[DISSERTATION PREFACE (2008)]

A Critique of Saul Kripke's
Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language

Chrysoula Gitsoulis

Almost three decades after its publication, Saul Kripke's intriguing and controversial *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private language* (1980) (henceforth WRPL) remains one of the most important and widely read commentaries on §§137-242 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI).

Many factors account for the book's enduring popularity. One is that it is written in simple, non-technical terms, which has made it readily accessible to a wide and diverse audience. Another is that it presents a captivating argument, which appears to flow seamlessly from apparently true premises to a startling conclusion. The crucial factor accounting for the book's popularity, however, is the important contribution it has made both to exegetical studies on Wittgenstein and to contemporary debates concerning the metaphysics and epistemology of meaning and understanding.

As a piece of historical scholarship, WRPL offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein that is far from ordinary. It represents Wittgenstein as defending a set of unified and highly provocative claims about the nature of meaning and understanding. Unlike many expositions predating WRPL, which take Wittgenstein's central topic of concern in his discussion of meaning and understanding in PI to be his famous 'private language argument', and locate it in §§243ff of PI, Kripke takes his central topic of concern to be that of 'following a rule' in §§137-202. Kripke's interpretation of these sections not only helped put the topic of following a rule into the philosophical limelight, but also tied together, in a novel and striking way, what seemed to be a series of dissociated remarks on rule-following and the attendant private language argument.

On Kripke's reading, the conclusion of the private language argument is a 'corollary' of results that Wittgenstein already establishes in his discussion of following a rule. More specifically, Kripke takes the conclusion of the private language argument to be a corollary of what he calls a 'skeptical solution' to a 'skeptical problem' concerning the topic of following a rule. Indeed, according to Kripke, the private language argument already reaches its conclusion by §202 of PI.

The '**skeptical problem**', which Kripke takes to be the central problem occupying Wittgenstein's attention in §§137-202, is: *Is there any fact about me that constitutes what I mean by my words?* The main character of WRPL, an imaginary meaning skeptic, examines a range of facts that might play the requisite constitutive role – and so solve the skeptical problem – and shows that they cannot do the job required of them. He then considers the proposal that my meaning what I do by my words is a primitive fact, and cannot be constituted by more basic facts, but rules this out as well. These considerations form the content of what Kripke calls the '**skeptical argument**'. On the assumption that he has examined all possibilities, he draws the (apparently paradoxical) '**skeptical conclusion**' that *there are no facts about me that correspond to my meaning what I do by my words*.

Faced with this seemingly outrageous result (undercutting, as it apparently does, some of the most fundamental assumptions we make about the notions of meaning and understanding), we naturally incline toward the view that there must be something wrong with the argument leading to it: that it relies on some assumption that we can reject, or that it makes some fallacious step. That is, we incline toward *rejecting* the skeptical conclusion, and maintaining that there must, after all, be what Kripke calls a '**straight solution**' to the skeptical problem: some species of fact that constitutes my meaning what I do

by my words, and hence that explains my applying them in the way that I do. Kripke, however, reads Wittgenstein as advocating what he calls a '**skeptical solution**': a response to the skeptical argument which *accepts* the skeptical conclusion but seeks to explain how we can rehabilitate talk of meaning in its light.

The skeptical problem, argument, and solution, have received a great deal of attention, not merely as interpretations of Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and understanding, but also in their own right. Many contemporary philosophers of mind and language are familiar with the skeptical problem, and have tried to offer a straight solution to it. Kripke's book makes an important contribution to efforts to 'solve' it, by ushering into contemporary debates the most important insights he takes Wittgenstein to offer on it. Ultimately, on Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, the skeptical problem has no straight solution. This result proved to be extremely contentious for many contemporary philosophers of mind and language, most of whom maintain that there is a straight solution to the skeptical problem. Not surprisingly, WRPL gave rise to a wave of controversy, which continues to this day.

Efforts to solve the problems arising from these debates have not been entirely disconnected from the historical Wittgenstein's writings; indeed, WRPL has prompted many contemporary philosophers of mind and language to revisit Wittgenstein's work to ferret out whatever insights he might have had on them. This, in turn, has helped *bridge the gap* between Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and understanding and contemporary discussions of these topics. We can think of WRPL as a stepping stone between these domains. If Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and understanding is taken more seriously in philosophy of mind and language today than in the past, the credit is due in large part to WRPL.

Both of these factors – WRPL's departure from standard expositions in its reading of Wittgenstein, and the radical theses WRPL establishes in its own right -- are responsible for the book's enduring popularity. And, of course, enhancing the book's appeal is the fact that Kripke defends many of his central contentions with force and an abundance of insights.

Though WRPL, like its predecessor *Naming and Necessity (1972)*, has been widely read, its content has not been taken up as favorably; indeed, the general consensus has been that the arguments of WRPL are flawed both in their own right and as an interpretation of Wittgenstein. Colin McGinn, for example, in the Preface to his book, *Wittgenstein on Meaning*, writes: 'When I first read Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private language*, it seemed to me to make clear sense, at last, of Wittgenstein's text... In the course of rereading Wittgenstein with Kripke's interpretation in mind I came, to my surprise, to have considerable doubts about the correctness of that interpretation ... At the same time, I began to think that the arguments Kripke develops were less impregnable than had first appeared to me.' Many commentators on WRPL have voiced similar remarks/reactions.

It seems to me, however, that the negative reception of WRPL rests on a number of critical textual misinterpretations. When I first read WRPL, I too thought the arguments it presented were flawed both in themselves and as a reading of Wittgenstein. After a more careful reading of WRPL, however, and of the associated passages in PI, many of the inconsistencies that I thought were present in WRPL began to dissipate, and my appreciation of it as a reading of Wittgenstein intensified. I came to understand why the skeptical argument took the rather unusual form it did, and that together with the skeptical solution, it forms a very good interpretation of the associated passages in PI. I also came to realize that most commentators failed to see this because, in some fundamental way, they misrepresented the content of WRPL: quoting passages out of context, omitting or distorting important parts of arguments, interpreting key expressions in ways not intended by Kripke, creating dialogue that is not present in the text, frequently affirming their opinion by corroborating the interpretive errors of others, and, most importantly, failing to distinguish two characters in WRPL -- Kripke's skeptic (who plays the role of the interlocutor in PI), and Kripke's Wittgenstein (who plays the role of Wittgenstein) – thereby putting words into the mouth of the wrong character. Given that I thought the book had many valuable insights

to offer that were being lost in the tangle of interpretive errors, I thought it well worth attempting to clear them up. That task is taken up in <u>Chapter 1</u>, where I present a detailed exposition of the skeptical problem, argument, and solution. In <u>Chapter 2</u>, I evaluate the skeptical argument in its own right. And finally, in <u>Chapters 3 and 4</u>, I examine how well the skeptical argument and solution fare as an interpretation of Wittgenstein.

I take these tasks to be important for several reasons. To begin with, regardless of whether or to what extent the skeptical argument has its source in PI, it demands careful evaluation in its own right, since it threatens to deplete our concepts of 'meaning' and 'understanding' of content, and thereby to undermine our everyday folk-psychological practices that depend on these notions; and it is not apparent that the skeptical solution can do the needed resuscitative work.

It is important to note that when I say the skeptical argument demands careful evaluation 'in its own right', I do not mean that I will not rely on PI in interpreting it. For I do not think the task of assessing the skeptical argument can be properly executed without appealing to the sections of PI which it is intended to illuminate. In fact, persistent failures to do this have, I think, been mainly responsible for the skewed readings of the argument.

It is not only the work of evaluating the skeptical argument in its own right that will precipitate us into PI, of course, but also, and necessarily, the task of assessing how well WRPL fares as an interpretation of PI. I take this task to also be important, for several reasons. For one thing, I have found that assessing WRPL as a reading of PI helps bring some of the most difficult passages of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following into sharp focus. It also helps us develop a greater appreciation for Wittgenstein's perspective on the skeptical problem, to the extent that we can locate it in PI, and other problems of a similar nature -- a perspective which, I believe, contains many important morals.[1]

In WRPL, as very often in Wittgenstein's works, a problem is presented and, quite naturally, erroneously interpreted. In WRPL, it is the skeptic (who plays the role of Wittgenstein's interlocutor) who is guilty of the *false interpretation*, and, on the basis of this error, he generates what Wittgenstein would call a '*pseudo-problem*', since it is based on a false interpretation. Repeated attempts are made to solve it, to no avail. The skeptic then concludes that the problem has no solution; indeed, his false interpretation causes him to draw an even stronger conclusion that appears to be paradoxical. At this point Kripke's Wittgenstein enters the scene, and offers a way out of the seeming paradox: a 'skeptical solution'. This involves describing actual linguistic practice, to help us see why no direct solution to the pseudo-problem is necessary or possible. The moral to be drawn is that the pseudo-problem is not in need of *solution*, but of *dissolution*.

I take this to be the central interpretive thesis of WRPL, a thesis that has been lost sight of in the literature, and I think it is *essentially* correct as an interpretation of Wittgenstein. In chapters 3 and 4, I offer my defense of this claim. Wittgenstein once wrote: 'A human being is *imprisoned* in a room, if the door is unlocked but opens inward; he, however, never gets the idea of *pulling* instead of pushing against it.' [RFM III, 37] In similar vein, I try to show that the reason the skeptical problem, as interpreted by the skeptic, baffles us and frustrates attempts to solve it, is that we have been pushing against a door that only opens by pulling it. Pushing against the door is trying to give it a *straight solution*. Pulling it is offering a *skeptical solution*. I try to bring this out in Chapter 4 by situating the skeptical problem, as interpreted by the skeptic, and the skeptical solution, into a larger framework concerning Wittgenstein's so-called 'metaphilosophy' (remarks concerning the practice of philosophy), that deals with his identification and treatment of pseudo-philosophical problems. Kripke maintains that the conclusion of Wittgenstein's private language argument is a corollary of results Wittgenstein establishes in §§137-202 of PI concerning the topic of following-a-rule, and not the conclusion of an independently developed

---

[1] Here, I agree with Crispin Wright [1989a p. 157] that 'there are still rich seems of philosophy, which we have failed to mine only by digging insufficiently deep'.

argument in §§243ff of PI, as most commentators take it to be. I go a step further in Chapter 4 and try to show that Wittgenstein's remarks on following-a-rule in §§137-202 of PI are a corollary of his 'metaphilosophical' remarks in §§107-136 of PI, which immediately precede his discussion of following-a-rule; they are, in other words, but one application/illustration of his philosophical method. I also defend the correctness of Kripke's interpretation of the rule-following remarks, which see Wittgenstein as developing a skeptical argument and solution, by showing that this interpretation squares with and supports the metaphilosophical framework to be presented. A crucial goal of this project is thus not only to clarify the relation between Wittgenstein's remarks on following-a-rule and the private language argument, but the *more fundamental* relation between Wittgenstein's philosophical method and his remarks on following-a-rule. If Kripke's discussion helped put the topic of following-a-rule into sharp focus, by linking it to the private language argument, then my hope is to sharpen that focus a bit further, so as to illuminate the fundamental role that Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy plays in his discussion of following-a-rule.

That, then, is a broad overview of the plan and motivation for this project. I turn now to more specific details of content.

Chapter 1

In §§137-242 of PI, Kripke interprets Wittgenstein as wrestling with the following problem about meaning: *Is there any fact about me that constitutes what I mean by a word?* This problem is developed by Kripke in WRPL in terms of an example from arithmetic. Suppose, the example runs, that I am given a computation that I have never performed before – say, '68+57=?'. I then perform the computation, obtaining '125' as my answer, and after checking my work, I am confident that '125' is the correct answer. Now suppose, Kripke continues, a 'bizarre skeptic' comes along who questions my confidence. 'What fact about you makes it the case that, as you used "+" in the past, the answer you meant or intended for "68+57" should have been 125 rather than, say, 5?' he asks. [p. 8][2] 'Perhaps', he continues, 'as you used the term "+" in the past, you meant some nonstandard function', which he calls 'quus', and defines as follows:

$$x \oplus y = x+y \text{ if } x, y < 57$$
$$= 5 \text{ otherwise}$$

If I meant *quus* by '+' in the past, then the answer I intended for '68 + 57' should have been '5', so that, if I am to accord with my past intentions, the answer I should now give is '5'. What fact makes it the case (makes it true) that I meant *plus* and not *quus*? This is the skeptical problem, and in section 1.1, I try to clarify in further detail the nature of this problem.

The skeptical argument developed by Kripke in Chapter 2 of WRPL proceeds by canvassing a range of candidate straight solutions to the skeptical problem. These include the following:

[A]   A 'rule' coming 'before my mind' that 'tells me' how to apply '+' in all future cases. [p. 15-16, 22]

[B]   An introspectible qualitative state of consciousness, such as an image or sensation, present when performing additions. [p. 41-51]

[C]   A disposition to give the right answer, i.e., to say that had I been queried about any question of the form 'x+y=?', I would have answered with the sum. [p. 22-40]

---

[2] All bracketed page number references are to WRPL, unless otherwise indicated.

The body of the skeptical argument consists in the skeptic's examination and rejection of these candidate straight solutions, along with the proposal that meaning so-and-so w is a 'primitive' fact.[3] [p. 41-42, 51-53] Assuming that these facts exhaust the possibilities, he concludes that there are *no* facts that correspond to my meaning *addition* rather than *quaddition* by '+', or indeed anything by any word, since the conclusion generalizes to any word.

In section 1.2, I fill in the details of the skeptical argument, and the pivotal role that the so-called 'justification constraint' introduced by Kripke's skeptic plays in his rejection of the facts considered. On the interpretation I offer, that constraint can be summed up as follows:

[J$_I$]   F justifies my applying word w thus and so, given what I mean by it, if and only if (1) I have *direct (non-inferential) access* to F, and (2) I can *deduce a priori* from F that I ought to apply w thus and so.

In Chapter 3 of WRPL, Kripke outlines what he calls a '**skeptical solution**' to the skeptical problem. There are two components to the 'skeptical solution'. On the one hand, unlike a 'straight solution', the skeptical solution is not intended to refute the conclusion of the skeptical argument. What makes the position 'skeptical' is that it *accepts* the conclusion of the skeptical argument:

[SC]   For any subject S, there is no fact about S that corresponds to his meaning *addition* by '+' (or anything by any word).

What makes it a 'solution' is that it nevertheless defends our ordinary *practice* of ascribing meaning and understanding to each other.[4] According to the skeptical solution, our ordinary practice of ascribing meanings to each other is not undermined by [SC], for, contrary appearances notwithstanding, it is not jeopardized by the failure of any fact to justify our applications of words in the way ([J$_I$]) demanded by the skeptic:

There are at least two delicate issues regarding the skeptical solution that stand in need of clarification. One issue concerns the very coherence of the skeptical conclusion [SC]. On the face of it, [SC] appears to be *self-undermining*: if there is no fact about S that his meaning *addition* by '+' (or anything by any word) corresponds to, for any subject S, then how can anyone succeed in stating the skeptical conclusion without contradicting himself?

It all depends on how we interpret the skeptical conclusion. A number of interpretations have been offered in the literature; among them some of the following:

[a]   (Radical skepticism) All words are meaningless.
[b]   (Error theory) All meaning-ascriptions are false.
[c]   (Expressivism) Truth/falsity and factuality/non-factuality is not properly predicable of meaning-ascriptions.
[d]   (Anti-individualism) Meaning-ascriptions cannot be analyzed in terms of facts about the subject *alone*.
[e]   (Anti-reductivism) Meaning-ascriptions cannot be analyzed in terms of any collection of natural, non-semantic facts.

In section §1.3.1, I flesh out each of these interpretations. Among them, only [a] - [c] are self-defeating or

---

[3] Kripke defines this as a state 'not to be assimilated with sensations or headaches or any "qualitative" state, nor to be assimilated to dispositions, but a state of a unique kind of its own'. [p. 51-53]
[4] I follow Scott Soames [1998 p. 313] in this interpretation of the terms 'skeptical' and 'solution'.

incoherent -- we will look at some arguments that bring this out – and, though [d] and [e] are coherent, I show that, along with the other candidates, they lack crucial features that Kripke attributes to the skeptical conclusion. The target conclusion, I try to show, is [f].

[f]   There is no state of an agent, analyzable or non-analyzable/primitive, that satisfies [J_I].

The second interpretive issue that stands in need of clarification concerns the relation between the skeptical solution and Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's 'private-language argument'. Kripke sees the conclusion of the private-language argument as a 'corollary' [p. 68] to the skeptical solution. But in what sense is it a 'corollary'? In §1.3.2, I flesh out the connection.

Chapter 2

Kripke raises four objections against the dispositional theory [candidate [C] above], the most promising straight solution, and indeed the most ardently defended in the current literature. They may be summed up as follows:

(1)   **Finitude objection**: Since my actual dispositions are *finite*, it's not true that if queried about any two numbers I will come up with their sum, as the dispositional theory maintains, for some numbers are too large for my mind to grasp. But surely I can mean addition by '+' despite the fact that I don't have dispositions to handle huge numbers.

(2)   **Error objection**: Any meaning-constituting fact must be able to account for the fact that some people are disposed to make *mistakes*. But the dispositional theory cannot account for this fact: according to it, how one *should* apply '+' is how one *would* apply '+'.

(3)   **Circularity objection**: The dispositional theory cannot succeed in giving a non-circular description of the facts that constitute my meaning what I do by my words.

(4)   **Justification objection**: Any meaning-constituting fact must 'show how I am justified' [p. 11] in giving one answer rather than another to any particular addition query. I.e., any meaning-constituting fact must be such that, however in fact I am disposed to apply '+', it should 'tell me' [p. 24] how I *should* apply it. But dispositions do not have this property.

These objections have a common form (as will become apparent when we look at them in detail in chapter 2): they impose a specific constraint on the dispositional theory, and then reject it as a straight solution to the skeptical problem for failing to meet that constraint.

In chapter 2, I examine and critique each objection. The chapter is divided into four sections, corresponding to the four objections. The plan for each section is as follows.

i.   I begin by laying out the argument corresponding to the objection in question, so as to identify the constraint that the objection imposes on the dispositional theory.

ii.   I then argue that the argument's success depends on an *unwarranted assumption* Kripke makes about how the constraint is to be interpreted, and that no meaning-constituting fact should be required to meet the constraint thus interpreted.

iii.   Finally, I offer a more reasonable interpretation of the constraint in question, and try to show that a more refined version of the dispositional theory than that entertained by Kripke is invulnerable to the objection when the constraint is thus interpreted.

I develop this more refined version of the dispositional theory – '**constructive dispositionalism**', as I call it -- in piecemeal fashion throughout chapter 2, as we deal with each objection in turn.

Chapter 3

In order to properly explain §§137-242 of PI, on which Kripke focuses his attention, we must situate them within the methodological framework in §§107-136 that precedes them. The main purpose of chapter 3 is bring this methodological framework to light, and thus to set the stage for chapter 4, where I defend the claim that the skeptical problem, as the skeptic interprets it, *does* emerge in §§137-242 as just another pseudo-philosophical problem, not in need of solution, but of dissolution. In chapter 3, I try to clarify Wittgenstein's means of identifying pseudo-philosophical problems, and his means of treating them, by focusing on his so-called 'meta-philosophical' remarks in §§107-136 of PI. There is an important analogy Wittgenstein develops in those sections between philosophy and medicine, which sees the practice of philosophy as a form of therapy, a method of healing. Uncovering the reaches of this analogy in Wittgenstein's work is one of the most fruitful and illuminating ways of explaining the aim and spirit of his philosophical method, and in particular, his diagnosis and treatment of pseudo-philosophical problems. I try to do so in chapter 3 by addressing the following questions, and defending the stated answers: §3.1: Symptoms: What, for Wittgenstein, are the symptoms that are in need of philosophical therapy? (Proposed answer: Conceptual tensions.) §3.2: Diagnosis: How, for Wittgenstein, are the symptoms generated? (Proposed answer: From the urge to generalize across different 'regions of language'.) §3.3: Treatment: What is the nature of Wittgenstein's therapy? (Proposed answer: Describing actual and exploring possible uses of language.)

Chapter 4

In this chapter, I apply the results of chapter 3 to the problem that forms Wittgenstein's focus of attention in §§137-242 of PI: What does understanding or meaning something by an expression 'consist in'? By placing a false interpretation on this problem, I try to show that the interlocutor (who plays the role of the skeptic in WRPL) constructs a pseudo-problem. This pseudo-problem, I maintain, can be identified with the skeptic's interpretation of the skeptical problem in WRPL. Thus, I try to show that the skeptical problem does emerge in PI, but as just another pseudo-problem, not in need of *solution*, but of *dissolution*. Throughout §§137-153 of PI, repeated attempts are made to solve this pseudo-problem, to no avail. It is mainly in these sections, I try to show, that we can locate the 'skeptical argument' of WRPL. In §§154-155, 179-183 of PI, Wittgenstein urges us to examine the kinds of circumstances in which we use the expressions that were falsely interpreted by the interlocutor (and led to the construction of a pseudo-problem), and the role these expressions have in our lives. It is in these sections, I try to show, that Wittgenstein presents the framework for a 'skeptical solution' -- a means of *dissolving* the pseudo-problem -- whose details he proceeds to fill in in §§184ff. Thus, the overarching aim of this chapter will be to show that the key ingredients of Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein can traced back to PI, and are adequately supported by it.