Skepticism and Quietism About Meaning and Normativity

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I

In a body of work going back to the 1970s, John McDowell has developed a powerful, persuasive and historically-informed conception of human language and thought and of their relation to the world. He has developed this conception in part through what he has called a "quietist" reading of the later Wittgenstein, and in particular of Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations.[1] This reading runs counter to commonly accepted interpretations of Wittgenstein as raising and addressing philosophical problems about the possibility of meaning, rule-following and intentionality. As McDowell sees it, the point of the rule-following considerations — a point which he himself endorses — is not to question the possibility of meaning or rule-following, but rather to undermine the defective ways of thinking which lead us to find them problematic. McDowell criticizes in particular the reading of Wittgenstein offered by Saul Kripke, who interprets the rule-following considerations as incorporating a skeptical argument to the effect that there is no such thing as meaning.[2] One of the morals that McDowell draws from Wittgenstein is that the skeptical problem described by Kripke is illusory, arising from a mistaken assumption about meaning and understanding.

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[1] See "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule" and "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," both reprinted in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); "How Not To Read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*," reprinted in John McDowell, *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); and "Wittgensteinian 'Quietism'" (*Common Knowledge* 15:3, 2009).

[2] See *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). All page references to Kripke are to this book. McDowell's understanding of Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein, and his challenge to Kripke, are most clearly articulated in §§3-4 of "Following a Rule" and §§1-6 of "Meaning and Intentionality."

My aim in this paper is to challenge McDowell's quietism about meaning, at least in the context

of his disagreement with Kripke, by arguing that he fails to appreciate the full force of the difficulty that

Kripke reads Wittgenstein as raising.[3] Because of this, I argue, the considerations he raises to support

quietism about meaning are inadequate to defuse Kripke's skeptical problem. I go on to present an

alternative approach to the problem, one which draws on McDowell's approach in invoking a kind of

quietism, but on which the quietism applies, not at the level of linguistic meaning, but rather at the level

of the more primitive normative attitudes on which the possibility of linguistic meaning depends. I

conclude that, while quietism is at some point inevitable in our attempts to make sense of rule-following

and meaning, McDowell invokes it too soon. Kripke's skeptic raises a genuine problem about how

linguistic meaning is possible, and that problem can be solved, even though the solution depends

on appeal to normative attitudes which cannot in turn be called into question.[4]

II

I begin by reviewing the skeptical problem presented by Kripke, since, as we shall see, much

depends on how it is understood. Kripke introduces it by imagining a scenario in which, having never

before added numbers greater than 57, I respond to the question 'What is 68 +57?' by saying '125,' only

to be confronted by a skeptic who challenges my confidence in what he calls the "metalinguistic"

correctness of my answer. He proposes that, if I am to accord with my previous usage of '+,' I should

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[3] For simplicity, I refer simply to "McDowell's" quietism, although McDowell puts it forward not as his own, but as Wittgenstein's. In a related simplification, I refer to the skeptical problem which Kripke ascribes to Wittgenstein as "Kripke's" skeptical problem.

[4] I first encountered John McDowell when, as a second-year undergraduate at Oxford in the spring of 1978, I attended a graduate seminar that he and Michael Dummett conducted on the topic of realism and anti-realism in the philosophy of language. This seminar (in which, incidentally, McDowell consistently seemed to me to have the upper hand in his debate with Dummett) was one of the formative experiences of my time as an undergraduate. My next serious encounter with McDowell's ideas was soon after the 1994 publication of *Mind and World*, which I read in the context of working on Kant. This book was a tremendous inspiration to me, both for the specific questions that it raised about the normative relation between thought and the world, and for the seamless way in which it incorporated reflection on historical figures, especially Kant, into discussion of contemporary issues. Since then, I have continued to find McDowell's work consistently inspiring, exciting and stimulating. I have learned a great deal both from critical engagement with his writings and from lively and memorable discussions with him at conferences and workshops. I am very grateful to him for the contributions he has made to my philosophical thinking over the years.

instead say '5.' The skeptic's ground for this challenge is the hypothesis that, in my past uses of '+,' or the 'plus' sign, I meant, not addition, but quaddition, where x quus y is x plus y for values of x and y less than 57, and otherwise 5. In order to justify the correctness of '125' rather than '5' in the light of my previous uses, I must rule out the skeptical hypothesis that I previously meant quaddition rather than addition. As Kripke sees it, this requires my identifying "some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute [the hypothesis]" (9). If I am unable to cite a fact which, as he puts it, "establishes that I meant plus rather than quus" (13), then I cannot rule out the skeptical hypothesis and my saying '125' is revealed to be an "unjustified leap in the dark" (10, 15). Kripke emphasizes that although the skeptical argument may seem epistemological, challenging my knowledge as to whether I meant plus or quus, it is in fact metaphysical, leading to the conclusion not just that I do not know what I meant by 'plus' but that 'there was no fact about me that constituted my having meant plus rather than quus' (21). This conclusion generalizes from past to present and future meaning (13, 21), and from the meaning of 'plus' or '+' to the meaning of linguistic expressions generally (19), leading to the conclusion that there is no such thing as meaning.

Having laid out the general framework of the skeptical argument, Kripke fills it out by considering and rejecting various responses I might give to the skeptic, most of which take the form of proposing candidate facts in which my meaning addition might consist, and which I might accordingly cite in order to 'establish' that I meant addition rather than quaddition. These putative facts include my having in mind a set of general instructions for the use of 'plus' (15-18), or a definition of 'plus' (16n12); my being disposed to give the sum in answer to 'plus questions' (22-37); and my having in mind an introspectable *quale* or mental image associated with the addition function (41-51). Kripke also considers a response to the skeptic, which he characterizes as 'desperate,' on which my meaning addition by 'plus' is simply a primitive, *sui generis*, fact about me (51-53). Kripke provides multiple lines of argument to undermine these various responses, of which I will highlight two. One, aimed against the dispositional proposal, is that dispositional accounts of meaning fail to do justice to the idea that meaning is normative: my meaning addition by 'plus' is supposed to justify my responding to '68+57' with '125,' but the claim

that I was disposed to say '125' cannot play that justificatory role. The other, aimed against both the "instructions" or "definition" proposal, and the "introspectable *quale*" proposal, is that anything I have in my mind associated with the expression '+' can be interpreted in such a way as to require me to respond '5' rather than '125' in order to be faithful to it. I might claim to have had in mind a set of directions for answering 'x + y' questions which call for me to assemble a heap of x objects and another heap of y objects, and then 'count' the number of objects in both heaps taken together; but the skeptic can maintain that I meant quus rather than plus by proposing that the word 'count' is to be interpreted in a quus-like way. And similar considerations rule out qualia or mental images, which are no less open to multiple interpretations than internalized linguistic expressions such as 'count the items in the heap.' In a passage quoted by McDowell as summarizing this part of the argument: "no matter what is in my mind at a given time, I am free in the future to interpret it in different ways" (107).

McDowell endorses the idea that meaning is normative,[5] and so agrees with Kripke on the unacceptability of the dispositional proposal. His view that the skeptical problem is illusory is based on a challenge to the assumption he sees as underlying the second line of argument, in particular the claim just quoted, that whatever is in my mind is open to multiple interpretations. The heart of the skeptical problem, as he sees it, is puzzlement about the notion of normative accord which both he and Kripke see as built into the ideas of meaning and understanding: the notion that our understanding of an expression can be such that a piece of behavior can either fit or fail to fit it. The puzzlement is about how there can be something in my mind corresponding to the expression '+' which makes it the case that '125' rather than '5' fits my understanding of the query '68+57'. We tend to assume that any such thing must be "normatively inert,"[6] something which cannot itself determine '125' as according with it, but must instead be supplemented by an interpretation. Given that assumption, the attempt to find something which constitutes our understanding of '+' leads into regress: whatever we propose as an interpretation in

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[5] See "Following a Rule," 235, 248; "Meaning and Intentionality," 264.
[6] "Meaning and Intentionality," 265; "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," 100.

turn comes to seem normatively inert, and so as calling for further interpretation.[7] McDowell's response

to the puzzlement is to reject the assumption that items in the mind cannot in themselves determine

behavior as correct or incorrect. He does so in terms of Wittgenstein's response, at *Philosophical*

Investigations §201, to the threat of a regress of interpretations. What the regress shows is not the

skeptical conclusion that there is no such thing as accordance with a rule (or with one's understanding of

an expression), but rather that, in Wittgenstein's words, "there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an

interpretation."[8] The idea that there can be understanding without interpretation allows me to meet the

skeptic's demand for a fact in which my having meant addition consists by citing, simply, the fact that I

meant addition. This amounts in effect to my insisting on the response which Kripke rejects as

"desperate" and "mysterious," namely that my meaning addition is a primitive, *sui generis* state.[9]

 This response might seem easy, but according to McDowell the task of dislodging the assumption

leading to the problem, and thereby showing that there can be understanding without interpretation, takes

considerable philosophical work.[10] Some of that work, he thinks, can be performed by reflecting on

Wittgenstein's example of a signpost.[11] A signpost might at first appear to just "stand there"

(*Philosophical Investigations* §85), a tapered board on a post without normative significance. So we

might be tempted to think that, in order to understand it as pointing in some one direction rather than

another, we need to put an interpretation on it, for example to say to oneself "it says to go right." But by

"insisting on a bit of common sense" about signposts,[12] we come to see that, for someone initiated into a

practice of following signposts, understanding the signpost does not require interpreting it. In following

an ordinary signpost, with (say) its tapered end at the right, we unreflectively recognize it as pointing to

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[7] See "Following a Rule," 226-227; "Meaning and Intentionality," 264-265, "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," 100.
[8] See "Following a Rule," 228-220; "Meaning and Intentionality," 267-268; "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," 101.
[9] This assimilation is suggested by McDowell's characterization of Kripke's "sui generis" proposal as a "saving grace" of his reading of Wittgenstein ("Intentionality and Interiority in Wittgenstein," in *Mind, Value*, *and Reality*, 298n4).
[10] See "Wittgensteinian Quietism," 367-369.
[11] *Philosophical Investigations* §85, §198. McDowell discusses the signpost example in §7 of "Following a Rule," §8 of "Meaning and Intentionality," §§3-7 of "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," and §2 of "Wittgensteinian Quietism."
[12] "Meaning and Intentionality," 276; cf. "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," 104.

the right, that is as something with which only going right can accord. No interpretation is needed to rule out, for example, that it is telling us to go left.[13]

The moral, while not spelled out explicitly by McDowell, is that something analogous holds of linguistic signs and of their mental correlates, such as the words 'plus' or 'sum', or the thought that I meant plus or the sum. We might suppose that an answer to Kripke's skeptic along the lines of "I had in mind that I should give the sum" is vulnerable to the regress because all I could have had in mind to determine the correctness of '125' rather than, say, '5', would have been the inert sign "sum" conceived of as just standing there like a board on a post. But the example of the signpost undermines the temptation to embark on the regress by helping us to see that, for someone initiated into a practice of using signs for arithmetical functions, the expressions '+' and 'sum'—whether spoken or in the mind—do not stand in need of interpretation in order for us to understand them as calling for one specific response rather than another. It is by reminding ourselves of this kind of common sense about things like signposts, according to McDowell, that we can rid ourselves of the assumption that makes the "*sui generis*" response to the skeptic seem desperate and mysterious, and so leads us to think that Kripke raises a genuine problem about the possibility of rule-following and meaning.

III

I will argue in this section and the next that McDowell underestimates the force of Kripke's skeptical problem, with the consequence that his response fails to address it adequately. As noted in the previous section, his approach assumes that the heart of the problem is puzzlement about the idea that our understanding of an expression can be such that a piece of behavior, say uttering '125' in response to '68+57' can fit or fail to fit it. He goes on to argue, plausibly enough, that this kind of puzzlement disappears if our conception of the facts in which meaning and understanding consist is broad enough to

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[13] Of course, as McDowell indicates at "Wittgensteinian Quietism," 368, some signposts are ambiguous. If a signpost is poorly placed, I may need to interpret it to determine which of two possible paths I am supposed to follow. No interpretation is needed, however, to determine whether I should follow it in the direction from post to tapered end or from tapered end to post, and, as the reference to *Investigations* §506 at p. 276 of "Meaning and Intentionality" shows, that is the relevant aspect of the example.

accommodate items which require no interpretation in order for pieces of behavior to accord or fail to accord with them. But I believe that Kripke's problem arises from a different and more fundamental kind of puzzlement. To put the difference crudely: what is puzzling is the possibility of accord, not between a piece of behavior and the understanding of an expression, but between a piece of behavior and previous pieces of behavior involving the expression. In other words, the puzzlement is about how my use of a sign at a given time can accord, not with what I mean or meant by the sign, or how I understand or understood it, but with previous uses of the sign, which could be my own, as in Kripke's way of generating the problem, but equally well those of others, such as my parents or teachers. As we will see in the next section, it concerns how I can recognize my use of a sign as correct in light of previous uses -- and so how I can, in Wittgenstein's terms, "know how to go on" in my use of a sign -- if, as is the case for a language-learner, I am not yet in a position to recognize those previous uses as bearing a specific meaning.[14] Kripke's way of developing the problem does indeed involve the challenge to cite a fact in which my meaning addition consists, but once we recognize that the challenge is motivated not by self-standing puzzlement about the possibility of meaning and understanding, but by a more basic puzzlement about how one piece of behavior can be correct in light of previous examples of behavior, we see that it cannot be addressed simply by letting go of the assumption that all understanding involves interpretation.

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[14] Note that I am understanding the "use" of an expression in a way which does not presuppose the idea of the expression's being used with a particular meaning, that is, in such a way that we can adequately describe the use of the sign '+' on some occasion by saying that someone responded to 'what is 68+57?' with '125,' as opposed to saying that she used '+' to assert that 68 plus 57 is 125. This clarification is necessary given that McDowell invokes a semantically loaded notion of "use" on which the use of an expression is properly described by saying that it is used to express a specific thought or make a specific assertion. See e.g. "In Defence of Modesty," in *Meaning, Knowledge*, *and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 87-107, at 99-100; "Another Plea for Modesty," (in *ibid.,* 108-131) at 123-124; and "Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding" (in *ibid.*, 314-343), at 317-321). A related conception of use is invoked by Barry Stroud, for whom we can describe the use of the expression "Add 2 each time" by saying "The words 'Add 2 each time' are used by us to mean that two is to be added each time" ("Meaning and Understanding," in Jonathan Ellis and Daniel Guevara (eds.), *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19-36, at 27). One can acknowledge the possibility of this semantically-loaded notion of use compatibly with recognizing a more traditional conception of the use of an expression as characterizable without appeal to its meaning; it is the more traditional conception which I am assuming here. For more on the distinction between these two conceptions of the use of an expression, see my "Inside and Outside Language: Stroud's Nonreductionism about Meaning," in Jason Bridges, Niko Kolodny and Wai-hung Wong (eds.), *The Possibility of Philosophical Understanding: Reflections on the Thought of Barry Stroud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 147-181, at 150-154, and William Child, "Meaning, Use and Supervenience", in James Conant and Sebastian Sunday (eds.), *Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 211-230, at 211.

To begin to see the contrast between these two kinds of puzzlement, let us recall that what the skeptic initially challenges is my confidence, not that I meant addition by '+', but rather that (if I am to accord with my previous usage of '+') I should now respond to '68+57' with '125'.[15] The hypothesis that I previously meant quaddition is introduced as a ground for that challenge. If I cannot rule it out by citing a fact which "establishes" that I meant addition, or in which my having meant addition consists, then my confidence in the correctness of '125' is shown to be unwarranted. At least at the outset, then, the skeptic appears to be offering an epistemological challenge, and the challenge is aimed at my knowledge that I ought to say '125'.[16] But, as we saw, Kripke goes on to draw a metaphysical conclusion: namely, that there is no fact of my having meant addition (and, generalizing, no fact of anyone's ever having meant or meaning anything). Now McDowell, like most readers of Kripke, sees Kripke's route to that metaphysical conclusion as leading directly from my supposed failure to cite a fact in which my having meant addition consists, to the non-existence of any such fact.   Viewed in this way, the argument in its essentials is metaphysical rather than epistemological. It boils down to the thought that, since it is not possible to reduce facts about meaning to more basic facts (for example about dispositions, qualia, or mental images), we have to conclude that there is no such thing as meaning. In the terms I used earlier to characterize McDowell's view of it, the argument is an expression of puzzlement about how there can be such a thing as meaning, given that meaning has to be the kind of thing with which behavior can accord, and that such things as dispositions, qualia and mental images do not appear to fit that bill. But this understanding of the argument is unsatisfying, both because it makes Kripke vulnerable to a charge of unargued reductionism,[17] and because it does not do justice to the epistemological elements of the argument which I just highlighted. The challenge to my confidence in the correctness of '125', on this reading, plays no essential role in reaching the skeptical conclusion. It

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[15] The reading of Kripke sketched in this and the next two paragraphs is explained and defended more fully in my "Leaps in the Dark: Epistemological Skepticism in Kripke's Wittgenstein," in G. Anthony Bruno and Abby Rutherford (eds.), *Skepticism: Historical and Contemporary Inquiries* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018), 149-166.

[16] Kripke repeatedly restates the challenge in this form, for example at 11, 13, 15, 21, 37, 40 and 42.

[17] A charge levelled by many commentators on Kripke, beginning with Colin McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 150ff. For more on the charge, see my "Leaps in the Dark."

illustrates a constraint on possible candidates for the fact of meaning addition (in that any such fact must determine that I should respond to '68+57' with '125'), but it does not in itself constitute a step in the skeptical argument.

The alternative reading which I propose offers a more complex, but I believe more convincing, route from my failure to cite a fact in which my having meant addition consists to the conclusion that there is no such fact. As suggested in the previous paragraph, that failure amounts to a failure to "establish" that I meant addition, and is thus an epistemological failure; the upshot is the epistemological conclusion that I cannot know that I should say '125', or, more picturesquely put, that '125' is a leap in the dark. It is this conclusion which in turn leads to the metaphysical claim that there is no such thing as meaning. If all my uses of language are leaps in the dark, then, as Kripke puts it, meaning "vanishes into thin air" (22). While Kripke is not explicit on this point, I take the thought underlying this last move to be that the meaningful use of language depends on our being in a position to know, in each use of an expression, that we are going on in a way which accords with previous uses of it. If, for all I know, each use of a sign is completely arbitrary in the light of previous uses — if I have no reason to suppose that saying '125' in response to '68+57?' fits the sequence of previous responses to '+' questions any better than '5' — then I do not count as understanding that expression or meaning anything by it.[18] The skeptical hypothesis that '+' in those previous uses meant quaddition is intended to undermine the possibility of facts of meaning by undermining my confidence that '125' fits previous uses of '+'. It is in order to restore that confidence, and hence to avert the threat of meaning's "vanishing into thin air," that I

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[18] Is this move tacitly verificationist? I do not think so. We might suspect verificationism if, as on some readings of Kripke, the argument moved from my not knowing that I meant, or mean, addition, to there not being a fact that I meant, or mean, addition. (For examples of such readings, see Crispin Wright, "Kripke's Account of the Argument against Private Language, *Journal of Philosophy,* 71 (12), 759-78, at 761-762, and Alexander Miller, *Philosophy of Language* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2018), at 200.) However the move I am making here has the non-factuality of meaning be a consequence, not of of my failure to know that I meant addition, but of my failure to know, on any given occasion of use, what I ought to say in light of past uses of '+'. It assumes that part of what it is for me to mean something by an expression is for me to be in a position to know that I am going on as I ought in my use of the expression. This does imply a dependence of a certain metaphysical question (is there a fact of my meaning addition by '+'?) on an epistemological question (do I know that I am now using '+' appropriately?), but not in the verificationist sense in which the obtaining of a fact depends on my knowing that same fact to obtain. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

have to rule out the skeptical hypothesis by citing a fact which "establishes" that I meant addition rather than quaddition.

On this reading of the argument, the skeptical challenge cannot be rebutted simply by claiming that I meant addition rather than quaddition. For the skeptic calls on me, not merely to cite a fact in which my having meant addition consists, but to cite a fact which allows me to justify my claim that I meant addition, and so prevent the skeptical hypothesis from undermining my knowledge that I ought to say '125'. In this dialectical context it is not enough just to insist, without grounds, that the skeptical hypothesis is false. The dialectical situation is somewhat analogous to that of the First Meditation, where Descartes' knowledge that he is sitting by the fire with a piece of paper in his hand is challenged by the skeptical hypothesis that he is dreaming. To defend the particular instance of knowledge targeted by the skeptic—and, by extension, since this is a "best case," all his knowledge of outer things—he has to find grounds to reject the hypothesis. The simple insistence that he is awake rather than dreaming does not count as an answer to the skeptic. The same is true in this case, where the hypothesis that I meant quaddition is introduced as a way of motivating doubt about the particular instance of knowledge which the skeptic is actually targeting, namely that I ought to say '125'. Of course, I can reject the hypothesis outright, as Descartes might reject outright the hypothesis that he is dreaming, but that is to refuse to take the skeptical challenge seriously, not to answer it. Now the situation would be different if, as McDowell supposes, the skeptic's challenge to cite a fact in which my having meant addition consists were motivated simply by puzzlement about how meaning states are possible, given that they have to be the kind of thing with which pieces of behavior can accord or fail to accord. It would then be reasonable to suspect, with McDowell, that the ground of this puzzlement was a misconception about what is required for this accordance to be possible, a misconception which prevented the skeptic from seeing that the state of my meaning addition can, unproblematically, meet the requirement. In that case, it would be perfectly in order for me to respond to the skeptic's challenge by citing the fact that I meant addition. But I have suggested that the motivation for the skeptic's challenge is deeper and more complex. The skeptic's denial that there is such a thing as meaning stems, not from puzzlement about meaning as such, but from

a more specific puzzlement about how I can know that any one of my uses of a sign is correct in the light of previous uses, given that the previous uses are apparently compatible with any number of hypotheses about what was meant in those uses. Even once the misconception has been removed, that puzzlement remains. I can accept, at least provisionally, that a state like meaning addition can be the kind of thing which determines uses as correct or incorrect, and still doubt, in light of the consistency of my previous uses with the hypothesis that what I meant was quaddition, whether saying '125' in response to '68+57?' accords with my previous uses of the plus sign. And that doubt threatens, after all, to undermine the possibility of meaning.

IV

To see more clearly how my view of the skeptical problem diverges from McDowell's, it will help to look more closely at the move which is made, on my reading of the skeptical argument, from the subject's not knowing that '125' accords with her previous uses of '+' to the disappearance of meaning. I said that the move, while not spelled out by Kripke, is motivated by the thought that, to use an expression meaningfully, I must take my uses of it to accord with previous uses. That thought, I want to suggest, can in turn be motivated by the further thought that, in order to make sense of the possibility of linguistic meaning, we need to accommodate the possibility of language-learning, where learning a language is understood as including learning what the expressions of the language mean. If a linguistic expression like '+' or 'table' is to *have* a meaning, it must be possible for potential users of the expression to *come to know* what it means, and this is something which can happen only if they can learn how to go on appropriately from previous uses of the expression which they have observed or been shown. In many cases this learning can take place through verbal explanation, but some expressions at least must be learned simply through example: the child hears uses of 'table' in contexts where tables are salient, or is shown uses of '+' in very simple arithmetic equations, and at some point comes to know how to use the expression herself in ways which accord with or fit those previous uses. Now we might put this by saying that she comes to grasp the meaning that was expressed in those earlier uses so that she is in a position to

use the expression herself in a way which fits that previously grasped meaning. But that way of describing what happens in learning such an expression is not obligatory. We can describe the situation more simply (and, as I shall argue in the next section, more accurately) by saying that she comes to know how to go on appropriately from previous uses, which is to say, to use the expression in a way which she can recognize as according with previous uses.

On this conception of language-learning, it is essential that the learner come to be able to recognize, for each of her (correct) novel uses of an expression, that she is going on appropriately from the uses she has previously been shown. The kind of learning which issues in knowledge of meaning has to involve the recognition of correct or incorrect uses, where "correct" and "incorrect" uses are understood as those which do or do not fit the examples from which one is supposedly learning. If the "learning" consisted in nothing but the formation in the learner of a disposition to use the expressions in a certain way — say, exposure to standard uses of '+' and 'table' engendering in the learner a disposition to give the sum in response to simple '+' questions or to say 'table' when suitably prompted in the presence of a table — then the process would not count as learning the meaning of the expression. We could say that the "learner" was acquiring a capacity to go on from the examples in a way which we find appropriate, but we could not say that she was coming to understand the expression or learning what it meant. For the process to count as learning the meaning of an expression, the learner must be capable of seeing a normative connection between the new uses she makes of the expression, and the uses she has previously been shown. In other words, if each new use of 'table' for her is a 'leap in the dark' from the uses she has been shown—if she is incapable of seeing, for example, that her present use of 'table' for a novel table under the Eiffel Tower accords with earlier uses of 'table' for tables in the Luxembourg gardens or in the kitchen at home—she does not count as learning the meaning of 'table' even if she is acquiring a disposition to use 'table' in ways in which her teachers regard as appropriate.

As I see the argument, then, meaning "vanishes into thin air" for Kripke because the skeptic challenges my entitlement to regard "125" as according with my previous uses of "+" (broadly construed as including those I observed as well as those I made myself) and hence to think of myself as *having*

learned the meaning of 'plus.' In other words, the skeptical argument undermines the possibility of linguistic meaning by undermining the idea, essential to the idea of linguistic meaning, that there can be such a thing as *language mastery*. In raising the question whether I should say '125' given my past uses of '+', the skeptic puts me in a position of a language-learner who, like the pupil of *Philosophical Investigations* §185, has to demonstrate his developing mastery of a linguistic expression (for Wittgenstein 'add 2') by going on correctly from previous examples of its use.[19] I may now be confident that I know what '+' means, but that confidence depends on my confidence that I was successful in learning how to go on correctly from the examples I was given. The quaddition hypothesis is supposed to reveal that latter confidence as unwarranted: since I have no reason to believe that I and my teachers meant quaddition rather than addition when we used '+' previously, I have no reason to believe that I am going on correctly from those previous uses. The doubt generalizes to call into question that anyone can ever learn the meaning of a linguistic expression from a finite series of examples, and in this way undermines the possibility of language-learning, and hence linguistic meaning, *uberhaupt*.[20]

This understanding of the argument in terms of learning helps us see more clearly how McDowell's approach misses the force of Kripke's problem. McDowell thinks that the problem arises only if we are under the misconception that the signs of language or their mental correlates are "normatively inert": not the kind of thing which can itself, without interpretation, determine a given use as correct or incorrect. Once that misconception is removed, I can reply to the skeptic's challenge to my knowledge about what I previously meant by '+' as I used it in the past by pointing out that I know I meant addition. I can know this because, among other things, I can remember thinking such things as *now I should add* when given a '+' problem. The skeptic's regress-inducing counter of "How do you

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[19] I say more about the idea of "going on" in Wittgenstein, and its connection with language-learning, in "Wittgenstein on Going On," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1) (2020), 1-17.

[20] Here I go substantially beyond Kripke, since he makes only passing references to language-learning in the course of developing the argument, and I am suggesting that it is central to the line of thought motivating the skeptical paradox. (The references that he makes include a characterization of Wittgenstein as having apparently shown that "all language, all concept formation" is impossible, where the reference to concept "formation" suggests that it is learning which is at issue, and passages at 59n45, 59n46 and 117 which hint that the problem is connected with language-learning.) If this suggestion is thought to be insufficiently grounded, then my issue with McDowell's quietism can be recast in terms of its failure to engage the skeptical argument I have described, whether or not it is Kripke's.

know you weren't thinking *now I should quadd*?" is invalidated once we see that what I had in mind, perhaps the words "I should add," need no interpretation to be understood as meaning that I should add and not quadd. Even more straightforwardly, I know that I meant addition because that is what '+' manifestly *means*, and the skeptic has given me no reason to suppose that I was, in the past, somehow imposing a meaning on '+' which it manifestly does not bear.

But, as McDowell makes clear, the knowledge to which I appeal in this response to the skeptic is available to me only because I have already been initiated into the language to which '+' belongs, and in particular into the correct use of '+'. It is "shared command of a language" which "equips us to know one another's meaning without needing to arrive at that knowledge by interpretation": if I do not share a language with my past self then I am not, in McDowell's terms, "equip[ped]..to hear [her] meaning in [her] words" and so not in a position, to know, without interpretation, that I previously meant addition.[21] So the proposed reply is not available if we understand the skeptical problem as turning on my capacity to become initiated into the use of '+' by learning how to go on from previous examples. The skeptical challenge, on this understanding, puts me in the position of a language-learner, someone for whom '+' does not yet bear any intrinsic meaning. Asked, in light of the quaddition hypothesis, how I know I ought to go on from previous uses of '+' by responding to '68+57' with '125,' I cannot simply appeal to my supposed knowledge of what '+' means, because that is just what has now been called into question. That appeal would be adequate if, as McDowell thinks, the skeptic's challenge arises from failure to recognize that mastery of a language can give me perceptual knowledge of meanings, knowledge which is not vulnerable to the threat of regress. But in fact the skeptic's challenge arises from a question about how we can acquire such knowledge: how we can get into a position from which a sign like '+' is revealed, not as "normatively inert" but as, manifestly, meaning addition.

A symptom of the shortcoming I have identified in McDowell's approach is his use of the signpost example to dislodge the assumption that understanding requires interpretation. Part of the appeal of the example is that it is very difficult, assuming that we recognize a signpost as meaningful at all, to

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[21] "Following a Rule," 253

see it as bearing any other meaning than the meaning which it in fact bears. It is indeed possible to see a right-tapered signpost either as a mere board on the post, "just standing there," or as serving some non-signpost-related purpose (to hang laundry on, say, or for children to swing from). But as long as we see it as showing the way, we have no choice but to see it as showing that we are to go to the right. It is telling that, when McDowell considers whether a signpost could be understood as pointing in the opposite direction, he does so by imagining how Martians might use things looking like our signposts. We have to invoke Martians or other aliens to make sense of a subject's understanding a right-tapering signpost as pointing left because we recognize how unnatural it would be for any human being, or community of human beings, to do so. Trying to imagine a human being who naturally sees a right-tapering signpost as pointing left is akin to imagining the more extreme case, mentioned by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* §185, of someone who naturally responds to a pointing gesture by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist. This makes signposts very good examples for illustrating the possibility of understanding without interpretation. The felt need for interpretation arises only when a sign is perceived to be, in itself, neutral among a wide range of possible meanings. That does not happen with a properly designed signpost. If a signpost is recognized by us as pointing at all, it is recognized as pointing in the direction from post to tapered end.[22]

But this very feature of signposts prevents the moral that McDowell draws from the signpost example—that there can be understanding without interpretation—from carrying over to the signs of language and their mental correlates. For the signs of language are different from signposts in that we can recognize that the function of a sign is to tell us something without recognizing what it tells us. This difference is familiar to anyone who has travelled in a country where she does not understand the language. If I do not know any French, I will not know whether 'Sortie,' seen on a right-tapering placard, is the name of a place or has a descriptive meaning, but I will be in no doubt that if I want to go to

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[22] What if, as in fact happened in some parts of England during the Second World War, signposts are turned around to confuse potential invaders? In that case, we may "follow" a right-tapering signpost by going to the left, and even take this response to be (in one sense) normatively called for by the signpost, but we will still continue to see it as pointing to the right, and indeed will think of ourselves (in a more fundamental sense) as following the signpost in the wrong direction.

wherever or whatever 'Sortie' is, I should go to the right.[23] This means that, contrary to what McDowell claims,[24] linguistic signs are different from signposts with respect to how readily they can "lapse into normative inertness" and thus engender the temptation to embark on the regress of interpretation. Even the signs of our own language can be seen by us, without recourse to the imagined perspective of Martians, as bearers of multiple meanings, as in the 2009 case of the Dutch advertising slogan 'Mama, die, die, die...' (Mama, that one, that one, that one...).[25] It is this capacity for bearing multiple meanings, not shared by signposts, Kripke's skeptic exploits in questioning my confidence that I previously meant addition by '+'.

This last point is related to my understanding of the skeptical argument as turning on the subject's entitlement to believe that responding to '68+57' with '125' fits previous observed uses of '+' and hence that she has been successful in learning the meaning of '+' from the examples she had been shown. The argument is effective for linguistic signs because, at least in some cases, we can master them only by learning how to go on from examples, something which often takes considerable training, for example in the case of color words. But our understanding of signposts does not depend on this kind of ostensive

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[23] Apparently Polish truck drivers accompanying less experienced colleagues on a first trip to Germany like to tease them by pretending that "Ausfahrt" (the German term for a highway exit) is the name of a very large town (Magdalena Bartłomiejczyk, "Text and Image in Traffic Signs," *Linguistica Silesiana* 34, 2013, 111). It is hard to imagine, by contrast, that a driver could convince even the most gullible colleague that right-pointing arrow signs in Germany mean "Go to the left."

[24] "The temptation to start on [the regress], and its disastrous consequences, are the same whether we are considering non-discursive expressions of rules, such as sign-posts, or discursive expressions, such as – for the same rule – someone saying "To follow the trail at this point you must go to the right" ("How Not To Read Wittgenstein," 100). Since this claim is aimed against Brandom's view that signposts exhibit a kind of normativity which is more fundamental than that associated with the explicit use of linguistic expressions, it is worth noting here that while I agree with Brandom in taking the normativity associated with understanding signposts to be at a lower level than that involved in language use, I do not agree that it is to be made out in terms of social practices of giving and asking for reasons. For more on the independence of this kind of normativity from reasons, in the context of McDowell's views, see my "Empiricism and Normative Constraint," in Johan Gersel, Rasmus Thybo Jensen, Morten S. Thaning, and Søren Overgaard (eds.), *In the Light of Experience: New Essays on Perception and Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 101-138.

[25] This was an advertising slogan for a children's drink made by the Dutch firm Nutricia. Another example is the illuminated "I fart" ("In motion") signs that used to be found in Danish elevators; in a possibly apocryphal story, these signs had to be covered up in the elevators Queen Elizabeth II used on a visit to Denmark. McDowell might object that these are not cases where, say, a linguistic expression in Dutch can be understood as bearing another meaning in English, but rather cases where a linguistic expression in Dutch can be mistaken for a different linguistic expression in English which, taken in isolation, looks just like it. However, even if this is granted, the fact that we cannot make this kind of mistake for signposts is enough to undermine the analogy on which McDowell is relying in his use of the signpost example.

learning. Although we may have to be taught in general what a signpost is for, we do not have to be

trained on multiple examples of right-tapering and left-tapering signposts in order to be able to determine,

for a given signpost, whether it means 'go right' or 'go left.' Rather, we can rely on the perceived

similarity of a signpost to a pointing gesture, the understanding of which requires no training.[26] This

difference is obscured in McDowell's discussion. Following Wittgenstein, he speaks of "training" in the

use of signposts,[27] suggesting an analogy between how we learn to understand a signpost and the

ostensive learning through which we come to understand linguistic signs. Relatedly, he speaks of our

being "party to...conventions" for the use of signposts,[28] suggesting that it is a matter of convention that a

right-tapering signpost points to the right. But although there are conventional aspects to the use of some

directional signs (for example that, in many countries, an upward-pointing arrow indicates that one should

go straight ahead rather than up), and these need either to be explained or learned from example, the fact

that a signpost is to be followed in the direction from post to tapered end is not one of them. So the

undeniable fact that we typically understand signposts without needing to interpret them does not touch

the problem about the meaningfulness of linguistic signs that is revealed by Kripke's skeptic.

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I have been arguing that McDowell fails to appreciate the full force of Kripke's skeptical

problem, and that, as a result, his quietism about meaning, at least in connection with that problem, is

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[26] Here I disagree with Robert Brandom, according to whom "a practice of pointing requires a great deal of social stage-setting—the untrained may be unable to transfer their attention beyond the tip of the pointing finger, or may perversely trace the line of indication in the wrong direction, from finger tip to base, and so take it that something behind the one pointing has been singled out" (*Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 461). There is a hint that McDowell might also take this view, since he treats pointing gestures and utterances of "Go to the right" as alike in their potential to "lapse...into normative inertness" ("How Not To Read Wittgenstein," 100), thereby suggesting that they are also alike in requiring training to be understood. But Brandom's view strikes me as plainly false: I know of no evidence that small children ever make the kind of mistake that Brandom describes, and if they did, it is hard to imagine how we could ever train them to understand pointing gestures correctly (would we point in the direction we expected them to follow the pointing gesture?). Brandom ascribes this position to Wittgenstein, but that again seems false: according to Wittgenstein "it is part of human nature to understand pointing with the finger in the way we do" (*Philosophical Grammar,* §52).
[27] "Following a Rule," 239
[28] "How Not to Read Wittgenstein," 101

unjustified. In order to get the measure of the problem we have to recognize that the skeptical attack on

meaning proceeds by way of an attack on the knowledge—essential to the possibility of learning the

meaning of an expression—that, in one's individual uses of an expression, one is going on appropriately

from the previous uses one has undertaken or observed. Once that is recognized, we see that the

skepticism cannot be defused by pointing out that someone who has grasped the meaning of the

expression can recognize immediately what the expression meant in those previous uses. Kripke's

skeptic can allow that, in principle, a competent language-user can understand the expressions of her

language, and the significance of the mental states in which her understanding is realized, without need

for interpretation. The question remains of how an individual can know that her present use of an

expression accords with previous uses, given the skeptical possibility that the expression in those previous

uses bears a meaning different from the one she now thinks it does, and hence that she is not after all, at

least with respect to that expression, a competent user of the language. It is this kind of question that

Kripke's skeptic raises in asking how I know that, if I am to accord with previous uses of '+', I should

now say '125' in response to '68+57.' In effect, he is calling into question whether I am, at least in

respect to the expression '+,' a competent language-user: that is, someone who knows how to go on

correctly from previous uses of that expression.

I now want to claim that the skeptic's question can be answered. The key is to reject an

unexamined assumption underlying the skeptical dialectic: that for my present use to accord with previous

uses of an expression it must accord with what was previously *meant* in those uses.[29] Kripke takes for

granted that, if I now want to remain consistent with my earlier uses of '+,' or in other words, to go on

appropriately from those past uses, I must use it with the same meaning as that with which I used it

previously.[30] It follows, given that assumption, that if I meant quaddition in those previous uses,

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[29] The idea that the use of an expression can accord with past uses of that expression, in a sense that does not amount to accordance with what those expressions meant, is implicit in Cavell's discussion of learning and projecting words in ch. 7 of *The Claim of Reason* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1979). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this connection.

[30] In fact he sometimes appears simply to identify conformity to past usage with conformity to past meaning, as when he moves from saying "[t]he skeptic questions whether my present usage accords with my past usage" to

conformity to those uses requires that I respond to '68+57' with '5,' not '125.' But the assumption is unwarranted. The question of which response to '68+57' accords with my previous responses to '+' questions, or more generally with my previous uses of '+,' is distinct from the question of which response accords with what I meant by '+' when I gave those responses. I can allow to the skeptic, at least provisionally, that I meant quaddition in my earlier uses of '+', so that saying '125' fails to accord with the meaning I then associated with '+', and still maintain that '125' accords with my previous uses. The idea that, regardless of what I *meant*, '125' accords with my previous *uses* can be brought out especially clearly if, as I have been proposing, we think of the subject in the skeptical scenario as if she were a language-learner who is in the course of learning the meaning of '+' from examples of its use. The possibility of successful learning depends on her being able to come to see, for instance, that the correct way to go on from a series of prior uses which includes responding to '18+7' with '25', '28+17' with '45', '38+27' with '65', '48+37' with '85', and '58+47' with '105' is to respond to '68+57' with '125', independently of any assumption about what was meant in those prior uses. If, once she has come to see this, someone convinces her that the users in those cases all meant quaddition, she can still insist that responding to '68+57' with '125' is the appropriate way to go on from the examples she was given, considered in abstraction from what the users meant by '+' when they responded to the '+' questions as they did. Saying '125' in response to '68+57' counts as going on correctly from the sequence of prior

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identifying the problem as that of "[h]ow...I know that '68 plus 57', as I meant 'plus' in the past, should denote 125" (12, Kripke's emphasis removed). The same identification is suggested when he says "If I meant [addition], then to accord with my previous usage I should say '125' when asked to give the result of calculating '68 plus 57'...[i]f I meant [quaddition], I should say '5'." (12) It appears here that accordance with my previous usage just is accordance with what I meant. Given the apparent identification of past usage with past meaning, it might be wondered whether I am right to put so much emphasis on conformity to past usage as distinct from past meaning: perhaps the skeptical problem is simply about how '125' can conform to what I meant, so that McDowell is right to construe the fundamental puzzlement as being about how a use of an expression can accord with our understanding of it, past or present, not about how it can accord with past uses. But in that case it is hard to see why I should be bothered by the skeptical challenge, and specifically why I should see it as threatening the "correctness" of my use of '125'. Why should it matter to me whether or not I am according with my past meaning as long as I am according with what the expression means now? It is only if we assume that accordance with past meaning is necessary for me to be going on correctly from previous uses, where this in turn is required for my having mastered the meaning of the expression, that it makes sense to regard it as a form of correctness and so to suppose, as Kripke mistakenly does, that I need to defend it from skeptical attack.

uses, even if it yields a false answer to the question '68+57' when the question is understood as the previous users understood it.

On this approach to the skeptical problem, the skeptical conclusion is avoided, not by rejecting the skeptical hypothesis, but by pointing out that it does not lead to the disappearance of meaning. Recall that, on the interpretation of the argument I have offered, meaning "vanishes into thin air" because my saying '125' in response to '68+57' is seemingly revealed as an unjustified leap in the dark. There can be no meaning if each use of an expression is perceived by the user as arbitrary in light of previous uses. But now note that the ground for concluding that '125' is a leap in the dark is my inability to rule out the skeptical hypothesis that I meant addition. The apparently "insane" suggestion that I should say "5" gets its seeming force from the skeptical hypothesis: if that hypothesis had not been presented, then I would have dismissed the suggestion and the skeptical dialectic would have been nipped in the bud. Now a solution on the lines that McDowell proposes would have me insist against the skeptic that I meant addition rather than quaddition. But the solution I am proposing is to allow the hypothesis, at least provisionally, but to point out that it is irrelevant to the question of how, if I am to accord with my previous uses, I should respond to '68+57.' There are now no grounds for claiming that '125' is a leap in the dark, and so no grounds for doubting that my use of '+' is meaningful. Once the skeptical challenge has been disposed of in this way, I can go back and deny the skeptical hypothesis. Since I no longer have grounds for doubting my own linguistic competence I can be secure in my conviction that I now mean addition by '+', and—in the absence of grounds for believing that I have undergone a dramatic change in my understanding of '+'—I have every right to maintain that I meant addition in the past as well. But it is important to see that my being able to take this common-sense line with respect to the skeptical hypothesis depends on my having already defused the skeptical threat to the possibility of meaning. It is only because I can be confident, independently of any considerations of what I meant by '+' in the past, that I am now going on appropriately in my use of '+', that I can resist the skeptic's attempt to cast doubt on the obvious fact that I now mean, and meant, addition.

What if I am now asked what grounds I have for taking '125' to fit my previous uses of '+', independently of what I meant by it? It is open to me at this point to appeal to features of those previous uses in virtue of which '125' is appropriate. For example I can list the uses mentioned two paragraphs above, and point out that if we look at the tens place for each answer successively we see the sequence '2,4,6,8,10' and if we look at the units place we see the sequence '5,5,5,5,5.' As long as my interlocutor sees '68+57' as according with the previous series of questions, she should see that '125' accords with the previous series of answers. But what if my interlocutor asks me for grounds for, say, taking '12' to be the appropriate continuation of '2,4,6,8,10', or '5' the appropriate continuation of '5,5,5,5,5'? Here there is nothing I can appeal to by way of further justification. I can say, of course, that if we could not be confident of the correctness of these ways of going on, then there could be no learning from examples: we could never come to grasp the meaning of expressions like 'add two' or 'same number,' let alone '+', if we could not rely on our intuitions about how to continue sequences of the kind presented. But that might provoke a skeptical rejoinder: so much the worse for the possibility of learning! If I cannot justify the correctness of '125' in light of my previous uses of '+', then, this skeptic will say, there can be no learning the use of '+' or of any other expression from examples, and, at least if I am right to think that the possibility of such learning is essential to the possibility of linguistic meaning, we have to accept Kripke's skeptical conclusion after all.

However, this skeptical challenge is different from, and considerably weaker than, the one offered by Kripke's skeptic. Kripke's skeptic does not simply demand a justification for the correctness of '125' in light of my previous uses, and then conclude, from my inability to provide a justification, that '125' is a leap in the dark. Rather, in raising the possibility that I meant quaddition, he provides an argument for questioning my confidence in the correctness of '125'. And on the face of it, the argument is a good one. It turns out to be insufficient only once we reject one of its premises, namely that the correctness of '125' in light of my previous uses depends on its accordance with the previous meaning of '+.' By contrast, the challenge just described is not motivated by any argument. Rather, it seems to arise from nothing more than a general puzzlement about how it is possible for a finite sequence of uses to be recognized as

making appropriate any one continuation rather than any other, and so how it is possible to learn the use of an expression from a finite set of examples. But there is no reason why we should find this philosophically puzzling. It is simply a pervasive feature of human experience that we find it appropriate to go on in certain ways from the behavior exhibited by teachers and peers, and, absent any specific ground for doubt (such as that raised by Kripke's skeptic) there is no reason to question our confidence in the legitimacy of our ways of going on.

My approach to this weaker skeptical challenge is comparable to McDowell's approach to the stronger skeptical challenge mounted by Kripke. As we saw, McDowell rejects Kripke's skeptical challenge to linguistic meaning because he sees it as insufficiently motivated. On his reading, it rests simply on puzzlement about something that he takes, in fact, to be quite unmysterious: the possibility of linguistic and mental items (like '+' and the thought 'I meant plus') which can be meaningful without interpretation. Although he thinks it takes work to remove the puzzlement, for example drawing our attention to "common sense" about signposts, he does not think of the skeptical challenge as a genuine problem. I am adopting a similar quietism, but not with respect to the skeptical problem about linguistic meaning, which I take to be a genuine problem for which Kripke has provided an apparently convincing rationale. Rather, I am being quietist about the supposed problem about the legitimacy of the normative attitudes on which, I have suggested, language-learning and hence linguistic meaning depend. Once we have cleared away the mistaken assumption underlying Kripke's skeptical problem about meaning, namely that one's present use of an expression can accord with previous uses only by according with the meaning they bear, we can see that there is no problem, *per se*, with the idea of someone's recognizing a normative fit between her response of '125' in response to '68+57' and the previous responses which have been given to '+' questions. The question of what justifies her in taking '125' rather than '5' to fit the previous responses — or, if the dialectic has proceeded as suggested in the previous paragraph, of what justifies her in taking '12' to fit the sequence '2,4,6,8,10' or '5' to fit the sequence '5,5,5,5,5' — can be rejected, on this quietist approach, as not adequately motivated. Ultimately, then, I am sympathetic to

an approach that, like McDowell's, recognizes that some philosophical questions are best addressed by pointing out that they lack motivation and so are not good questions.

Where I disagree with McDowell, though, is on the point at which we need to take a quietist approach to the philosophical questions which arise when we consider the phenomenon of human language-use. McDowell's quietist approach starts relatively early on, when we ask, with Kripke's skeptic, how linguistic meaning and understanding are possible. It makes use of the fact that, as long as we do not seek to understand linguistic meaning from what McDowell calls a "sideways-on" perspective[31]—that is, in a way which attempts to abstract from the knowledge we have in virtue of our participation in the practices which constitute language-use —there is no problem about its possibility. We simply see and hear what people are saying and doing when they use linguistic signs. But McDowell does not recognize that Kripke's skeptical question about the possibility of meaning is motivated by a further question about how we can become initiated into linguistic practices, and so get into a position from which we can unproblematically recognize signs as bearing the meanings they do. In order to take that question seriously, we need to think our way into the perspective of someone for whom the signs of our own language (say, English) do not manifest their meanings immediately, but must be learned: either by having their meaning explained to us, as in the case of someone who already knows another language, or by being shown examples of their use, as in the case of a child's earliest language-learning. This does require taking a kind of sideways-on view, and, in the case of the child, a quite radical one. But although it is sideways-on with respect to the use of English, and in the case of the child, with respect to the use of language altogether, it is not sideways-on with respect to the norm-governed practices in which we participate simply in virtue of being human beings, and which make the acquisition of language possible. It takes for granted our recognition of the normative significance of the gestures, facial expressions and other forms of behavior that are involved in the teaching of language: for example pointing gestures (with the hand, or, in some cultures, with the chin), smiles, frowns, and the kind of physical intervention (in some cultures, moving a child's hand to encourage her to wave bye-bye) which is intended to get her to

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[31] See, for example, §3 of "Noncognitivism and Rule-Following," in *Mind, Value and Reality*.

imitate some piece of adult behavior. It also takes for granted our recognition of certain behavior as fitting or failing to fit sequences of previous behavior: for example, in the case of a very young child, the appropriateness of covering and uncovering her eyes during an impromptu peek-a-boo game, or of responding to an adult repeatedly clapping his hands by clapping her own hands; and in the case of a more sophisticated child, the appropriateness of continuing the sequence '0,2,4,6,8....1000' with '1002', or of continuing the sequence of answers to '+' questions by answering '68+57?' with '125'.[32]

Now an even more radical sideways-on view would abstract even from the knowledge we have simply as human beings, attempting to take the perspective of imagined Martians who (to elaborate McDowell's example, cited in section IV) see things like our signposts as pointing from tapered end to post: either because they see things like our pointing gestures as pointing in the opposite direction from ours, or because they see a right-tapered signpost as more similar to the gesture of pointing to the left than to the gesture of pointing to the right. Such Martians might have facial expressions that look like smiles but that they see as calling for a violent attack, and, if they have things that look like our numerals and arithmetical signs, they might find it appropriate to continue what looks like our '0,2,4,6,8....1000' sequence with what looks like '1004' or to respond to what looks like our '68+57?' with what looks like our '5.' The seeming conceivability of this Martian perspective might lead us to question our grounds for taking our own responses, in the examples given in the previous paragraph, to be correct. In virtue of what, we might ask, *is* it appropriate to respond as we do to the behavior we observe in others? How could we justify our ways of going on to a Martian, or to an imagined human with Martian-like behavior, who insists (or appears to insist) that the appropriate continuation of '0,2,4,6,8....1000' is '1004'?

It is with respect to these questions that I think that quietism is warranted. While we can examine human behavior from a standpoint outside language, we cannot do so from a standpoint outside more

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[32] As helpfully pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, there has been much empirical research into small children's participation in these kinds of norm-governed activities. I discuss some of the relevant research, and its implications for ascribing primitively normative attitudes to prelinguistic children, in my "Conceptualism and the Notion of a Concept," Christoph Demmerling and Dirk Schröder (eds.), *Concepts in Thought, Action, and Emotion: New Essays* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2021), 42-59, and in "Spontaneity Without Rationality: A Kantian Approach to Self-Consciousness and Perceptual Content," in Andrea Giananti, Johannes Roessler and Gianfranco Soldati (eds.), *Perceptual Knowledge and Self-Awareness*, forthcoming.

basic human practices and the normative attitudes that inform them. Our standpoint as human beings simply allows us to recognize, in the examples I have given and in countless others like them, the appropriateness of the responses that we are, in fact, naturally inclined to make;and the fact that there is no justification to be given in response to an imagined Martian challenge does not show that this recognition is illusory. My approach to these questions is not only in the spirit of, but largely inspired by, McDowell's quietist approach to skepticism about meaning. My point of contention with McDowell is just that, in failing to recognize the possibility of a viewpoint outside language but still within human practices, he endorses quietism too soon.[33]