

*The Philosophical Review*, Vol. XCVIII, No. 1 (January 1989)

WITTGENSTEIN ON MEANING. By COLIN MCGINN. Oxford, England, Basil Blackwell, 1984. Pp. viii, 202.

The book is part of the enormous resurgence in Wittgenstein commentary inspired by Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.<sup>1</sup> It bears witness to its origins by devoting as much space to discussing Kripke's book on Wittgenstein as it does to discussing Wittgenstein himself. There are four chapters: one laying out McGinn's account of Wittgenstein's views on meaning; one criticizing Kripke's interpretation of same; a third offering an evaluation of the views McGinn attributes to Wittgenstein; and a fourth offering a critical assessment of the arguments propounded by Kripke's Wittgenstein.

I.

The publication of Kripke's book constituted something of a landmark in Wittgenstein studies. In three crucial respects Kripke's interpretation succeeded where, it seems to me, most Wittgenstein commentary up to that point had failed.<sup>2</sup> First, it attributed to Wittgenstein a clear and interesting thesis about meaning. Second, it uncovered from the Wittgensteinian corpus a set of powerful and challenging arguments for the thesis in question. And last, but by no means least, it showed how the central thesis about meaning provided support for the grand and provocative claims—the impossibility of private language, for example—for which the later Wittgenstein had become so famous. For practically the first time in a long tradition of Wittgenstein commentary, we were presented with a portrait of the philosopher that not only made it clear *what* he said, it also explained *why* he said it. And it did so, moreover, in a way that could conceivably justify his enormous reputation.

The crux of Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein may be put like this. It is

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<sup>1</sup>Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>One notable exception is Crispin Wright's *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). Indeed, in certain crucial respects—I have in mind the emphasis on the normative character of meaning—Wright and Kripke offer quite similar interpretations. I discuss some of these issues in my "The Rule Following Considerations," forthcoming in *Mind*.

of the essence of meaning an expression in a certain way, that meaning it that way determines how the expression would have to be used if it is to be used correctly. For example, if I mean *table* by “table,” then my meaning it that way determines that “table” is correctly used by me in application to all and only tables. Now, this observation can be converted into a condition of adequacy on theories of meaning: any proposed candidate for being the property in virtue of which an expression has meaning must be such as to ground the “normativity” of meaning—it ought to be possible to read off from any alleged meaning-constituting property of a word what is the correct use of that word. According to Kripke, the later Wittgenstein’s central contention was that there could be no real property of a word from which its correct use could be gleaned; hence, there could be nothing for meaning something by a word to be. The question arises how this conclusion is to be accommodated. Are we to conclude that all our ordinary talk of meaning and rules is so much insignificant noise? According to Kripke, Wittgenstein offered a solution to his own skeptical problem which, while conceding that there are no semantic facts, nevertheless sought to preserve ordinary semantic discourse. The solution is, in effect, an expressivist account of the function of such discourse: very roughly, to say of Jones that he means addition by “+” is not to describe a fact about Jones; it serves rather to express confidence in Jones’s ability to enter into certain sorts of transaction. It is then argued that this kind of account can make sense only in a communal setting; from which it is held to follow that the idea of a solitary language—a language constructed solely out of a single speaker’s properties—is incoherent: the only conditions under which meaning attributions are held to be significant do not include that of speakers considered in isolation.

McGinn tells us that his book arose out of the conviction that Kripke’s reading was wrong in most every fundamental respect. In particular, McGinn maintains, it was no part of Wittgenstein’s intent to deny that there are facts about meaning; quite the contrary, he claims, Wittgenstein was actually concerned to say what such meaning facts consist in. And it is not true that the community plays a significant role in Wittgenstein’s later thought; it certainly does not figure, he says, as a crucial precondition for the significant employment of meaning attributions. He sums up his own interpretation of Wittgenstein by attributing to him the following theses:

- (i) To mean something by a sign is not to be the subject of any sort of event, state or process.<sup>3</sup>
- (ii) To understand a sign is not to interpret it in a particular way.

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<sup>3</sup>The official statement of this thesis reads: “To mean something by a sign is not to be the subject of an inner state or process.” But the subsequent discussion makes it plain that the qualification “inner” is doing no work and that events too are being excluded.

- (iii) Using a sign in accordance with a rule is not founded upon reasons.
- (iv) To understand a sign is to have mastery of a technique or custom of using it (p. 3).

Of the negative theses, the first is by far the most important in that it supplies the ground for the other two. Put together they add up to this: meaning or understanding a sign in a certain way is not *any sort* of inner event, state or process; in particular it is not a process of supplying an interpretation of that sign which then justifies one in reacting with that sign in a particular way (cf. p. 42).

The alert reader may be forgiven for wondering at this point how this interpretation differs from Kripke's. After all, if meaning a word in a certain way is said to be neither an event, nor a process, nor a state, then that sounds as if it's nothing at all. (If it were something real, how could it fail to be one of those?) But then this sounds just like the thesis *Kripke* attributes to Wittgenstein: that there is no "condition in the world," or fact, that amounts to someone's meaning a word in a certain way. Indeed, it is precisely because Kripke fails to find an appropriate event, state or process that he concludes, on Wittgenstein's behalf, that there are no meaning facts. Whence, then, McGinn's claim that the two interpretations are "very different" (p. 59)? It seems, on the contrary, that McGinn's reading simply collapses into Kripke's.<sup>4</sup>

The issue may be put like this: both McGinn and Kripke are agreed that Wittgenstein rejected the suggestion that meaning something by a word could be any sort of event, state or process. Kripke infers from this that Wittgenstein denied the existence of meaning facts and consequently adopted a non-cognitivist account of semantic discourse; whereas McGinn refuses to allow the inference. The main question dividing the two readings then becomes: is there really a viable position intermediate between denying that there is any sort of event, state or process that constitutes meaning a word in a certain way and a belief in meaning facts? Or, perhaps more to the point: did Wittgenstein believe there was?

McGinn does not discuss this question directly (indeed, he never so much as mentions the apparent similarity between his reading and Kripke's). What he does offer, however, tacitly amounts to an argument against making Kripke's inference. The most important points raised are these: (a) that Wittgenstein would have regarded the question whether some fragment of declarative discourse is or is not factual as quite empty, so he could not have been advocating the thesis Kripke attributes to him;

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<sup>4</sup>Notice that Kripke is going to agree with McGinn's other two negative theses as well. For, of course, if meaning something by a word is nothing at all, then, in particular, it is neither a process of supplying an interpretation of a sign nor a something which provides one with reasons for using the sign in specific ways. Indeed, Kripke himself draws out these consequences explicitly.

and, (b), that far from denying that there are any meaning facts, Wittgenstein actually has a positive conception of what such meaning facts consist in—viz., in facts concerning a speaker's ability to use signs (cf. p. 71).

Now, although both these considerations do raise interesting challenges to Kripke's interpretation, I don't think they can be considered decisive.

Consider first McGinn's claim that Wittgenstein would have regarded Kripke's skeptical conclusion as empty, so he cannot plausibly be taken to have endorsed it, much less made it the centerpiece of his later writings. The problem with Kripke's reading, McGinn says, stems from the fact that Wittgenstein subscribed to a redundancy theory of facts and truth; thus, he would surely have regarded any dispute about the factuality of some ongoing fragment of declarative discourse as utterly lacking in substance.

Now, although it is true that taking non-cognitivist claims seriously presupposes the availability of a non-pleonastic conception of "fact"; and although it is true that Wittgenstein seems officially to renounce any such conception (see *PI*: 136); it is also true that one of Wittgenstein's recurrent themes is that we are prone to be misled by the form of certain fragments of declarative discourse into supposing that those fragments are functioning *descriptively*, that they are being used to state facts. That is part of the mistake that is said to underlie Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics; and there are many passages in *Investigations* which seem to suggest that a similar mistake would underlie a fact-stating conception of mental discourse. Consider, appropriately enough in the present connection, *PI*: 180 (the reference is to the words "Now I know how to go on"):

*This is how these words are used.* It would be quite misleading, in this last case, for instance, to call the words a 'description of a mental state'.—One might rather call them a 'signal'; and we judge whether they are rightly employed by what he goes on to do.

The full story on how these passages are to be understood remains, no doubt, to be told. But I venture to suggest that at least this much is clear: Wittgenstein seems not only to have found intelligible; but also to have deployed, a distinction between declarative sentences that are used descriptively and those that are not. To what extent this is consistent with his subscription to a redundancy conception of facts and truth is an important, but different, question. McGinn's claim, however, that Wittgenstein would have regarded any Kripke-style non-cognitivist claim as utterly empty strikes me as too facile given the textual evidence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>It is worth noting that, even on McGinn's reading, Wittgenstein could not have been wholly consistent in his pleonasticism. For on this reading, Wittgenstein is alleged to have held that meaning something by an expression is a fact but that it is not a state. But on a pleonastic view, something is a state if it has the *grammar* of a state, and most uses of the concept of meaning do have such a grammar. So if one is going to deny that things with the grammar of states are states, this can only be if one believes there to be a non-pleonastic, non-grammatical sense of state.

McGinn's second complaint seems more telling: for doesn't Wittgenstein often seem to suggest that the idea of meaning a word in a certain way can be somehow explicated by the idea of an *ability* to use that word in a certain way? Doesn't it seem then, that McGinn is right in saying that, "if we want to talk in terms of facts it seems that Wittgenstein *does* suggest that understanding consists in a fact, the fact of having an ability to use signs" (p. 71).

Now, McGinn is, of course, perfectly right to emphasize the connection between meaning and ability for Wittgenstein. But this connection is emphasized by Kripke too: according to the latter, Wittgenstein held that abilities to use signs in certain ways are *crierial* for the attribution of meanings to symbol users, that they constitute the *assertibility conditions* for meaning-ascribing sentences. On Kripke's reading, this crierial account replaces the jettisoned truth-conditional one, which is no longer viable in view of the accepted conclusion that there are no facts for meaning sentences to report. So the observation that Wittgenstein emphasized the connection between meaning and ability is telling against Kripke only if it can be shown that Wittgenstein intended that connection to be stronger than merely crierial, that he intended to suggest that abilities might be used to *analyze* talk about meaning, to provide truth conditions for it.

The difficulty here for McGinn is that Wittgenstein *never* suggests that analysis is the intended connection between meaning and abilities and several times suggests that the connection is intended to be purely crierial (see for example, *PI*: 183). Indeed, in *Zettel* he goes so far as to say:

The mistake is to say that there is anything that meaning something consists in.<sup>6</sup>

McGinn does exhibit some awareness of this point; but he dismisses it as irrelevant: any resistance on Wittgenstein's part to saying that meaning consists in a capacity, he says, stems from a general distrust of the enterprise of philosophical analysis, not from a conviction that meaning is not a fact. I, for one, am not so sure.

The textual arguments, then, against Kripke's interpretation are far from decisive. But that was, of course, to be expected. If the validity of interpretations of Wittgenstein could have been decided by straightforward appeals to the Wittgensteinian corpus, the business of interpreting the man would have been far easier than it has turned out to be. Are there, perhaps, more general reasons for preferring McGinn's interpretation to Kripke's? I think, on the contrary, that the anti-factualist interpretation provides a more coherent and stable picture of Wittgenstein's views than McGinn's alternative. Here I can only mention two considerations.

Consider McGinn's Wittgenstein's central contention: meaning some-

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<sup>6</sup>L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1970).

thing by a word is neither an event, nor a state nor a process of *any* kind; yet there are facts about what speakers mean by their words and these facts consist in certain facts about their abilities. Sustaining this position requires, at a minimum, (i) admitting that there are facts about a certain phenomenon—in this case, meaning something by a word—which are nevertheless not facts about any sort of event, state or process; and (ii) denying that someone's possessing an ability consists in that person's being in a certain sort of state. And the difficulty is that both (i) and (ii) seem wild. The first I'm not sure I even understand; and I cannot imagine the considerations that would lead me to aver the second.<sup>7</sup> Kripke's meaning-eliminativism, by contrast, does not suffer from such obvious defects; its problems, if any, would be deep problems.

A second, more serious, consideration against McGinn's reading and in favor of the anti-factualist interpretation, has to do with the status of the "multiple application thesis" in Wittgenstein's later writings.

One of Wittgenstein's most intriguing and provocative claims is that someone may be said to have grasped some rule only if that person has actually correctly obeyed that rule, or some other rule, on numerous occasions (see *PI*: 199, 204). As McGinn notes, the claim is not merely epistemological; it is meant to be a thesis about the conditions for the very *possibility* of meaning anything at all: *some* concepts need to have been actually correctly applied multiple times by someone, if that person is to be said to have *any* concepts. Wittgenstein clearly regarded this thesis as fundamental: it is one of his most often sounded themes, cropping up in some very crucial passages, most notably in the concluding paragraphs of the discussion of rule-following. Its significance is plain: if true, it would imply that not all our judgments could be false, thus constituting a "transcendental argument" against the possibility of radical error.

Now, how, according to McGinn, does this pivotal thesis connect with Wittgenstein's broader discussion of what it is to mean something by a word? This is what he has to say:

The immediate problem is that Wittgenstein himself gives no real guidance as to *why* his thesis should be accepted: what sorts of considerations lead him to suppose it true? (p. 126).

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<sup>7</sup>The problem is especially acute for someone who claims that their remarks are intended to be purely "grammatical": for the grammar of ability verbs is so clearly that of state verbs. But even putting that aside, the difficulty is not just that the thesis is implausible but also that it seems unmotivatable. What conceivable philosophical payoff could there be in denying that abilities are states? McGinn himself can do no better at uncovering such motivation than to impute to Wittgenstein a series of unconvincing and confused considerations that he himself describes as "unpersuasive, resting as they do (in the main) upon misplaced linguistic legislation in the interests of philosophical prophylaxis" (p. 117).

This is an astonishing claim. Few things are as clear in Wittgenstein as that he conceived the multiple application thesis as a *corollary* of the rule-following considerations. The difficulty, I venture to suggest, is not that Wittgenstein gave no guidance as to why his thesis should be accepted, it's that McGinn's *reading* of those considerations gives no such guidance.

Why, indeed, should the multiple application thesis be true if all that we have to go on is that meaning something by a word is neither an event, state or process? No aspect of that thesis by itself, nor anything else McGinn ascribes to Wittgenstein, seems capable of shedding any light on why Wittgenstein subscribed to the multiple application thesis, less still on why he thought it flowed from his more general discussion of meaning. To be sure, McGinn does try to reconstruct some such connection; but as even he acknowledges, the effort yields nothing very convincing. The reader is left with the distinct impression that there wasn't even the *semblance* of a good reason why Wittgenstein held the multiple application thesis.

By contrast, the anti-factualist reading provides a very natural explanation for the thesis in question. (Curiously, McGinn not only doesn't see this—he actually says that Kripke “never so much as mentions” the multiple application thesis (p. 82).) Condensing considerably, the explanation would go like this: it is clearly a feature of the *criteria* for the ascription of meanings—of the assertibility conditions for meaning-attributing sentences—that we do not feel justified in attributing grasp of a meaning to a beginner just because the beginner says he's got it: the novice has to satisfy us that he's mastered the concept in question by using the associated word correctly on numerous occasions. However, once he has persuaded us in this way that he has successfully mastered a certain number of concepts, we don't then need similar certification for every subsequent claim to have mastered a new concept: in the case of accredited masters of *some* concepts, we are entitled, for most every new claim that they might make, to take their word for it. In sum, then: it is not warranted to attribute any concepts to someone unless they have successfully applied on multiple occasions some concepts. So something like the multiple application thesis is true at the level of criteria for the ascription of meaning. The question is: what led Wittgenstein to believe that he could convert a point about when we are justified in attributing meanings into a constitutive point, into a condition on the very possibility of meaning? This is the question to which McGinn can find no satisfactory answer. But on Kripke's reading the answer is plain: given Kripke's way of reading the moral of the rule-following discussion—that there can be no truth conditions for meaning-attributing sentences—the *critical* account is the *only* account of the significance of meaning-attributing sentences that there is. That is why features of the critical practice may be taken to ground constitutive claims.

## II.

McGinn's lengthy discussion of the merits of Kripke's arguments, considered independently of their status as Wittgenstein interpretation, contains many useful points. He correctly observes that the skeptic about semantic facts needs to show not only that semantic facts are not reducible to non-semantic facts, but also that there could not be any *irreducibly* semantic facts. And he effectively criticizes Kripke's half-hearted attempt at dispatching such an anti-reductionist suggestion. He also resists Kripke's assertion that meaning is possible only in a communal setting by raising a set of interesting challenges to the claim that the assertibility conditions for meaning-attributing sentences must make reference to such a community.

Unfortunately, the discussion of other important issues is marred by a serious misunderstanding of the point behind calling meaning a "normative" notion.

We have already had occasion to note what the normativity thesis amounts to and how it figures in Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein. The main point is this: it is of the essence of meaning an expression in a certain way that meaning it that way determines how the expression is to be used if it is to be used correctly. Its significance is as follows: if true, any proposed candidate for being the property in virtue of which an expression has meaning must be such as to determine what is the correct use of that expression: it ought to be possible to read off any such property what is the correct use of that word. This is the requirement on which *dispositional* accounts of meaning are said to founder: one cannot read off a disposition to use a word in a certain way what is the *correct* use of that word, for to be disposed to use a word in a certain way implies at most that one *will*, not that one *should* (one can have dispositions to use words *incorrectly*).

Suppose I do mean addition by '+'. What is the relation of this supposition to the question how I will respond to the problem '68 + 57'? The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account of this relation: if '+' meant addition, then I will answer '125'. But this is not the right account of the relation, which is *normative*, not descriptive. The point is *not* that, if I meant addition by '+', I will answer '125', but that, if I intend to accord with my past meaning of '+', I *should* answer '125'.<sup>8</sup>

Now, although McGinn occasionally seems to state the normativity thesis correctly, his explication of it betrays a misunderstanding. He writes:

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<sup>8</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 37.

We have an account of this normativeness when we have two things: (a) an account of what it is to mean something at a given time and (b) an account of what it is to mean the *same* thing at different times—since (Kripkean) normativeness is a matter of meaning now what one meant earlier (p. 174).

According to McGinn, to call meaning an essentially normative notion is not to say that meaning something by an expression determines in application to what that expression may be correctly used; it is to make the altogether different claim that it must be possible to ask whether an expression has the same meaning at one time as it had at some earlier time.

Now, it ought to be clear that, although the thesis McGinn defines is perfectly coherent, it is not the thesis that Kripke is operating with. For McGinn's thesis is hardly the sort of thesis that could act as a substantive constraint on theories of meaning. *Any* theory of meaning that provided an account of what speakers mean by their expressions at arbitrary times—however crazy that theory may otherwise be—would satisfy McGinn's normativeness constraint. In particular, the principal theory that Kripke deploys his normativity requirement against—the dispositional theory—would easily pass it on McGinn's reading: since there are perfectly determinate facts about what dispositions are associated with a given expression at a given time—or, rather, since it is no part of Kripke's intent to deny that there are such facts—it is always possible to ask whether an expression has the same or a different meaning on a dispositional theory, thus satisfying McGinn's normativeness requirement.

Whence, then, Kripke's claim that a dispositional theory founders precisely on the normativity requirement? The answer is that the normativity requirement is not the thesis McGinn outlines but the one I sketched above: viz., that any theory of the facts in virtue of which an expression has meaning must be such as to determine how the expression *ought* to be used if it is to be used correctly. And the reason a dispositional theory seems to fail this requirement is that it seeks to understand how an expression has meaning in terms of how it *will* be used rather than in terms of how it *ought* to be used.<sup>9</sup>

McGinn's misunderstanding of the normativity requirement leads him to press all sorts of irrelevant objections to Kripke's arguments; the most important are these: that Kripke does not and cannot mount against mental content exactly the same skeptical argument as he directed against

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<sup>9</sup>Many readers seem to have been misled by certain optional aspects of Kripke's presentation—in particular by the fact that the skeptical argument is presented in a quasi-dialogic form—into misunderstanding the normativity requirement: see, for example, P. Coates: "Kripke's Skeptical Argument: Normativeness and Meaning," *Mind* 45 (1986). Limitations of space prevent me from discussing this issue further here.

linguistic content (p. 146ff.); that Kripke ignores all sorts of viable reduction bases for meaning facts (p. 164ff.); and that his own “skeptical solution” does not meet the normativity requirement. Here I have space only to consider the first.

This objection, if sustained, would be an embarrassing one for Kripke: he would stand accused of having claimed to have shown that there can be no facts concerning linguistic meaning without having considered the most plausible candidates for such facts—the propositional attitudes with which linguistic expressions are used. It is indeed hard to see how one could threaten the determinacy or factuality of *linguistic* content without threatening the determinacy or factuality of *mental* content. But, according to McGinn, not only does Kripke never consider the question of mental content, it is not even clear “how the extension of the paradox to concepts is to be carried out” (p. 146).

Now, it is true that Kripke does not devote a lot of space to discussing his skeptical argument at the level of thought; but the reason for this, I suspect, is that he thought the extension of it to that level too obvious to merit extensive discussion. What has led McGinn astray here is his misunderstanding of normativity. Given his interpretation of that thesis, it is indeed difficult to see how the argument is to be run against thoughts: for, as he says, “what could be (relevantly) meant by asking whether my present employment of a concept is in accordance with its previous content?” (p. 147). But that’s not the relevant requirement. The relevant requirement is that a theory of content should be such as to determine the conditions under which a tokening of that content would be correct. Of course, this requirement is as appropriate in connection with mental content as it is in connection with linguistic content. And, if there is a difficulty about the existence of properties that determine correct tokening, these difficulties will be formulable equally in application to mental contents as to linguistic contents.

For all its difficulties the book is not without merit. Many topics raised by both Wittgenstein and Kripke receive useful and illuminating discussion. In particular, McGinn’s insistence, against what has become orthodoxy, that Wittgenstein nowhere introduces the community into his account of meaning and rule-following is original and potentially very important. The writing is clear and lively throughout.

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