Wittgenstein and Kripke's Skeptic

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1. Introduction:

Exercise of human freedom results in human action and human action in turn forms cultural facts. Physical actions, such as running, walking, lifting something, arranging books, etc. are all cultural activities. The divide between what is natural and what is cultural is marked by the absence or presence of human freedom.[1] Note Wittgenstein's remark: 'What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?'[2] If we subtract 'my arm goes up' from the fact that 'I raise my arm' what we get is the expression of human freedom. My arm going up is an event and my raising the arm is an action. In both the cases of my arm going up and my arm being raised, what is perceived is the same, but the observations made are two different things. One is observed as an event and the other is observed as an action. We invoke the laws of nature in observing events and we invoke the exercise of freedom in observing actions.

Our expectation is based on these two things. If some one holds a gun, we expect a sound if it is fired.[3] The link between the triggering of the lever and the gunshot are causal, and triggering of the lever is an action expected of the person if he is a police inspector running after a terrorist. Regularity or repeated experience is the basis of expectation. We expect rain after observing the clouds; we expect a visitor if there is a prior engagement. Expectation in the case of natural events is based on the laws of nature, and expectation of human behaviour is built on the norms we follow.

2. Rules as norms

Systematic use of human freedom in a particular way becomes the norm. Going for a walk at a fixed time regularly becomes a norm. So would be our eating at a regular time becomes a norm. Anything that a human being does with regularity would acquire a normative status. Telling the truth is a norm since we often tell the truth. Thus, language too is normative since its words and sentences are used in accordance with syntactical and semantic rules. There should be an agreement between the subject and the verb in a sentence is a norm. All culture-regulating rules of human beings are normative; since music, dance, architecture, painting, literature, philosophy etc. are all systematic and regular rule governed institutions, they are all normative.

Science that deals with nature and laws of nature too is an inseparable part of the social institution. The laws of nature can be made into a norm by adapting the laws of nature as part of cultural activity. For instance, the lighting of candles can be a norm though lighting of the candle has to meet the conditions of combustion, that is, presence of oxygen and wax apart from igniting the fire. Similarly, a mobile phone is a cultural product even though much of scientific and technological principles have gone into making such a tool available to us.

To speak in general terms, scientific activity including technology is an inseparable part of a culture. A certain type of cultural activity we call science. Science has its own language. To be more specific, each science has its own language. The language of physics is different from the language of biology and this in turn is different from the language of chemistry and mathematics.[4] Yet there is connection between them and each and every language of science has a connection with natural language. The norm of language of science is that it should describe and explain, hence the descriptive language. The correspondence theory of truth goes well with this norm of describing[5] and explaining and occasionally we require coherence when it becomes the matter of theory in science.

One cannot speak of a norm without a normative principle. Within the legal system we find the laws of the land and in the context of language, we find the rules for the use of words as norms. When you write in English, be grammatical would be a normative statement about writing. When we edit the sentences or correct ill-formed sentences, we are following the norm. When we provide different criteria for the use of the word 'game' for instance, board game, card game, ball game etc., we are distinctly laying down the norm for the use of the word. Since rules of words are normative, they have the ability to guide us in our linguistic behaviour.[6] When there are several rules, no one rule would be necessary. Therefore, we cannot speak of a necessary and sufficient condition for the use of a word. Every rule is a sufficient condition, though every rule is not a necessary condition.

The distinction between a statement and a sentence makes it clear that a description is too normative. A statement is said to be the use of a sentence. For instance, when I utter the sentence 'I am hungry' I make a statement that can take the value true or false. Someone else can use the same sentence to make a different statement having just the opposite truth-value. What is important to note here is that the act of asserting makes the sentence a statement capable of taking on the value true or false. A mere sentence is neither true nor false. To realize this is to realize the value of describing.

We may note here certain practices. When someone offers a definition, one takes the sentence to be true by definition and does not ask the question, what makes a definition true? Nothing needs to be done to know that a definition is true. This is because when we offer a definition, we make a linguistic move of proposing the manner in which the word is to be used. Being the member of this institution called language, each one of us has the license to introduce or modify the rules of the use of certain words, by way of a definition. This linguistic liberty cannot be taken away, since in defining the words, we exercise our freedom as a member of the institution of language.[7] Wittgenstein has rightly emphasized the arbitrary nature of rules in language.[8] However, he is equally aware of the necessity of following the rules.

[1] Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*), 3rd Edn. Trans by G.E.M. Anscombe, Prentice Hall, NJ, 1958, § 25.
[2] PI § 621.
[3] PI § 442.
[4] PI § 7.
[5] PI § 136.
[6] PI § 172-178.
[7] PI § 3, § 29, § 69.
[8] PI § 372, § 397.

Commitment to the rule makes the rule necessary. 'Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way.'[9] By arbitrariness of rules, one should not understand that the rule is arbitrary in the sense that it could be changed any time one wants it, but one should understand it as conventional, as opposed to something natural and given. 'The rules of language are arbitrary' means that the rules are formulated by human beings at will. Without human effort, the rules would not have come into being. Or another way of putting the same thing would be that the rules are cultural, and not natural. 'Arbitrary' as we normally use it always has reference to some practical end.[10]

Every word in language is equally governed by the rules of language. There is no order in language in terms of something being superior or inferior.[11] Different words, sentences etc. have their use, some of them may change over time.[12] 'For a large class of cases –though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.'[13] Ordinary language is all right. It is doing its job quite well.[14]

It is important to note that we are able to learn the rules of language by learning the use in a few contexts. Rules of language are comparable to rail lines. When we speak of a series it is one like a visible section of rails laid to infinity. Here infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule.[15] When we stipulate a rule, we have no choice. 'When I obey a rule, I do not choose. I obey the rule blindly.'[16]

3. Rules and their interpretations

Certain words have several rules for their use. This leads to the unpredictability of the use of words. We require an interpretation of the rule to comprehend. This leads to the problem of *seeing as*. Wittgenstein recognizes several possible interpretations. Speaking of ostensive definition, he holds that any ostensive definition will have various interpretations.[17] It is possible to interpret and reinterpret a facial expression, for instance as timid or courageous.[18] Similarly, Wittgenstein has provided a figure of a square that is seen as a glass cube, or as an inverted open box. His famous duck-rabbit example too emphasizes the interpretative aspect of language.[19] We interpret human behaviour and ascribe the intention to the speaker.[20] 'The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.'[21]

Interpretation is sometimes essential since there are several criteria for the use of the word. For instance, if someone states: 'the teacher carried his table to the class' this might require some interpretation. One might have to interpret that the teacher has carried mathematical table with him when he entered the class or his writing table, as the classroom was not well furnished. However, there would be only one interpretation if there were only one defining criterion. For instance, the notion of validity of an argument as opposed to the soundness of an argument has only one criterion: the conclusion cannot be false when the premises are true. Similarly, a series might have just one criterion, say, add 2, to get the next number in the series. We might use the formula n+2 to obtain the next number and then we know exactly that the next number in the series ought to be 1006 after 1004, and 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on.[22] This is because the criterion provided is precise and only one, i.e., n+2.

4. Kripke's Skeptic

Rule-following skeptic Kripke fails to notice this point about the rules of language. Having recognized the arbitrary nature of rules, the skeptic constructs a rule parallel to our rule of addition. Thus, the stipulated *quus* rule behaves exactly the way our plus rule behaves in all observed cases and differs from plus rule only in unobserved cases. Kripke's skeptic then argues that there is no way one can identify the rule followed since the behaviour is identical. However, there is a difference in meaning since the rules determine the meaning and the one who follows plus rule would count 68 + 57 to be 125 and the other would claim the resultant to be only 5.[23] However, there is some kind of inconsistency in the argument of Kripke's skeptic. Either he should claim that when you know the rule, you learn all the instances of the application of the rule, or when you know the rule, you know only the application that you have learnt so far. In the former case, when the rule is given all its extensions are given and in the latter case, when the rule is given not all the extensions are given. Kripke's skeptic makes use of both these views in constructing his argument.

While providing the observed cases, Kripke's skeptic believes that we are aware of the rule plus and the rule *quus* but do not know in advance that when we add 67 and 58 they do not behave in the same manner. That is to say, when we learn a rule, we do not know all its applications. Of course, such a view leads to certain kind of absurdity: If we do not know when and where to apply the rules, and if we have to take fresh decisions regarding the application of either rule of plus or *quus* each time we confront a situation, the rules would lack their normativity, and thus the power to guide us. While arguing for the difference in meaning of the rules of plus and *quus* , Kripke's skeptic counts the unobserved cases. As we have noted, Kripke's skeptic wants to have the cake and eat it too. The *quus* rule remains arbitrary all the time for the skeptic. It does not follow any logic in all the unobserved cases, and hence lacks generality, which is an essential feature of all rules. Kripke's skeptic believes that his *quus* rule requires interpretation every instance of its application.

[9] PI § 202-206.
[10] Wittgenstein, L., Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-35, From the notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret MacDonald (Ed.), Alice Ambrose, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1979, p. 60.
[11] PI § 97.
[12] PI § 23.
[13] PI § 43.
[14] PI § 402.
[15] PI § 218.
[16] PI § 219.
[17] PI § 28.
[18] PI § 536, § 537.
[19] PI Part II, pp. 193-194.
[20] PI § 201-202, § 634-653.
[21] PI § 206.
[22] PI § 186-187.
[23] Kripke, S. A., Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982, p. 21.

5. Concluding remarks

For Wittgenstein, when we grasp a rule, we grasp the whole of the rule in a flash.[24] We do not have undecided cases waiting for us to confront them and to decide upon anew. If it ever happens that way, that would be the case of modifying the existing rule or invoking a slightly different rule. Of course, this is not to claim that interpretations are not required at all. Those cases where interpretations are at work are the ones where multiple rules are applicable. If different rules were used, there would naturally be a difference in meaning. Kripke's skeptic is not able to show that plus rule and *quus* rules are different epistemically. If these two rules are different, Kripke's skeptic does not know at time *t* that they are different and when he learns that they are different at time *t'* he would not claim that the rule plus and *quus* are identical in their behaviour.

[24] PI § 155.