A Note on Kripkenstein's Paradox

Una nota sobre la Paradoja de Kripkenstein

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Abstract

In this note I present a solution to Kripkenstein's paradox, based on a very simple argument: (1) natural language and rule-following are empirical phenomena; (2) no case has been described, in real life, of a person who behaves as Wittgenstein's or Kripke's fictional character; (3) therefore, the discussion of such a case is completely devoid of interest. I lay out the example of a 'Kripkensteinian apple', which has a normal weight on even days and is weightless on odd days, in order to highlight the contrast between a genuinely empirical perspective, such as that of physics, and the logical-analytical perspective, under which Kripkenstein's paradox has attracted so much attention.

KEYWORDS: Communication; empirical semantics; logical analysis; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Saul Kripke.

Resumen

En esta nota presento una solución a la paradoja de Kripkenstein, basada en un argumento sumamente sencillo: (1) el lenguaje natural y el seguimiento de reglas son fenómenos empíricos; (2) no se ha descrito en la vida real ningún caso similar a los personajes ficticios de Wittgenstein y Kripke; (3) por consiguiente, la discusión de un caso semejante carece completamente de interés. Propongo el ejemplo de una "manzana kripkensteiniana", ingrávida los días impares del mes y grávida los pares, para que se vea mejor el contraste entre una perspectiva genuinamente empírica, como la de la física, y la perspectiva lógico-analítica, que ha llevado a dedicar a la paradoja de Kripkenstein tanta atención.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Análisis lógico; comunicación; Ludwig Wittgenstein; Saul Kripke; semántica empírica.

1.   In this note I present a new approach to Kripkenstein's paradox.[1] This paradox is based on a fictional character; neither Wittgenstein nor Kripke derives the paradox from a real case, but from an imaginary one:

> Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say + 2) beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

> We say to him: "Look what you've done"—He doesn't understand. We say: "You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!"—He answers: "Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it" (Wittgenstein 1958, I, §185);[2]

> 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 (Wittgenstein 1958, I, §201);

> I do not in this piece of writing attempt to speak for myself, or, except in occasional and minor asides, to say anything about my own views on the substantive issues … Primarily I can be read, except in a few obvious asides, as almost like an attorney presenting a major philosophical argument as it struck me (Kripke 1982, p. ix);

> Let me suppose, for example, that '68 + 57' is a computation that I have never performed before … I perform the computation, obtaining, of course, the answer '125' … Now suppose I encounter a bizarre sceptic. This sceptic questions my certainty about my answer, in what I just called the 'metalinguistic' sense. Perhaps, he suggests, as I used the term 'plus' in the past, the answer I intended for '68 + 57' should have been '5'! … Ridiculous and fantastic though it is, the sceptic's hypothesis is not logically impossible (Kripke 1982, pp. 8-9).

The paradox arises, hence, from a thought experiment: from the logical analysis of a hypothetical scenario. Neither in Wittgenstein's nor in Kripke's writings – nor, as far as I have been able to check, in any later publication on this paradox – is there a single real case of a subject who behaves as the rebel pupil or the bizarre sceptic that Wittgenstein and Kripke portray in these quotations.[3]

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[1] "I refer, of course, to the paradox that Saul Kripke … has located in the work of Wittgenstein" (Schiffer 1986, p. 162, note 9). Given that this paradox has been so vastly debated, it is difficult to verify that the approach I present here is completely new. However, I have revised more than one hundred publications (including virtually all those archived in http://philpapers.org under the category 'Kripkenstein on Meaning' at the time of writing this paper), and none of them gives an argument similar to the one I put forward here. Towards the end of the paper, I will mention the two references I have found that come closest.

[2] Italics are as in the original, unless otherwise stated.

[3] Of course, the case of someone who has not yet mastered the rule and is unsure about how to apply it, the case of someone who has full competence in applying the rule but disputes it

On the other hand, it is an increasingly accepted thesis that natural language and natural language rules are not mental realities, or Platonic self-subsistent entities, but social phenomena, which exist in virtue of how people behave in society. In other words: that without people, and without people behaving in a certain way, there is no natural language, and there is no rule-following at all (in the sense of natural language rule-following). If this is so, language and rule-following are empirical phenomena, and they must be studied from an empirical perspective, not from a logical one. Kripkenstein's paradox amounts then to speculation on a purely hypothetical case, one which in the real world is not known to happen, and that there is no reason to think is ever going to happen. How speculation on such a case may be of interest for science, philosophy, or any other area of human knowledge, is hard to see. Such is my solution to Kripkenstein's paradox, a solution that can be summed up as follows:

Premise 1: Natural language and rule-following are empirical (social) phenomena.

Premise 2: No one has reported a real-life case of someone who behaves like Wittgenstein's or Kripke's fictional character, nor has it been plausibly argued that such a person exists or will exist in the future.

Conclusion: Speculation on such a case is completely devoid of interest.

2. Kripkenstein's argument is especially pressing for the Platonic conception of meaning, according to which meanings and social rules are self-subsistent entities, which we manage to grasp by some mysterious procedure yet to be clarified. From this – logical-introspective – point of view, the possibility of someone failing to grasp 'the correct meanings', including myself or the whole community of speakers, as well as the possibility that the observable evidence is not enough to univocally determine what those meanings are, are worrisome. However, from an empirical point of view, and in particular from the view of meaning and rule-following as genuine social phenomena, the situation is exactly the opposite: it is precisely because there are no rebels or bizarre sceptics of the kind described by

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with the aim of enforcing a new one, or the case of someone who is just cynically pretending not to understand, do not qualify as instances of Kripkenstein's scepticism. These cases are indeed easy to find, but they do not exhibit the kind of radical disagreement that gives rise to the paradox, and have played no significant role in the literature on the subject.

Wittgenstein and Kripke, that social rules emerge – that social rules come into existence.

In order to illustrate the difference between the empirical and the logical-introspective approach, let us place the discussion in a field whose empirical character is beyond any doubt: physics. Let us imagine that someone proposes to discuss the case of a 'Kripkensteinian apple': an apple which is attracted to the Earth on the even days of the month, but not on odd days; in such a way that on even days it falls to the ground when we drop it, but on odd days it remains free-floating, as a cloud. What a great problem such an apple would pose for physics! The laws of mechanics would be fatally challenged by a case like this. And yet it is difficult to imagine the physicists entangled for a long time on the discussion of such a case: the purported apple simply does not exist, and the only lesson that can be obtained from it is that its nonexistence confirms those physical laws with which it would be incompatible.

In the case of Kripkenstein's paradox, there is an analogous lesson to be learned: that instead of requiring of a good semantic theory that it enables us to tame the Kripkensteinian imaginary rebel, the sensible thing to do is to use the fact that *there are no* Kripkensteinian rebels as evidence in favour of those semantic theories which have as a consequence that Kripkensteinian rebels do not occur[4].

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[4] Gary Ebbs has pointed out that: "If we have no understanding of rules apart from our practices of obeying rules and going against them in actual cases, then we can't make sense of Kripke's skeptical 'hypothesis' that in the past our word 'plus' meant quus not plus. Kripke tries to persuade us that we can make sense of this 'hypothesis' by focusing on our first-person experience of trying to follow a rule. This directs our attention to mental states that accompany our attempts to follow rules, and thereby leads us unwittingly to accept Kripke's view that a speaker's intention to follow a rule is just a matter of his being in a certain mental state … Without Kripke's view of meaning to sustain it, our feeling that we understand Kripke's skeptical 'hypothesis' fades. And without Kripke's skeptical 'hypothesis' to motivate it, his skepticism about meaning dissolves. Since the skeptic has not raised a genuine possibility, there is no need to try to rule it out" (Ebbs 1997, §130). However, the possibility to which Kripke initially alludes is precisely that of a 'bizarre sceptic' appearing that raises such a hypothesis. Leaving aside whether the hypothesis that the sceptic purports is something of which we can make sense, the very fact that no such sceptic ever appears in real life is something that Ebbs could have crucially used to reinforce his position at this point.

On the other hand, Andrew Lewis contemplates the possibility of such a sceptic appearing, but he notes: "If only one person began to respond to '+2' as the pupil does, we could simply dismiss it as 'a hitherto unknown kind of insanity' [in reference to a quote to (Frege 2013) given in (Wittgenstein 1978, §152)]. However, if his case was repeated in sufficiently

And there is yet a second – more bottom-line – lesson to be learned from this paradox, and from the vast discussion it has brought about: that logical analysis is not the best methodology for addressing the semantic study of natural language. Indeed, the very philosophical entanglement to which the logical-introspective perspective has driven us in this case is an a fortiori reason to opt for an empirical model of meaning, such as the one I have argued for elsewhere.[5] Only then will we realise how fruitless it is to cast so much attention on a case that never occurs, instead of investigating the inner workings of natural language by looking at real communicative transactions.

3. Appendix. An anonymous referee of *Análisis* objects that 'what Kripke's argument shows is that the solutions to the new questions are not determined by the solutions previously given to old questions', so that 'confining the discussion to Kripke's example does not do justice to the argument'. I think it is worthwhile answering this criticism, and I will try to do so in this appendix.

To start with, it should be noticed that the way in which Kripke's argument is supposed to show that 'the solutions to the new questions are not determined by the solutions previously given to old questions' is by means of the hypothetical case of a certain sceptic – the case of an sceptic to whom, should she appear on stage, we would not know how to reply. And the fact that we cannot convince the sceptic that her answers are incorrect (that is, the fact that we cannot logically demonstrate that her answers are incorrect, on the basis of the preceding solutions) is supposed to prove that the solutions to the new questions are not in fact determined by the solutions already given to old questions.

The preceding reasoning is an example of a purely conceptual (purely logico-philosophical) reasoning. It begins with an imaginary scenario, and reaches a certain conclusion after a number of steps. But let us imagine, however, that the

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great numbers, then, unless it was possible either to re-train or to isolate those who respond in this way, it would become impossible to continue the communal practice of arithmetic. Wittgenstein therefore views this case as a danger only if it becomes actual, and only if it occurs with sufficient frequency; however, the rule-sceptic regards even the possibility of such a case as a threat to arithmetic" (Lewis 1988, p. 297). What Lewis does not realise is that, again, the very fact that in real life no Kripkensteinian sceptics ever appear (not even once, let alone 'in sufficiently great numbers') is in itself evidence in favour of the social vision of language: the way in which subjects manage to harmonise their answers as a matter of fact is by the mere practice of living in community, not by looking for justifications.
[5] (Picazo 2014), (Picazo 2015a), (Picazo 2015b).

solutions to the new questions are not determined by logic, but by a complex empirical mechanism. My hunger, for example, is not determined by logic, but by an empirical mechanism, which has to do with my biological constitution. The mechanism by virtue of which I feel hungry after some time without eating is independent of whether I can be convinced by rational reasoning that I should feel hungry after not having eaten for some time.

Let us suppose, then, that there is an analogous mechanism responsible for the fact that people coincide in their answers to rule-following questions (in the usual conditions, i.e., supposing that there is a linguistic community, a previous well-defined use, etc.). Assuming that this mechanism exists, the fact that people coincide in their answers to rule-following questions could be seen, not as the consequence of logical reasoning, but as a consequence of the action of that mechanism.

Such is precisely the thesis I hold. By maintaining that natural language and rule-following are empirical phenomena, I am committed to the existence of a complex mechanism (which I am not, obviously, in a position to account for in detail), by virtue of which understanding and linguistic communication exist. By virtue of such mechanism, answers to the new questions *are* determined; but they are not logically determined by the answers to the old questions; rather, they are empirically determined by the mechanism which regulates the very existence of language as a whole.

From this perspective, the fact that we actually coincide in our answers, and the fact that Kripkenstein's sceptics do not crop up in real life, are regarded as relevant evidence. Indeed, they are regarded as evidence in favour of the bottom-line hypothesis that there is an empirical mechanism responsible for the existence of natural language. In this respect, the claim that 'confining the discussion to Kripke's example does not do justice to the argument' is precisely an instance of the type of mistake that I contend against here: the whole of Kripkenstein's argument is based on a fictional character, and the way to do justice to the argument is precisely to point out that, as long as a person who behaves like that fictional character is not found in real life, there is simply no case; just as there is no case to be raised in physics regarding the Kripkensteinian apple, simply because such an apple does not exist. It is true that, were there to be Kripkensteinian apples, their existence would challenge the laws of physics. But for that same reason, the fact that there are no Kripkensteinian apples is a confirmation of such laws. And in a similar way, it is true that if there were Kripkensteinian sceptics, their existence would challenge the existence of a shared language. But for that same reason, the

fact that there are no Kripkensteinian sceptics must be regarded as a confirmation that natural language communication exists.[6]

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