compulsion, the paradigmatic applications in question do exert a *psychological* compulsion on  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ . Both  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are hard-wired in such a way that given certain paradigmatic applications, they will find, as it were, natural only one way (or only a few ways) to project those applications into their future linguistic behavior. All the other ways in which the word in question could be used, although in principle legitimate, are just disregarded, or ruled out as “too strange”. In our case, of course, things are likely to be more complicated: sometimes we do disregard certain ways to use a word because of our hard-wiring, but sometimes the reason why we rule out a certain way to use a word as too strange is just that we have been trained to disregard certain kinds of rules. In our case, hard-wiring and learning probably work together. That being said, in our case, too, the paradigmatic applications of a word exert only a psychological, not a logical, compulsion. The reason why we all project these paradigmatic applications in approximately the same way is not that that way is the only correct one; the reason is, rather, that that way is the one which, because of our hard-wiring and training, we find natural.<sup>15</sup>

Now, it is on this latter point that the Illusion View focuses in order to explain the ubiquity of meaning talk. First, note that if there were only one way to use a word consistent with its paradigmatic applications, then we would all have a (normative<sup>16</sup>) reason to talk about *the* way words *should* be used and, therefore, to use the concept of meaning. If Kripkenstein is right, the antecedent of this conditional is false. However, if what I have said about our dispositions to find certain ways to use words natural and certain others unnatural is correct, well, something in its vicinity is true: even though there are infinitely many ways to use a word

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of such an arational, and yet foundational, level is – of course – Wittgensteinian in character (see esp. Wittgenstein 1969); however, it dates back to, at the very least, Reid 1785.

<sup>16</sup> For the notion of a normative reason see, e.g., Enoch 2011, pp. 221-222.

which are *consistent* with its paradigmatic applications, speakers are hard-wired, and trained, to find natural only one way (or only a few ways) to project those applications into their future linguistic behavior. This, of course, does not provide us with a (normative) reason to talk about *the* way words *should* be used, but it can definitely explain why, as a matter of fact, people talk as if there were one: we use semantic discourse and we talk about *the* way the words of our language *should* be used because the way we are built, and trained, makes us blind to the alternatives.<sup>17</sup>

But if this is why we use meaning talk, it is clear that the problem to which this kind of discourse is an answer is not that of finding the expressive resources to talk about meaning facts; the problem is that of finding the expressive resources to talk about the most natural way to use the words of our language, the coordination equilibrium that, as a matter of fact, solves the general problem of human communication. Meaning talk would be a suboptimal solution to this representation problem (since it gives a misleading representation of the relevant facts) which we end up embracing because of our blindness to all the other ways in which we could use the words in question.

Let us now turn to the Coordination View. I have already stressed that the reason why we disregard certain ways to use a word is likely twofold: it has to do both with the way we are hard-wired and with the way we have been trained during our childhood. However, it seems clear that, at least sometimes (think about color words), this is not yet enough to bring about the amount of coordination which successful communication requires. We are hard-wired roughly in the same way, we have been trained to disregard the same kind of rules, and we are familiar with basically the same paradigmatic applications; and yet, there still are too many ways to use the word in question which look rather natural, so that – in order to make communication possible – some of these ways to use the word have to be ruled out explicitly. Now, both during this process, whose goal is that of ruling out *particular* rules, and during the training process through which we learned to disregard certain *kinds* of rules, the myth of the one right way to use the word turns out to be incredibly useful – just as the Christian apparatus of God, heaven, and hell seems to be the best way to teach a certain kind of people to behave. And this seems to offer us another possible explanation for the ubiquity of meaning talk, namely: meaning talk is such a widespread practice because it helps maximize the coordination on which successful communication relies.

Such a view is far closer than the Illusion View to Kripkenstein's skeptical solution. After all, both Kripkenstein and the proponent of the Coordination View

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<sup>17</sup> Note that when I say that we are blind to the alternatives, what I mean is not just that we do not think about the alternatives. What I mean is that even if we were presented with an alternative, we would not see it *as an alternative*.

maintain that meaning talk is an optimal solution to a problem which cannot be viewed as a representation problem. The only difference has to do with the characterization of the problem in question. In Kripkenstein's view, the problem meaning talk is supposed to solve is that of certifying someone as reliable with respect to certain transactions. According to the Coordination View, the problem is that of maximizing the coordination on which successful communication relies.

The following table should help the reader see how the views I described (the Objection from Meaning Talk and the various ways to answer it) are related to each other:

	Meaning talk is	to	namely
The Objection from Meaning Talk	an optimal solution	a representation problem	that of finding the expressive resources to talk about meaning facts
Kripkenstein's skeptical solution	an optimal solution	not a representation problem	that of certifying someone as reliable with respect to certain transactions
The Illusion View	a suboptimal solution	a representation problem	that of finding the expressive resources to talk about the most natural way to use the words of our language
The Coordination View	an optimal solution	not a representation problem	that of maximizing the coordination on which successful communication relies

What is the right way to answer the Objection from Meaning Talk? That is hard to say. Most likely, the best answer involves elements from both Kripkenstein's skeptical solution and the alternatives sketched in this section. That being said, the very existence of various strategies to explain semantic discourse without making any reference to meaning facts shows that the mere existence of meaning talk provides hardly any evidence for that of meaning facts.

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