

# Putting Wittgenstein Back Into Kripkenstein: Meaning Skepticism and Knowing How to Go On

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Most readings of the meaning skepticism Kripke ascribes to Wittgenstein understand it as metaphysical. The threat to meaning is supposed to follow immediately from the impossibility of citing facts in which meaning consists. I offer an alternative, epistemological, reading which is closer to Wittgenstein. What threatens meaning is the worry that, when I use an expression on any given occasion, I cannot know that my use conforms to previous uses of the expression: instead, in Wittgenstein's terms, I go on "blindly," without the understanding which is necessary for meaningful use. This reading makes for a stronger skeptical argument, in that it blocks the non-reductionist response of taking meaning facts to be primitive. But the argument, on this reading, can still be answered: not by citing meaning facts but by showing that I can know how to go on with an expression without needing to appeal to what the expression means.

## I. Introduction

Since the publication of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, a substantial literature has emerged discussing the skeptical problem that Kripke ascribed to Wittgenstein and its implications for meaning and rule-following. Despite the extent and variety of this literature, there has been considerable convergence, if not on how to address the problem, at least on how it is to be understood. Most commentators agree, first, that although Kripke formulated the problem as an interpretation of Wittgenstein, the problem should be understood in its own right rather than by reference to Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning and rule-following. The proponent of the skeptical argument has come to be labelled "Kripkenstein," a philosopher whose views can be fully understood by reference to Kripke's text,

and without recourse to Wittgenstein.<sup>1</sup> A second point of agreement is that the problem is fundamentally metaphysical rather than epistemological: it arises from the difficulty, given certain constraints which Kripke specifies, of coming up with an adequate philosophical account of what meaning or grasp of a rule consists in. The skeptical conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning is understood to follow more or less directly from our supposed inability to specify a fact which constitutes a person's meaning something by an expression. A third point of agreement is that the very first move in the skeptical dialectic—in which a skeptic challenges my supposed knowledge that I ought to say “125” in response to “what's  $58 + 67$ ?—is not essential to the argument; all that is needed to establish the skeptical conclusion is to undermine candidate answers to the question of what meaning consists in.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I offer an alternative reading of the skeptical problem which differs from this consensus on all three points. I think that the skeptical problem is best understood, not in isolation, but in light of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following, and specifically his discussion of “knowing how to go on.” Relatedly, I understand the source of the skeptical problem as essentially epistemological: the skeptical conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning arises from my supposed inability to know, when I respond to “ $68+57$ ?” with “125”, that I am going on correctly from previous uses of “+”. And, again relatedly, I take the skeptic's challenge to my knowledge of the correctness of “125” to be crucial to the argument.<sup>3</sup> I will argue that this reading, as well as being closer to Kripke's own intentions, yields a stronger and more distinctive argument against the possibility of meaning. Nonetheless, as I will indicate in conclusion, the argument can be answered: not in the usual way, by offering an account of

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Kripkenstein” has been in use at least since Schiffer 1986 and is now widespread.

<sup>2</sup> Although this third point is often left implicit, it is made very clear by Paul Boghossian, who makes a point of describing the argument without any reference to the skeptic (1989, 515). Gary Ebbs, in this volume, diverges from the consensus regarding the second and third points, since he takes the question of my epistemic warrant for saying “125” to be crucial in motivating the skepticism. But his reading differs sharply from mine, in ways that I do not have space to discuss here.

<sup>3</sup> I have argued for the second two points in Ginsborg 2018; the present paper draws on the connection with Wittgenstein to expand and strengthen that argument. See also Ginsborg 2021 and forthcoming.

meaning and intentionality that supposedly meets Kripke's constraints, but by showing that such an account is not needed in order to avoid the skeptical conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

## II. The skeptical argument

I begin by rehearsing the opening phase of the skeptical argument, with a view to considering how it leads to the skeptical conclusion. We assume that I am an apparently competent speaker of English who knows basic arithmetic but who happens never to have added numbers larger than 57. I am now asked "What is  $68 + 57$ ?" and I answer "125." In so doing, Kripke says, I am confident that "125" is correct "both in the arithmetical sense that 125 is the sum of 68 and 57, and in the metalinguistic sense that 'plus,' as I intended to use that word in the past, denoted a function which, when applied to [68 and 57]... yields the value 125" (8).<sup>5</sup> I am confident, that is, both that I have calculated correctly, and that I am using the linguistic expression "+" correctly given how I used it, or intended to use it, in the past. At this point, however, I encounter a skeptic who challenges my confidence in what Kripke calls the "metalinguistic" correctness of my answer. This skeptic raises the possibility that "as I used the term 'plus' in the past, the answer I intended for ' $68+57$ ' should have been '5'" (8). My first reaction is to dismiss this suggestion as insane, but the skeptic goes on to give a reason. He points out that my past uses of "+" are consistent with the hypothesis that I meant, not addition, but quaddition, a function which yields the sum for arguments less than 57, but which otherwise yields the value 5. Unless I can rule out that hypothesis, he says, I have to give up my confidence in the "metalinguistic" correctness of my answer. In fact, unless I can show that I specifically meant addition, I have no reason at all to believe that "125" is correct in this sense, that is, that it conforms to what I meant by "+" when I used it previously.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that my aspiration to "put Wittgenstein back into Kripkenstein" extends only to the skeptical argument, and not to the skeptical solution. As I indicate in section V, I take Wittgenstein's own answer to the skeptical problem to be quite different from the communitarian solution proposed on his behalf by Kripke.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, page references are to Kripke 1982. Note Kripke's reference to my use of the word *in the past*; unlike most commentators, I take this as indicating that the correctness at issue has an essentially temporal dimension. The significance of this will emerge later.

He puts this by saying that my choice of “125” as an answer to the question “what is  $68+57$ ” is arbitrary, an unjustified “leap in the dark” (10, 15).

After this opening phase, the skeptical dialectic continues in the form of my making various attempts to show that I meant addition, and the skeptic arguing that these attempts are inadequate. In a preamble to this stretch of the dialectic, Kripke describes my task as that of “citing a fact in which my meaning addition consists.” Accordingly, I put forward a range of possible facts, most of which correspond to established philosophical accounts of meaning; regarding each of them, the skeptic argues that it fails to meet constraints essential to capturing the idea of meaning, notably the constraint that meaning is normative—at a first approximation, that what I mean by an expression determines, and puts me in a position to recognize, how I ought to use the expression. One immediate upshot of this extended stretch of argument is that I cannot rule out the skeptical hypothesis, and, more generally, cannot show that I meant addition in my previous uses of “+”. This upshot, at least on the face of it, is epistemological: it amounts to saying that I lack justification both for claiming that I meant addition and that I ought now to say “125.”. But Kripke makes clear that he takes the argument to yield a metaphysical conclusion as well. The argument establishes not just that I do not know that I meant addition, but that there is no fact of my having meant, or now meaning, addition. This conclusion generalizes to all uses of language: “there can be no fact as to what I mean by ‘plus’ or any other word at any time” (21). And it applies not just to what an individual means but to meaning generally: “it seems that the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air” (22).

How does this metaphysical conclusion follow from the epistemological considerations that precede it? Kripke is not clear on this point, and this may be part of the reason why many readers have discounted the initial, epistemological, phase of the argument. Readers who have attempted to accommodate the argument’s epistemological starting-point have typically justified the move to the metaphysical conclusion by pointing out that I am an “idealized” subject, in that the skeptic grants me complete cognitive access to my former behavior and conscious mental states. On the assumption that facts about meaning lie in one of those domains, it follows from my not knowing that I mean addition that

there is no such thing as my meaning addition. However, this move is successful only if we allow the assumption that facts about meaning are facts about behavior and conscious mental states, and, more specifically, that they are the kinds of facts that are in principle knowable through observation or introspection. The skeptic grants me idealized versions of my ordinary cognitive powers of observation, introspection, and memory: he does not, however, grant me a God-like omniscience about all metaphysically possible aspects of reality. So without further argument to the effect that meaning facts must in principle be facts about observable behavior or introspectible mental contents, the argument, so construed, does not go through. And this is a ground for understanding the argument, in line with most recent interpreters, as fundamentally metaphysical, that is, as turning directly on the difficulty of saying what meaning consists in.

However, if the argument is understood in this latter way, then it is open to an obvious objection, raised by several of Kripke's early commentators under the head of "unargued reductionism."<sup>6</sup> What is to stop us responding to the challenge to "cite the fact" of my meaning addition by saying that it is, simply, the fact that I mean addition? Famously, Kripke characterizes this approach, that of taking meaning facts as "sui generis," as "desperate and mysterious." But it is not clear what is desperate about taking facts about meaning to be primitive, nor why—if it is impossible to reduce meaning facts to facts that are more fundamental—the irreducibility of putative meaning facts should be thought to imply that there are no such facts. Typically, if we find ourselves unable to reduce facts of one kind to facts of a supposedly more fundamental kind, we do not conclude that there simply are no facts of the first kind. It might be replied that in fact the true moral of the skeptical argument is not that there are no meaning facts at all, but rather that there are insuperable obstacles in the way of a reductive account of meaning.<sup>7</sup> But although that is certainly an interesting and significant conclusion, it is considerably less ambitious than the conclusion which the skeptical argument claimed to establish. So, one way or another, we are left with a

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<sup>6</sup> McGinn 1984, 150-2; for further references, and more discussion, see Ginsborg 2018, 153.

<sup>7</sup> Anandi Hattiangadi (this volume) understands the argument this way. [[\*\*need to check this\*\*]] Verheggen forthcoming (a) also reads the argument primarily as a challenge to semantic reductionism, although one which, in combination with the claim that primitivism about meaning is unsatisfactory, leads to the "provocative" conclusion that there are no meaning facts.

weaker argument than initially advertised, one which fails to establish the dramatic and seemingly paradoxical conclusion that all language is meaningless.

The reading I propose avoids this objection by taking the argument to turn, not on the metaphysical challenge of saying what meaning consists, but on the epistemological challenge of justifying my confidence in the correctness of “125” as a response to “68+57?” On this reading, the metaphysical conclusion depends on the epistemological considerations raised at the beginning of the argument, but it is arrived at through a different route from that considered above. My failure to know that I meant addition rather than quaddition by “+” is not intended to lead directly to the conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning; rather, it is intended to show that, in the scenario Kripke asks us to imagine, I do not know, or am not warranted in believing, that “125’ is correct given my past use of “+”. It is this last claim—the claim that “125” is a “leap in the dark”—that, when generalized to all my particular uses of language, yields the conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning. Epistemological considerations are thus central to the argument, but the knowledge that is most crucial is not knowledge of what I mean by a given expression, but rather knowledge of what Kripke labels the “metalinguistic” correctness of my particular uses of expressions: knowledge, in each use, that it conforms to previous uses. To see how the argument works, though, we need to look more closely at this kind of correctness, and to consider why failure to recognize that my uses of language are correct in this sense should lead to the disappearance of meaning. We can do this most effectively by looking at some of the passages in Wittgenstein which, arguably, are the inspiration for the Kripke’s skeptical argument. I turn to this in the next section.

### III. Knowing how to go on

The most important passage for our purposes is *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* §185 where Wittgenstein describes an aberrant pupil who goes on wrongly in developing the sequence 0,2,4,6,8....

We first encounter this pupil in *PI* §141, where he is learning the basics of the decimal system, first learning to copy sequences of numerals, then learning how to write the numerals 0 through 9 in the correct order, then (as described in *PI* §143) learning to develop sequences of numerals into the tens and hundreds. Wittgenstein reintroduces him in *PI* §185. He now seems to have got the hang of the decimal system, so we go on to teach him to develop simple arithmetical sequences in response to orders like “+1,” “+2,” and “+3.” For example, when we give “+2” he is to write a segment of the sequence 0, 2, 4, 6, 8.... The pupil appears to have got the hang of this too, because we have tested him on two- and three-digit numbers and he has been successful every time: he has, let us say, responded to the order “+2” by writing out the whole sequence up to 998 and has gone on, as we expect, to write “1000.” But now, instead of writing “1002, 1004,” he writes “1004, 1008, 1012.” When we protest that we told him to add two, and tell him to look at what he wrote earlier (with the implication that he should do the same as he was doing earlier) he is baffled. He insists that what he is doing is correct and that he is going on in the same way as he did earlier. Wittgenstein continues as follows: “—It would now be no use to us to say “But don’t you see...?”—and repeat for him the old explanations and examples. — In such a case, we might perhaps say: this person naturally understands our order, once given our explanations, as *we* would understand the order “Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000, and so on.” This case would be like one in which a person naturally reacted to a pointing gesture with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, instead of looking in the direction towards the fingertip.”

Although the example is in the first instance about someone else’s apparent failure to continue a sequence correctly, and hence to understand an expression (in this case, “add two”) that we are trying to teach him, Wittgenstein clearly intends the case to raise a question also about our own knowledge of how to continue the sequence and hence our own understanding of the expression “add two.” How do *I* know, when I continue the sequence with “1002, 1004” rather than with “1004, 1008,” that it is *I* who am going on correctly, and not the pupil? And if I do not know, then how can I be confident that it is *I*, and not the pupil, who have arrived at the correct understanding of the expression “add two” as it was used previously? This becomes clear in the next section, §186, where Wittgenstein asks the more general

question: “How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular point?” His interlocutor proposes that “The right step is the one that is in accordance with the order – as it was *meant*.” The suggestion is that I can appeal to what I meant in the past to justify my claim that the pupil is going on wrong and I am going on correctly. But then Wittgenstein asks, rhetorically, “So when you gave the order “+ 2”, you meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000—and did you then also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on—an infinite number of such sentences?” My meaning “add two” when I gave the order did not involve my having in mind an explicit instruction to write “1002” after “1000”; what I had in mind was completely compatible with the thought that the correct thing to write after “1000” was “1002.” So I cannot appeal to my past meaning, conceived as a state of mind, to justify the correctness of writing “1002” at this point. I am thus left with the apparently skeptical question: how do I know that I should respond to the instruction “add two,” once I have got to 1000, by writing 1002? Or, to quote a related passage from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (*RFM*) I §3: “How do I know that in continuing the series +2 I must write “20004, 20006” not “20004, 20008?” (The question “How do I know this colour is “red”?” is similar.)”<sup>8</sup> And the implication is that if I do not know that, then I have failed to understand the expression “+2” or the word “red.”

Another way to put this implication is in terms of the notion of “knowing how to go on,” which figures in a number of passages in the *Investigations* leading up to the example of the aberrant pupil (*PI* §§151, 154-55, 179, 183-184). As Wittgenstein suggests, the expressions “now I can go on,” “now I know how to go on” and “now I understand” are used interchangeably to express our confidence that we have grasped the rule instantiated by a series of examples. We say we have grasped the rule—and, accordingly, understood the expression associated with the rule—when we are confident in our capacity to recognize the correct next step in a sequence. (Here “sequence” and “next step” should be understood in a way that accommodates non-numerical examples: in the case of a child learning the expression “red,”

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<sup>8</sup> Both the turn to the first person and the connection with understanding are explicit in notes taken from lectures Wittgenstein gave in 1939: “We are...tempted to say, “We can never really know that he will not differ from us when squaring numbers over, say, 1,000,000,000. And that shows that you never know for sure that another person understands.” *But the real difficulty is, how do you know that you yourself understand a symbol?* [emphasis mine]” (*Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 28).



the “sequence” would be the uses of “red” she has already observed, and the correct “next step” would be pointing to the strawberry rather than the banana when asked “Show me the red one.”) We take for granted, with respect to our ordinary linguistic expressions, that we know how to go on in their use, which is to say that we can recognize which uses are correct given the uses we have already made or observed. If we lacked this knowledge, then—going by the interchangeability of “now I know how to go on!” and “now I understand!—we would not understand the expressions. The question invited by the case of the aberrant pupil—how do *I* know that I should write “1002” after “1000”?—in turn raises the possibility that my confidence in the correctness of “1002” may be no more warranted than the pupil’s confidence that he should write “1004.” If that is so, then, despite the fact that I do in fact “go on” in my uses of expressions like “add two” and “red,” in the sense that I use them, with confidence, in new cases, this “going on” does not reflect any knowledge on my part: to borrow an expression from Kripke, each new use of the expression is, in Kripke’s words, an “unjustified leap in the dark.” But if I do not know how to go on, then I do not understand the expressions. Wittgenstein, characteristically, does not generalize beyond the particular cases he discusses, but the skeptical threat is clear. If I do not know that “1002” is the correct next step, then not only do I not understand “add two,” but nobody ever understands any expression. And, on the plausible assumption that there can be no linguistic meaning without linguistic understanding, then it follows that nobody ever means anything by an expression either.

Although Kripke does not cite the passage from §185 or its continuation in §186, it is natural to understand the skeptical dialectic as modelled on the example of the aberrant pupil. I am confident that I should say “125,” just as the pupil is confident that he should write “1004.” But the skeptic attempts to challenge my confidence, just as we attempt to challenge the confidence of the pupil who says 1004. In raising the possibility that the “metalinguistically correct” response to “68+57?” is “5” rather than “125”—he is suggesting that I am in the same situation with respect to “+” as that of the aberrant pupil with respect to “add two” Just as the pupil wrongly takes “1004” to be the correct thing to write after “1000” given what he wrote previously in response to “add two,” so I may be wrongly taking “125 to the correct response to “68+57?”, given my previous responses to “+” questions. And the skeptic uses that

possibility to argue that I do not know how to go on in my use of “+”, just as we take it that the aberrant pupil does not know how to go on in the sequence “0,2,4,6,8...” and hence in his use of the associated expression “+2.” On this way of understanding the skeptical scenario, the initial skeptical challenge is very close to the question implicitly raised by the example of the aberrant pupil (and more explicitly in the passage Kripke quotes from *RFM* I §3): how do *I* know that the right way to go on from “0,2,4,6,8...998” is to write “1000, 1002” and not “1000, 1004”?

Now we saw that Wittgenstein does not explicitly draw the conclusion that, if I do not know the right way to go on, then there is no such thing as understanding, or meaning anything by, a linguistic expression. But we saw that this conclusion in fact seems to follow. So it is natural to read Kripke as attempting to make explicit the damaging consequences for meaning and understanding that appear to be raised by the example of the aberrant pupil. On this reading, Kripke highlights the first-personal implications of Wittgenstein’s example by reversing the perspective: rather than my questioning someone else’s mastery of an expression, it is my own mastery of an expression which is under scrutiny. He also sharpens the question, and makes clearer its potentially damaging implications, by asking not *how*, but, in a skeptical spirit, *whether* I know the right way to go on. And he goes to great lengths to argue, on behalf of the skeptic, that I do *not* know the right way to go on—that my confidence about the right way to go on does not amount to knowledge. It is in this context that he undertakes his extensive examination of philosophical accounts of meaning. Because he assumes that knowledge of how to go on in one’s uses of a expression depends on knowledge of what one meant by the expression in one’s previous uses, he takes the skeptic’s task to be that of undermining my putative knowledge that I meant addition rather than quaddition in my previous uses. This leads him to the demand that I should “cite a fact” in which my meaning addition consists, and so to the lengthy discussion—nowhere paralleled in Wittgenstein—of the inadequacies of various attempts to account for meaning in more fundamental terms. These differences aside, though, the skeptical problem raised by Kripke parallels—and, I believe, should be understood in terms of—the problem that is implicitly raised by Wittgenstein in the passages under discussion. The question that the skeptic first raises about my entitlement to regard “125” as

“metalinguistically correct” is a question about what Wittgenstein calls “knowing how to go on.” And it is my failure to answer that question—and not, as such, my failure to provide a reductive account of meaning—that leads to the skeptical threat that there are no such phenomena as understanding or meaning.

One further difference that might obscure the parallel is that, in Kripke’s example, the question concerns conformity of my present use specifically to my own past usage, whereas for Wittgenstein the question primarily concerns the pupil’s conformity, or lack of it, to the usage of his teachers. Even though it is the pupil himself who has been developing the sequence up to 1000, it is part of the background of the example that those uses have been endorsed by his teachers as well, and that he thinks his writing 1004 after 1000 is correct in light of *their* previous use of the expression “+2”. The pupil’s failure to understand “+2”—which prompts the question whether we ourselves understand “+2”—thus appears initially as a failure to *learn* the use of “+2”. The corresponding first-personal question likewise can be framed in terms of learning: am I using “+2” correctly given the examples my teachers showed me, or am I responding arbitrarily to their instruction? But I do not think that this difference is consequential. The primary reason Kripke recasts the example in terms of conformity to my own previous usage, rather than that of my teachers, is to make the point that the problem does not rest on behavioristic assumptions (see at 14). Putting the skeptic’s initial question in terms of whether “125” conforms to my own past usage of “+”, rather than that of other people I have observed, makes clear that the problem does not rest on my inability to draw inferences about meaning from external behavior. But Kripke could equally well have put it in terms of my conformity to others’ use of “+” while allowing me telepathic access to the contents of their minds. Moreover, Kripke himself suggests in a number of contexts that the problem has something to do with learning. He motivates the hypothesis that I meant quaddition by noting that “[in] the past, I gave myself only a finite number of examples [of the function associated with ‘+’]” (8). The talk of “giving myself examples” suggests that, as for Wittgenstein, conformity to past usage is conformity to the usage of a teacher: the difference is just that, for Kripke, the teacher in my own past self. Other formulations make explicit a connection with learning. In connection

with the *tabair* example he says that “I think that I have learned the term ‘table’ in such a way that it will apply to indefinitely many future items” (19). And in connection with the *duckog* example, he describes the problem as one of how I can extend the term “duck” from ducks seen in Central Park (which is where I learned the term “duck”) from ducks not found there (117). So there is no reason to think that Kripke, any less than Wittgenstein, sees the problem in terms of conformity to previous uses in general, and not just my own past uses.

#### IV The idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis and the importance of previous use

The skeptical argument as I have presented it depends on the claim that there cannot be such a thing as anyone’s meaning anything by an expression—for example my meaning addition by “+”—unless we are in a position to know, of any of our uses of the expression, that it conforms to previous uses of the expression, whether our own or those of our teachers. I have motivated this claim in terms of the connection Wittgenstein draws between the idea of understanding and the idea of the correct next step in a sequence of uses. In the case of a child learning the use of an expression, we can say that she has come to understand the expression, and by extension that she uses it meaningfully, only once she knows how to go on in her use of the expression, where this implies a capacity to recognize her uses as correct in light of the preceding uses.<sup>9</sup> But is this connection sufficient to warrant the claim that the meaning as such depends on knowing how to go on in this sense? Most interpreters of the skeptical argument assume that the crucial constraint on the possibility of meaning—the so-called normativity of meaning—requires that my use of an expression at any one time conform, not to previous uses of the expression, but to what I mean by the expression at the time of the use. Although, as we have seen, Kripke introduces the skeptical argument by having the skeptic challenge the conformity of “125” to what I meant by “+” when I used it earlier, there is widespread agreement that this temporal dimension is essential neither to the argument

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<sup>9</sup> Note that this does not require that, at the time of use, I consciously recall any past uses; it requires only that, if I am reminded of past uses, I can recognize that my present use conforms to them. Thanks to Gary Ebbs for prompting this clarification.

nor to the thesis that meaning is normative.<sup>10</sup> All that is required in order for me now to mean addition by “+”, and by implication to understand “+” as meaning addition, is for me to have in mind a standard which determines some uses of “+” as correct and the rest as incorrect. I need not be capable of recognizing any kind of relation, normative or otherwise, between my present uses and those which I made or observed in the past.

Now Wittgenstein’s discussion suggests that, if a child is to succeed in learning the meaning of an expression from examples she has been given, she must be capable of coming to recognize new uses of the expression as correct in the light of those examples. Hearing “duck” used for ducks in Central Park might engender a disposition to apply “duck” to ducks on Hampstead Heath, but this would count as learning only in the very undemanding sense used by some psychologists and cognitive scientists, on which any acquisition of a disposition counts as learning. It would not be learning in the sense in which we normally think of learning in human children, which requires intelligent appreciation, on the part of the child, of what she should do in response to the teacher’s examples, and, relatedly, the ability to recognize when she is being corrected and to modify her behavior as a conscious response to correction. Such learning, in the case of language, requires the ability to grasp, in particular cases, whether one’s uses are appropriate to previous uses. The child who says “duck” to a duck on her first visit to London does not count as having learned from her previous duck-experiences in Central Park unless she is in a position to register a normative connection between her “duck”-utterances now and the ones she observed earlier. But someone might accept this as a point about what is required for learning the meaning of an expression, while denying that it has any implications for grasp of meaning. Even though, as a matter of empirical fact, we do come to understand our most basic expressions by learning from examples, this is not necessary for the possibility of understanding. So, the objection goes, understanding an expression does not require that we be able to recognize a normative fit between our uses of the expression at one

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<sup>10</sup> McGinn 1984 is an exception, but my view of the relevant normativity differs from his. See Ginsborg 2021 for discussion and for a defence of my temporal reading of the normativity thesis.

time and our, or others', uses at earlier times; all we need to be able to recognize is the normative fit between any one use and the meaning that we have in mind at the time of that use.

We can make the objection vivid by imagining that, rather than our coming to understand expressions by learning them from others, God grants us linguistic understanding by implanting the meanings directly in our minds. That is to say, for each expression, God puts into our minds an item of intentional content which both inclines us to use the expression in a specific way, and which we recognize as constituting a standard for its use. If the objection is well-founded, the presence of this item in any one person's mind at any time should be sufficient for saying that she understands the expression, or, equivalently, grasps its meaning. So, even though the possibility of linguistic communication would depend on God's giving each of us the same meaning for any one expression, and also for his keeping the association between expressions and their meanings constant over time, this would not be required in principle for each of us, at any one time, to understand our own idiolect. We might allow that, perhaps in order to amuse himself, God could change my idiolect from day to day or from moment to moment. Today he has made it so that I mean addition by "+" and duck by the word "duck", but tomorrow, or in a moment, I might mean quaddition and duckog. This hypothesis satisfies the constraint that meaning is normative, as it is typically understood, since, at any one time, the meaning I have in mind normatively constrains my uses of the expression, and is recognized by me to do so. Regardless of what I meant a moment ago or what I will mean tomorrow, I know now that, given what I mean by "+", the correct response to "68+57" is "125" rather than "5." It might seem, then, that we have all we need to make sense of my grasping the meaning of "+" in my idiolect-of-the moment. Admittedly I am not grasping a public meaning, and nor am I grasping a personal meaning which endures over time. The meaning I grasp may be a short-lived thing which exists only while I am asking myself and answering the question "what is 68+57"? But there is nonetheless something in my mind which I recognize as determining the correctness of my use of "+" on this occasion, and this is sufficient for me to count as understanding "+".

However, the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis fails to accommodate a distinction between two kinds of correctness which is, I believe, essential to the idea of linguistic understanding. We can make

sense, on this hypothesis, of my going wrong in responding “5” to “68+57?”, or saying “That’s a duck” about a dog on Hampstead Heath or under the Eiffel Tower, but we cannot distinguish between my going wrong because I am mistaken about the arithmetical or empirical facts, and my going wrong because of what Tyler Burge calls “linguistic or conceptual” error.<sup>11</sup> Ordinarily, we recognize two different kinds of mistake, and conversely two different kinds of correctness, in our use of an expression. We can be wrong in responding to a “+” question or in saying “that’s a duck” because we have failed to calculate correctly (for example, forgotten to carry) or because we have been misled by the poor viewing conditions (this distant object looks like a duck, but it is actually a floating log). But we can equally well be wrong because we lack sufficient understanding of the expression, or do not fully grasp the corresponding concept. A child might say, of something that is obviously a goose, “That’s a duck,” because she understands “duck” as applying to all water-birds; or she might refuse to apply “duck” to a mallard because, having learned the word in connection with her bathtime rubber duck, she understands it as restricted to yellow ducks. This kind of error is not limited to children. I might report that a house with a gabled roof has a “pediment” because, having learned the term “pediment” in connection with triangular structures on top of colonnades, doors and windows, I have come to misunderstand it as applying to any triangular section of a facade. To borrow some examples from Burge, I might deny that someone entered into a “contract” because the agreement she made was verbal, and my acquaintance with the expression up till now has led me to understand “contract” as restricted to written agreements, or I might refer to a harpsichord resting on a table as a “clavichord” because I have come to understand “clavichord” as applying to any early keyboard instrument without legs.<sup>12</sup> In both kinds of case the upshot is, or can be construed, as a false assertion, but the error responsible for the falsity is different in each.

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<sup>11</sup>Burge 1979, 82, 100. In invoking this kind of error, and the examples Burge gives of it, I am not necessarily endorsing Burge’s account of how such error is to be understood, nor the use he makes of it in arguing for anti-individualism. What I am drawing from Burge is primarily the idea of a distinctive kind of error, in one’s use of a word, which cannot be assimilated either to straightforwardly factual (paradigmatically empirical error) or to mistakes in which a word with one meaning is unintentionally substituted for one with another meaning (as in slips of the tongue, spoonerisms and malapropisms).

<sup>12</sup> Burge 1979: 80ff.

The ordinary idea of understanding depends on our being able to distinguish these two kinds of error, and, correspondingly, correctness. We attribute understanding, as opposed to effectiveness at discerning the relevant facts, to the extent that someone successfully avoids the second, rather than the first, kind of error.<sup>13</sup> Someone may be bad at arithmetic, or lacking in the observational skills that make for a good birdwatcher or naturalist, but still have a perfectly good understanding of “+” and “duck.” Conversely, someone could be highly skilled in these respects—capable, say, of doing complex arithmetical calculations or creating detailed drawings and descriptions of birds—and still make false assertions because of deficiencies in their understanding of arithmetical and ornithological terms or in their grasp of the corresponding concepts. Indeed, as I understand Kripke, it is this distinction that he aims to capture when, in setting up the skeptical argument, he describes me as confident that “125” is correct in both the arithmetical and the “metalinguistic” sense (8). The worry that “125” is an “unjustified leap in the dark” (10), and hence that, for all I know, “ $68+57=125$ ” is false, is not that I lack arithmetical justification for asserting the sentence “ $68+57=125$ ”, but rather that my understanding of “+” is deficient, so that I lack grounds for believing that “ $68+57=125$ ” means what I think it does. But, on the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis, we cannot make sense of the distinction. The meaning now in my mind serves as a standard for determining whether “ $68+57=125$ ” or “that’s a duck” (uttered while pointing to a duck) is a true or false sentence. However, it does not determine whether falsity would indicate a lack of understanding or an ability to determine the arithmetical or empirical facts. This means that the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis does not allow for the distinctive kind of error whose avoidance is characteristic of understanding an expression. Consequently, the hypothesis is incoherent. God cannot grant us understanding simply by giving us a standard for the truth or falsity of our uses; what he needs to give us is a standard by which we determine whether our uses are correct in the linguistic or conceptual

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<sup>13</sup> Davidson concludes from his discussion of malapropisms that this distinction cannot be maintained: we must “erase...the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” (1986, 445-446). I am arguing in effect that, without this boundary, we cannot make sense of meaning or understanding. Davidson would disagree, but discussion of this lies beyond the scope of the present paper.



sense. But on the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis there is no standard simply because there is no such thing as being correct in the distinctive sense relevant to understanding.<sup>14</sup>

The idea that understanding—and not just learning to understand—depends on the recognition of conformity to previous uses is motivated by the thought that, if there is a standard of correctness in the “linguistic or conceptual” sense, it must be afforded by, or depend on, history of past use. If, to cite Burge’s most famous example,<sup>15</sup> Bert applies “arthritis” to the pain in his thigh, he is failing to go on appropriately from past uses of “arthritis” in the same sense in which Wittgenstein’s aberrant pupil fails to go on appropriately from past uses of “+2”. The main difference between the examples, aside from degree of psychological plausibility, is that Bert’s error is localized and thus can be easily corrected, whereas the pupil’s error is part of a systematic pattern of error, extending to the words (like “count” and “same”) which we might use to try to explain where he is going wrong. (We could make Bert more like the pupil by supposing that he resists correction: when we explain that arthritis is a disorder of the joints, he might insist that his thigh is a “joint” and that this use of “joint” is consistent with its use for his knees and elbows; if we point out that joints are like hinges, it might turn out that he applies “hinge” to doors and jewel-box lids.)

It might be responded that, although we might need a standard for correctness in the relevant sense, it does not have to be provided by previous use; we could say that Bert is going wrong because what he means by “arthritis” diverges from what the broader community means, or what the experts

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson’s triangulation argument, as defended by Claudine Verheggen in Verheggen and Myers 2016, and helpfully summarized and discussed in Verheggen forthcoming (b), might seem to rule out the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis for a different reason, but one which also has to do with understanding: a speaker can assign meanings to her own expressions only through linguistic interaction with another speaker occupying a distinct point of view on how the first speaker should be interpreted. While adequate discussion of this point lies beyond the scope of this paper, I am inclined to suspect that Davidson’s commitment to what Verheggen calls the “primacy of idiolects” means that he cannot rule out the in-principle possibility of the idiolect-of-the-moment hypothesis. Even if, absent Divine intervention, the meanings of our own expressions can be fixed only through our triangulation with others, it would remain possible, on Davidson’s conception of meaning, for God to endow each of us directly with determinate meanings corresponding to our expressions and thus, by Davidson’s lights, to make it the case that we understood those expressions. The difficulty I am raising for the hypothesis goes deeper: God could not make our expressions meaningful because, in the absence of a standard for specifically linguistic or conceptual correctness, there would be no such thing as understanding those expressions.

<sup>15</sup> Burge 1979, 77

mean.<sup>16</sup> On this picture, what is distinctive about linguistic or conceptual error as opposed to factual error is that it has its source in this kind of divergence. We understand an expression, then, to the extent that the meaning of the expression in our idiolect matches the meaning of the expression in other idiolects. Now for some kinds of linguistic error, this does seem like the right account: a very clear case is that of malapropism, where we confuse the meanings of two similar-sounding words (say, “epithet” and “epitaph”) But for reasons articulated by Burge, not all errors relevant to understanding are naturally assimilated to this model.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, this picture assumes as a starting point that individuals in a community can attach determinate meanings to their expressions, or possess concepts corresponding to those expressions: without that assumption we cannot make sense of the idea that what one individual means by an expression at a given time matches, or fails to match, what other individuals mean by it. This assumption, however, is just what is in question when we ask what is required for understanding an expression. To make sense of the idea that what Bert means by “arthritis” or “contract” diverges from what the medical or legal experts mean, we have to assume that both Bert and the experts mean something by those expressions, which in turn requires that they understand them, at least in their own idiolects. So while in isolated cases, such as malapropisms, we can appeal to community or expert meaning as the standard of linguistic or conceptual correctness, we cannot appeal to that standard to account for the possibility of understanding in general.

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<sup>16</sup> Thanks to Paul Boghossian for raising this possibility.

<sup>17</sup> Burge 1979, 90.

## V. A response to the skeptical argument

I have defended a reading of the skeptical argument which, in line with Kripke's stated intentions, understands it as an interpretation of Wittgenstein. Specifically, the skeptic's conclusion that there are no facts of meaning is reached through his challenge to our supposed knowledge of the "right way to go on" from a past sequence of uses—a challenge which is implicit in Wittgenstein's example of the aberrant pupil. If we do not know the right way to go on in our uses of linguistic expressions, then we do not understand them, but if there is no understanding of them, then there is no meaning anything by them either: the idea of meaning thus "vanishes into thin air" (22). The skeptic's arguments to the effect that I cannot cite a fact in which my having meant addition consists are not intended, on this reading, to lead directly to the conclusion that there is no such fact. Rather, they are intended to undermine my supposed knowledge that I meant addition, which Kripke takes to be a condition of my being able to know the right way to go on from my previous uses of "+". My lack of knowledge of what I meant in the past is not in itself a reason to suppose that there are no facts of what I meant, or now mean, by my expressions; rather, for Kripke, it is a reason to deny that I know how to go on from my past uses of expressions, and hence that I understand or mean anything by those expressions.

In addition to bringing Kripke's skeptic closer to Wittgenstein, this reading has the advantage of making the skeptical argument both more distinctive, and stronger, than the consensus reading allows. It interprets the argument as turning, not on familiar metaphysical concerns about how to account for meaning and understanding in more fundamental terms, but on an epistemological question which is, arguably, original with Wittgenstein: how do I know the right way to go on from a previous sequence of behavior? Thus construed, the argument is stronger in that it resists the often-cited objection from unargued reductionism. As I argued in section II, the skeptical problem, as standardly understood, can be answered simply by denying that meaning facts must be reducible to more basic facts, that is, by allowing

the possibility that meaning facts are primitive. But this answer does not work for the problem as I have construed it. In order to show that I know how to go on from my previous uses of “+”—e.g. that the correct “next step” is to respond to “68+57?” with “125” rather than “5”—it is not enough, according to Kripke, for me to say that my having meant addition is a primitive fact. What I have to show, to satisfy Kripke’s skeptic, is that I *know* that I meant addition—that is to say, I have to provide epistemic justification for my belief that it was addition, rather than quaddition, that I meant. Kripke is not, then, simply relying on the assumption that meaning facts have to be reducible to more basic facts; he could allow provisionally that meaning facts could be primitive, and still generate the skeptical puzzle by asking how we can justify our supposed knowledge that one rather than another such fact obtains. The nonreductionist might respond to this version of the argument by proposing, not just that meaning facts are primitive, but that we have a primitive capacity to know these facts. When the skeptic asks me to justify my confidence that I meant addition and not quaddition, I can reply that no justification is necessary: it is simply a fact about me that I know I meant addition, just as it is a fact about me that I meant addition. But in the context of the skeptical dialectic, this answer is unsatisfactory: it is not an answer to the skeptic, but a dogmatic refusal to engage with his argument.<sup>18</sup>

How, then, can the skeptic be answered? Recall that, on my reading of the argument, the skeptic’s primary challenge is not to my knowledge that I meant addition in my past uses of “+”, but to my knowledge that, given those past uses, I ought to say “125”: it is my lack of this knowledge that leads to the conclusion that I do not understand “+” and, in turn, to the disappearance of meaning. My knowledge that I meant addition is important to the argument only because Kripke assumes that, if I do not know that I meant addition, I cannot know that I ought to say “125.” If the assumption is correct, then the only way to answer the skeptic is to justify my claim to have meant addition: something which, as the skeptic argues at length, cannot be done. But we can also answer the skeptic by challenging the assumption, and this is the approach which I propose. I can grant to the skeptic that I do not know that I meant addition, as opposed to quaddition, in my previous uses. But I can deny that this impugns my

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this point see Ginsborg 2018, at 158-59.

knowledge that I ought to say “125” rather than “5.” In Wittgenstein’s terms, I can “know how to go on” from my teachers’ uses of an expression without first having to identify what my teachers meant when they used that expression, or what rule was governing their use of the expression. The question of whether responding “125” or “5” is the correct continuation of my previous uses of “+” is independent of the question of what I meant in those previous uses, so the skeptic’s suggestion that I might have meant quaddition leaves untouched my prior conviction that I ought to say “125.” This approach parallels what I take to be Wittgenstein’s own response to the threat of skepticism implicit in his discussion of the aberrant pupil.<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein rejects the idea that, in order to know what I should write after “1000” in the series 0,2,4,6,8..., I must be guided or justified by an antecedent grasp of the rule governing the series. I can recognize “1002” as appropriate to the sequence “0,2,4,6,8....1000” without first having to interpret that sequence, or the expression “+2,” as meaning *add two* as opposed to, say, *add two up to 1000 and then add four*.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, we can answer Kripke’s skeptic by rejecting the requirement that I need to interpret myself as having meant addition rather than quaddition in order to know that I should now say “125.” This allows us to short-circuit the question whether I meant addition or quaddition. Even if I meant quaddition, in which case “68+57=125” is false in the language I was speaking earlier, I can still know it to be the case that “125” is the correct next step in the sequence of my earlier responses to “+” questions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For more on this parallel, see §§5-6 of Gnsborg 2021.

<sup>20</sup> This is of a piece with Wittgenstein’s remark—often taken, following McDowell 1984, to embody Wittgenstein’s rejection of rule-following skepticism— that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation” (PI §201). I grasp the add-two rule, not by interpreting the expression “+2” or the sequence I was shown, but by knowing the correct way to continue the sequence, where this knowledge does not itself rely on interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> This approach might seem to resemble that offered by James Shaw (this volume) in that both appeal to the idea of “going on” from previous uses. For Shaw, I meant addition rather than quaddition because “addition is the most regular and uniform continuation” of previous uses (\*\*ms 6); responding “125” to “68+57” is more “similar” (\*\*ms 8) to my previous uses than responding “5.” (As Shaw makes clear, his approach is like that of David Lewis (1983), but without the metaphysical underpinnings.) But there are two important differences. First, my approach turns on the idea not that responding with “125” is *similar to* what I did previously, but that it is *correct or appropriate* given what I did previously, where this appropriateness does not depend on its being similar. (I argue in §6 of Ginsborg 2020 for the priority of going on correctly, and going on the same way; the same considerations apply with respect to Shaw’s preferred notion of going on in a way that is similar.) Second, Shaw’s idea that saying “125” is going on in a uniform or similar way figures, for Shaw, as part of an argument to the effect that I meant addition, whereas my approach bypasses altogether the question of what I meant. This means that Shaw’s answer does not address the problem as I understand it, since it does not account for the immediacy of my ordinary

Where does this leave the skeptical challenge as it has typically been understood, that is, as a challenge to give an account of what meaning consists in? In earlier work, I argued that the approach I have just sketched allows the skeptic's interlocutor not only to defend the correctness of "125" as an answer to "86+57", but to offer a "partially reductive" account of meaning addition in the form of a normatively enhanced version of the dispositional view.<sup>22</sup> Roughly, on this account, meaning addition by "+" is being disposed to respond to "+" questions with the sum, and, in so doing, to take one's response to be primitively appropriate to one's previous uses of "+".<sup>23</sup> Although I remain cautiously optimistic about the prospects of such an account,<sup>24</sup> I have come to believe that the task of giving an account of my meaning addition is inessential, and perhaps even irrelevant, to the task of answering the skeptical argument, properly understood. If, as the skeptic argues, there is no such thing as meaning and rule-following, it is not because I am not in a position to give an account, reductive or otherwise, of what meaning addition consists in. At most, my being able to give such an account might put me in a position to establish, against the skeptic, that I previously meant addition rather than quaddition, so that my saying "125" accords with the meaning I previously ascribed to "+". But the skeptical challenge to the possibility of meaning, I have argued, turns not on whether my present use of "+" accords with my earlier *meaning*, but on whether it accords with my earlier *uses*, in the sense highlighted by Wittgenstein's examples of going on. The project of providing a wholly or partially reductive account of meaning is an interesting one, but, as I see it, tangential to addressing the very real challenge to meaning posed by Kripke's Wittgenstein.<sup>25</sup>

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knowledge that "125" is correct in the relevant sense: for Shaw I can know this only by a stretch of philosophical reasoning to the effect that I must have meant addition because addition is the more uniform continuation of my previous uses.

<sup>22</sup> See Ginsborg 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Or, as I might now put the last clause, "to take oneself to be going on as one ought in one's use of '+'."

<sup>24</sup> In spite of criticisms raised, for example, in Miller 2019, Sorgiovanni 2018, Sultanesco 2021 and Verheggen and Myers 2016 (50-53).

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