

Chapter 4

KRIPKE'S INTERPRETATION OF WITTGENSTEIN'S PRIVATE LANGUAGE

ARGUMENT:

The Problem of Rule-Following:

'Rule' enjoys a very important position in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Its implications on philosophy of language, meaning, mathematics, mind, logic etc. is immense. With Saul Kripke's very influential, provocative, and controversial book, *Wittgenstein On Rules And Private Language*, the question of rule following has become one of the most controversial themes in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Since, Kripke thinks that this issue is a central one and has far reaching implications regarding private language, therefore, it is instructive to discuss it in some detail.

Kripke notes that sections 143-242 are the most original and significant part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. He further claims that at the core of the *Philosophical Investigations* is a sceptical problem. Wittgenstein is confronted with, Kripke maintains, a sceptical paradox which is 'perhaps the central problem of the *Philosophical Investigations*'. (K.7) Wittgenstein does not only invent the

sceptical paradox, Kripke holds, but offers a solution – sceptical solution – of it. Kripke writes:

Wittgenstein has invented a new form of scepticism . Personally I am inclined to regard it as the most radical and original sceptical problem that philosophy has seen to date, one that only a highly unusual cast of mind could have produced. Of course he does not wish to leave us with his problem, but to solve it: the sceptical conclusion is insane and intolerable. It is his solution, I will argue, that contains the argument against 'private language'; for allegedly, the solution will not admit such a language. (Kripke, p.60)

Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein is that the notion of rules or rule following is central in the *Philosophical Investigations*. He finds the question of rule following very problematic. Kripke is of the opinion that in this context Wittgenstein offers a sceptical paradox of Humean nature and then puts forward a sceptical solution of the same sort. The sceptical paradox, which Kripke thinks Wittgenstein offers, is that there is nothing, no fact, that could constitute meaning

so much so that language is impossible. A sceptical solution, which Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein, is that he rejects the sceptical conclusion while accepting the premise(s).

Kripke rejects the widely held view that the 'private language argument' begins in section 243. He is of the opinion that the real private language argument lies in the sections preceding 243.

Indeed, in 202 *the conclusion is already stated explicitly* : "Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it." (K. 3)

Sections 243-315 which are generally referred to as the 'private language argument' 'deal with the application of the general conclusions about language drawn in 138-24 to', Kripke maintains, 'the problem of sensations'. (K 79) This according to Kripke runs contrary to the Wittgenstein's conclusion regarding language. Let us see the paradox and its solution.

The Wittgensteinian Paradox:

According to Kripke section 201 of the *Philosophical Investigations* contains the sceptical paradox. He quotes Wittgenstein:

In 201 Wittgenstein says, " this was our paradox:
no course of action could be determined by a rule,
because every course of action can be made out to
accord with the rule. (K p.7)

Kripke implies from here the impossibility of linguistic meaning and hence language, since language is rule governed. The following discussion will show how Kripke presents the alleged Wittgensteinian paradox.

Kripke maintains that if I use a certain word or function now it must accord (cohere, be consistent) with what I had meant by it in the past, i.e., if I now give the answer of '58 + 67' then it must be assumed that I am interpreting '+' in the same manner as I used it in the past . I give '125' as the answer by *adding* the two arguments. As I perform this operation it must be assumed that in the past I have meant

addition or plus by '+'. Kripke's sceptic challenges this assumption. There is no fact to guarantee this assumption. It could be the case that in the past I did not mean addition by '+' but another function, quaddition whose answer is '5' instead of '125'. He argues:

In the discussion below the challenge posed by the sceptic takes two forms. First, he questions whether there is any fact that I meant plus, not quus, that will answer his sceptical challenge. Second, he questions whether I have any reason to be so confident that now I should answer '125' rather than '5'. (Kripke, 11)

The sceptical paradox has two aspects, Colin McGinn clarifies Kripke's position, 'an epistemological aspect, and a metaphysical aspect. Epistemologically, ... nothing can now be cited to justify my assumption of semantic constancy; constitutively [metaphysically], ... there is no fact about me which could constitute my meaning addition rather than quaddition.'¹ . The epistemological aspect is given as follows. Kripke says:

Let me repeat the problem. The sceptic doubts whether any instructions I gave myself in the past compel (or justify) the answer '125' rather than '5'. He puts the challenge in terms of a sceptical hypothesis about a change in my usage. Perhaps when I used the term 'plus' in the past, I always meant quus: by hypothesis I never gave myself any explicit directions that were incompatible with such a supposition. (Kripke, 13)

The metaphysical aspect that there is no fact which could constitute my meaning addition rather than quaddition is related to the epistemological one. It is the metaphysical aspect around which the whole issue centers. Here Kripke argues that there is nothing in my past history, no formulae, no brain state or process, or mental fact, to settle this problem. He maintains:

Now Wittgenstein's sceptic argues that he knows of no fact about an individual that could constitute his state of meaning plus rather than quus. (Kripke, 39)

In such a case any answer is correct some interpretation. This means that there is no question of correctness or incorrectness here. Every attempt is a leap in the dark. He argues:

The sceptic argues that when I answered '125' to the problem '68+57', my answer was an unjustified leap in the dark; my past mental history is equally compatible with the hypothesis that I meant quus, and therefore should have said '5'. . . . Nothing justifies a brute inclination to answer one way rather than another. (K. 15)

The last sentence refers to what Kripke calls the paradox. He says:

This, then, is the sceptical paradox. When I respond in one way rather than another to such a problem as '68+57', I can have no justification for one response rather than another. Since the sceptic who supposes that I meant quus cannot be answered, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning plus and my meaning quus. Indeed, there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning a definite function by 'plus' (which

determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all. (K 21)

It is to be noted in the celebrated example cited by Kripke, one is seeking to interpret the present case, without success, in accord with the past one. The same thing holds good for the past case as well. That is to say that the use of '+' in the past must accord with the use of it in remoter past. But we have seen that it is not possible in the present case, therefore, it must not be possible in the past case as well. Thus there is the paradox. So far a brief outline of the sceptical paradox has been made with the help of the mathematical example. Kripke generalizes it in the following words:

The sceptical argument, then, remains unanswered. There can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to accord with anything we may choose to do. So there can be neither accord, nor conflict. This is what Wittgenstein said in 202. (k 55)

The Sceptical Solution:

The solution (sceptical) to this paradox, according to Kripke, consists in accepting the premise and denying the conclusion. 'The sceptical solution does this by persuading that we do not need to supply the account of meaning the sceptic shows to be unavailable; we can take a radically different view of the significance of statements about meaning, namely that such statements do not purport to state fact at all' ² McGinn clarifies Kripke's view. It consists in replacing 'truth-condition' with 'assertability-condition'. Kripke thinks that 'Wittgenstein proposes a language based, not on truth condition, but on *assertability conditions* or *justification conditions*.' (K 74) This, Kripke further maintains, on the one hand 'offers a new approach to the problem of how language has meaning', while on the other hand 'it can be applied to give an account of assertions about meaning themselves, regarding as assertions within our language (K 77). Wittgenstein's solution, according to Kripke, is sceptical in so far as it accepts the sceptic's negative claims that no fact or truth condition corresponds to statements, yet it is a solution as far as it shows that the impossibility of meaning can be done

away with if we shift from truth conditions to assertability conditions.

Wittgenstein's sceptical solution concedes to the sceptic that no 'truth conditions' or 'corresponding facts' in the world exist that make a statement like "Jones, like many of us, means addition by '+'" true. Rather we should look at how such assertions are used. (Kripke, 86)

Kripke notes here that this shift from truth condition to assertability condition will not encounter sceptical problem. He says:

Now if we suppose that facts, or truth conditions, are of the essence of meaningful assertion, it will follow from the sceptical conclusion that assertions that anyone ever means anything are meaningless. On the other hand, if we apply to these assertions the tests suggested in *Philosophical Investigations*, no such conclusion follows. . . . the game of asserting them under such conditions has a role in our lives. No supposition that 'facts correspond'

to those assertions is needed. [Italics mine] (K 77-78).

This shift from truth-conditions to assertibility-conditions leads to a shift from correspondence to facts to coherence with the community. The assertibility-conditions of my meaning something by a word or function involves that I am inclined to use it in accordance with the linguistic community. According to Kripke:

Any individual who claims to have mastered the concept of addition will be judged by the community to have done so if his particular responses agree with those of the community in enough cases, . . .
(Kripke, 91-92)

The lack of accordance with the linguistic community will exclude the person from having any language at all. That is to say that to possess a language one must be judged to cohere in use with the rest of the community. He further argues:

A deviant individual whose responses do not accord with those of the community in enough cases will not be judged, by the community, to be following its rules; he may even be judged to be a madman,

following no coherent rule at all. 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, 93)

Since to mean something involves community therefore Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein implies a sort of verificationism. The agreement with rest of the community entails that it is checkable. Kripke maintains:

Wittgenstein's sceptical solution to his problem depends on agreement, and on checkability - on one person's ability to test whether another uses a term as he does. (Kripke, 99)

The issue is, according to Kripke, linked with the private language argument. Since my following of rules must accord with the rest of the community, therefore, it is impossible to have private rules. The impossibility of private rules implies the impossibility of private language. Kripke says:

A sceptical problem is posed, and a sceptical solution to that problem is given. The solution

turns on the idea that each person who claims to be following a rule can be checked by others. (Kripke, 101)

Kripke's interpretation of private language argument is this that a physically isolated person can follow a rule, 'but a person considered in isolation cannot'. Thus there is nothing wrong in saying that Robinson Crusoe, isolated on an island, follows rules, provided, Kripke maintains, we take him into our community and apply our criteria of rule following. Kripke writes:

What does follow is that if we think of Crusoe as following rules, we are taking him into our community and applying our criteria for rule following to him. The falsity of the private model need not mean that a *physically isolated* individual cannot be said to follow rules; rather that an individual, *considered in isolation* (whether or not he is physically isolated), cannot be said to do so. (K 110)

A Critical Analysis of Kripke:

Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein has been put to severe criticism by the thinkers dealing in this tradition during the last decade and a half. The claim that Wittgenstein puts forward a sceptical paradox and offers a sceptical solution in the Humean manner, critics believe, is not supported by the text. In what follows I would inquire whether or not the letter or interpretation of the Wittgenstein's text could lead to the problem which Kripke has pointed out.

According to Kripke sec 201 is the core of the *PI* in which Wittgenstein puts forward the paradox. On Kripke's interpretation the solution of the paradox—sceptical solution—involves community which renders private language impossible (which according to Kripke is established in 202). Let us examine this i.e. whether 201 offers a paradox and whether 201 is the core of the *Philosophical Investigations* and whether 202 states the conclusion of private language argument.

The sec. 201-2 of the *Investigations* run as follows:

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer

was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.

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 one contended us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call "obeying the rule" and "going against it" in actual cases.

Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term "interpretation" to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another. (PI 201)

And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule

'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it. (PI 202)

Whether 201 is the core of PI :

In order to answer the questions whether 201 is the core of the *Investigations* the historical evolution of the *Investigations*, Baker and Hacker recommend, is to be seen. They point out that in the earlier draft of the *Investigations* the sec. 201 is missing.³ Now, had 201 been the core of PI such omissions would not have resulted.

Furthermore, the context of occurrence of 201-3 in MS 129 is not the same as that of *Philosophical Investigations*. In MS Sec. 201-3 has a bearing on 'recognition as mediating between saying and seeing'.⁴

Again, they write 'the manuscript contexts has nothing to do with scepticism', rather 'in their original context they [sec 201-3] quite explicitly build upon [sec]198 and upon the senselessness of private ostensive definition,'⁵ Further they say:

The 'private' following of a rule, e.g. a mental ostensive definition, that is presupposed by the supposition that recognition intervenes between seeing and saying, is a sham, in which following a rule and thinking one is following a rule collapse into each other.⁶

Whether 201 offers a paradox:

In order to determine whether Wittgenstein offers a paradox as suggested by Kripke the context of 201-202 is to be seen. There is a thematic unity in sec. 143-242 of *PI*. In these hundred sec. Wittgenstein aims at dispensing with the view that meaning and understanding consist in being guided by a rule- a mental rule. Wittgenstein's target is the rejection of the concept of being guided by a rule. Nowhere in these hundred sections or anywhere else in the *PI* does Wittgenstein reject or doubt rule following. Hence the context of the text does not provide any ground to attribute a sceptical paradox to Wittgenstein. Let us fill this argument a bit.

Immediately before 143 Wittgenstein introduces the issue of the relation of the act of meaning and understanding, which

happens (in a flash) at any instance, and the use of it which is extended in time. 'Can what we grasp *in a flash* accord with a use, fit or fail to fit? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before us in an instant, fit a use?' (PI 139) The answer to this question involves a correct appreciation of what it is to grasp the meaning of a word or to understand it. Wittgenstein rejects that the use or application of a word means the occurrence of something before one's consciousness. He argues:

What is essential is to see the same thing can come before our minds when we hear the word and the application still be different. Has it the same meaning both times? I think we shall say not. (PI 140)

Wittgenstein here is pointing to the fact that the mental sample could not serve the purpose of explaining the relation between the act of grasping the meaning and its use i.e., Marie McGinn comments '. . . our infinite ability to use language cannot be explained in terms of a, finite generative base;' and consequently the difference between understanding and failing to understand language 'does not lie in the

presence or absence, respectively, of the finite internal state which is the source of infinite capacity.' "

Wittgenstein, in connection to the question of relation of grasping the meaning and its correct application in an infinite number of cases, investigates the possibility of occurrence of formula coming before one's mind. Wittgenstein rejects this also on the pretext that the coming of the formula before one's mind does not guarantee the correct application of it. Thus understanding does not consist in the occurrence of a picture or formula before one's mind. These are, for Wittgenstein, the common misconceptions. Understanding (or meaning) is akin to ability or a mastery of a technique. Wittgenstein argues:

If there has to be anything 'behind the utterance of the formula' it is *particular circumstances*, which justify me in saying I can go on—when the formula occurs to me. (PI 154)

The above section hints that it is the actual circumstances which must be the focus of attention in dealing with the issues regarding meaning and understanding. As understanding is mastery of a technique we are lead to the problem of

following a rule. The crucial questions addressed in 185-242 are related to the issue of what it is to follow a rule, what is the relation between rule following and interpretation, and rule following and action/practice.

Here Wittgenstein rejects the idea that there is something in the rule which somehow compels one to obey a particular rule in certain determinate way/ways. There is no mysterious process, state, formula, according to Wittgenstein, which determines the pupil to write 1002 instead of 1004 when given the order to add +2. It is only the practice of using a rule that determines what it is to follow a rule and going against it. It is not the case that there exists a conflict between a rule (+2) and the reaction of the pupil (when he writes down 1004, 1008, instead of 1002, 1004) which would lead to rule scepticism as thought of by Kripke. It is rather a conflict between the pupil's reaction and the trainer's reaction, and which one is the correct application could only be resolved by referring to the actual form of life within which the training and the application are done.

True, there are cases in which one knows the answer to a particular question in advance but that too must be explained in terms of practice. As Marie McGinn explains 'it is practice

that is invoked by these words, and not a mysterious mental act.' ⁸ As Wittgenstein writes:

When you said "I already at the time . . ." that meant something like: "If I had then been asked what number should be written after 1000, I should have replied '1002'." And that I don't doubt.
(PI 187)

There remains another tempting misconception, which Wittgenstein rejects, that there mediates an act of interpretation between a rule and its application. That is the pupil's writing down 1000, 1004, 1008,.. depends on his interpretation of the rule (+2). But this is absurd since in that case the distinction between correct and incorrect application of rule would be lost. The matter is referred to in sections 198 and 201. Wittgenstein clarifies:

"But how can a rule shew me what I have to do at this point? Whatever I do is, on some interpretation, in accord with the rule." -that is not what we ought to say, but rather: 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. (PI 198)

It is to be noted that in the above paragraph what Wittgenstein rejects is that one cannot talk about correct interpretation of a rule without paying any heed to the actual practice. The last sentence of the above quotation when read with the section 201 would resolve the supposed charge of sceptical paradox.

This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: 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. . . . (PI 201)

In the above section Wittgenstein is clearly stating a reductio ad absurdum. To put the case precisely we can reframe the argument in this way. If interpretation mediates between rule and its application, then it is both the case that interpretation accords with the rule and does not accord with

the rule (which is absurd). Hence, Interpretation does not mediate between a rule and its application. This is a perfectly valid argument. To conclude from here that rule following does not occur is to argue besides the point.

Again, Wittgenstein nowhere claims that rule following does not occur. The long chain of argument of which 201 is the terminus aims at dispensing with the confusions regarding, understanding, knowledge and rule following etc., hence it cannot be validated that Wittgenstein subscribes to a sceptical paradox.

Moreover, defective conceptual schemes beget scepticism and paradox. Wittgenstein's sole interest is the grammar of following the rules (PI 199). Here he does not propose any theory or analysis of rule following. What he says is that rules are connected with regularity and practice, which is, as Marie McGinn puts, 'observable in the structure of our language, in how our concepts actually function.'⁹ Since he is not interested in giving any theory or philosophical analysis about rule following, therefore, one cannot attribute sceptical paradox to Wittgenstein. The following section substantiates this view:

Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule—say signpost—got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? —Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it.

But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the signpost; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in. On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom. (PI 198)

Introduction of the community:

Kripke's claim that Wittgenstein, after realizing the impossibility of rule following, replaces Truth conditions with Assertability conditions. The latter involves a community and hence it is impossible for the individual in isolation to obey a rule and possess a language. This in turn leads to the impossibility, according to Kripke, of private language.

This suggestion of replacing Truth condition with Assertability condition is also not correct. For, in the first place Wittgenstein nowhere offers a theory of meaning. When dealing with meaning Wittgenstein tells to look at the explanation of meaning, use, practice, particular concrete cases. This does not agree with the view which Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein i.e. Wittgenstein puts forward an assertability theory of meaning involving community.

A note on the Grammar of rule- following:

This discussion will aim at clearing the dispute that whether community is necessarily involved in rule-following and whether it is possible to follow a rule in isolation.

For Stuart Shanker Wittgenstein conception of rule-following involves a social practice.¹⁰ But for Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, Rule-following is a practice which need not necessarily be social. I think Hacker's suggestion implies from (PI 198) , quoted above, that practice here refers more to theory and practice rather than individual and social practice.¹¹

Moreover, there must be, Colin McGinn maintains, more than one occasions of regularity of action (rule-following).¹² This means that it is possible to obey a rule in isolation. This would not amount to saying that one is obeying a rule privately, since 'private' means that which pertains to consciousness—to the first person subjective experiences. Rule-following is characterized by regularity and not necessarily by community. One man can be said to follow a rule when on a number of occasions he pursues a regular course of action (including linguistic action). As Wittgenstein argues:

Is what we call "obeying a rule" something that it would be possible for only one man to do, and to do only once in his life? —This is of course a note on the grammar of the expression "to obey a rule".

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. —To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institution).

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (PI 199)

It is possible for me to invent a card-game today, which however never gets played. But it means nothing: in the history of mankind just once was a game invented, and that game was never played by anyone. That means nothing. Not because it contradicts psychological laws. Only in a quite definite surrounding do the words "invent a game" "play a game" make sense.

In the same way it cannot be said either that just once in the history of mankind did someone follow a sign-post. Whereas it can be said that just once in the history of mankind did some walk parallel with a board. And that first impossibility is again not a psychological one. (RFM p. 346)

Wittgenstein does talk about agreement but from here one cannot make a case for community, since the agreement is essential for communication with others and not for rule-following. It is to be noted that rule-following is an action

and not merely an event, it is contingent and is exclusively pertains to human ways of living. Rule-following makes sense when there is a possibility of not following rules and that relates to human ways of acting and living. Wittgenstein writes:

We say that, in order to communicate, people must agree with one another about the meanings of words. But the criterion for this agreement is not agreement with reference to definitions, e.g., ostensive definitions—but also agreement in judgments. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgments. (RFM p. 343)

Moreover, the above discussion shows that there does not exist any mythical, metaphysical, mathematical, or mechanical connection between a rule and its application. Rule-following relates to ways of living and acting. One need not have any

justification for it. Rule-following is blind. It has also been made evident that rule-following is possible in isolation. Hence, Kripke is wrong in arguing that rule-following is not possible in isolation. I can be as certain that I have followed a rule as others could be about me. As Shanker argues:

It is not that the rule mechanically determines it's application, but rather, that we determine, in our practice of using the rule as a paradigm, what is it to count as complying with a rule. ¹³

Does PI 202 states the conclusion of the private language argument:

In section 202 Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of private rules (private ostensive definition). This has a bearing on the private language argument. Since the impossibility of private rules would necessarily reject the possibility of private language. But the real private language argument is not in 202. It is rather introduced in 243 as discussed in this study. The reason for this is that the context of 202 is different from 243. In 202 Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of there being private rules after rejecting the

false picture of being guided by interpretation whereas in what is known as the private language argument he rejects the philosophical confusions regarding 'the conception of the mental underlying the mainstream European philosophy since Descartes.' ¹⁴ Hence the conclusion of private language could not be found in 202. Hacker argues that the relation between 202 and private language argument is like the connection between Kant's Transcendental Analytic. Baker and Hacker write:

The private language argument is indeed built on the previous discussions, not only of rule-following but also of ostensive definitions, samples, meaning, understanding, and explanation. So too Kant's 'Dialectic' is built on the 'Analytic', but that does not mean that the 'real "Dialectic"' is the 'Analytic'. ¹⁵