

Radicalism and Rule-Following

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How can there be such a thing as a general, correct, systematic description of a practice which at any particular stage may go in *any* direction without betrayal of its character? There is simply nothing *there* systematically to be described.

Crispin Wright, *Rails to Infinity*

1 Introduction

Philosophers inspired by Wittgenstein have been waging a guerrilla war against systematic semantic theory since the rise to dominance of such theories in the early 1970s. The Wittgensteinian resistance involves two elements: first, a focus on the way our assessment of the truth conditions of sentences changes in various ways as we vary the surrounding context of utterance; and second, the deployment of what is the equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction—Wittgenstein’s reflections on rule-following. This second element is what makes the resistance to the dominant practice of semantic theory a distinctively *Neo-Wittgensteinian* form of resistance, and it is what makes the Neo-Wittgensteinian criticism *radical*, because it challenges the very foundations of semantic theory. My aims in this chapter are very modest: I will try to state as clearly as possible the way Wittgenstein’s reflections on rule-following threaten semantic theory. I will proceed by trying to answer a question that Crispin

Wright asked about the relation between Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations and “the Central Project of theoretical linguistics”. According to Wright, the “Central Project” is the explanation of our ability to “recognize of infinitely many unencountered strings [of a language] both whether they constitute well-formed sentences and what, if anything, they could be used in a particular context to say”.¹

Wright puts his question as follows:

My question . . . is whether . . . the Central Project is not somehow already at odds with lessons to be learned from Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations* and elsewhere.²

In order to answer Wright’s question, I will first explain his understanding of the lessons learned from Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following. The received treatment of Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations, due to Kripke, is to treat them as containing a skeptical argument. I’ll present the skeptical argument and the so-called “flat-footed” response to the argument in §2. Wright thinks the flat-footed response to the skeptical argument doesn’t address the real issue raised by the rule-following considerations. I’ll discuss Wright’s assessment of the real issue in the rule-following considerations in §3. He claims that the lessons he draws from the discussions of rule-following are compatible with the Central Project, but that’s a mistake. I’ll explain why at the end of §3. The lessons Wright draws from Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following are actually radically at odds with the Central Project. In §4 I will examine Charles Travis’s treatment of the rule-following considerations. Unlike Wright, he thinks that Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations are at odds with the Central Project.

¹Wright 2001b, p. 170. Thinking of the Central Project as concerned with explaining how speakers recognize *what is said* by novel sentences is controversial; see Cappelen and Lepore 1997 for an argument that semantics should not be understood that way, and Reimer 1998 for a response.

²Wright 2001b, p. 171.

2 Rule-Following and the Skeptical Paradox

Kripke's skeptical paradox is introduced in terms of a worry about an arithmetical rule. But the worry about the arithmetical rule is supposed to apply equally to anything that has *content*, where content is understood as something with *correctness conditions*, including "all meaningful uses of language".³ Kripke develops his skeptical paradox by asking about the arithmetical rule *plus*, which is signified by the sign '+'. Here is what Kripke says about the rule for addition:

I, like almost all English speakers, use the word 'plus' and the symbol '+' to denote a well-known mathematical function, addition. The function is defined for all pairs of positive integers. By means of my external symbolic representation and my internal mental representation, I 'grasp' the rule for addition. One point is crucial to my 'grasp' of this rule. Although I myself have computed only finitely many sums in the past, the rule determines my answer for indefinitely many new sums that I have never previously considered. This is the whole point of the notion that in learning to add I grasp a rule: my past intentions regarding addition determine a unique answer for indefinitely many new cases in the future.⁴

It would be ludicrous to maintain that a subject needs to actually compute every sum of two numbers before he is able to grasp the addition rule, because that would mean that no one (other than God) could grasp the rule for addition. At a given time, for a given subject, there will be indefinitely many sums of pairs of numbers, which the subject has not computed, but which are determined by the addition rule. Most adult subjects, although they have performed only a finite number of calculations involving pairs of numbers and the '+' sign, or the word 'plus', are regarded as grasping the addition rule. More simply, they are regarded as *knowing how to add*. What is the right way to understand the content of that knowledge?

Imagine that you have performed a number of calculations involving the '+' sign in the past. Say, for example, that you have just responded to the query '68+56'

³Kripke 1982, p. 7. For this way of putting the target of the skeptical paradox, see Boghossian 1989, p. 515.

⁴Kripke 1982, pp. 8-9.

with the reply ‘124’. Now you encounter the query ‘68+57’, and you respond with the answer ‘125’. Here is where Kripke’s skeptic steps in:

...suppose I encounter a bizarre sceptic. This sceptic questions my certainty about my answer Perhaps, he suggests, as I used the term ‘plus’ in the past, the answer I intended for ‘68+57’ should have been ‘5’! Of course the sceptic’s suggestion is obviously insane. My initial response to such a suggestion might be that the challenger should go back to school and learn to add. Let the challenger, however, continue. ...perhaps in the past I used ‘plus’ and ‘+’ to denote a function which I will call ‘quus’ and symbolize by ‘ \oplus ’. It is defined by:

$$\begin{aligned}x \oplus y &= x + y, \text{ if } x, y < 57 \\ &= 5 \text{ otherwise.}\end{aligned}$$

Who is to say that this is not the function I previously meant by ‘+’? ...

Now if the sceptic proposes his hypothesis sincerely, he is crazy; such a bizarre hypothesis as the proposal that I always meant quus is absolutely wild. Wild it indubitably is, no doubt it is false; but if it is false, there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute it.⁵

The skeptic asks for “some fact about [one’s] past usage” that refutes the skeptical hypothesis that you meant quus and not plus when you performed operations with ‘+’ in the past. There must be *some* fact that makes it the case that you were following the plus rule rather than the quus rule, otherwise it would be indeterminate which rule you was following, and then there would be no fact of the matter about which response you give to ‘57+68’ would be correct. And if there is no fact of the matter about which response would be correct, then ‘+’ is meaningless.

Kripke considers various possible candidate facts as responses to the skeptical challenge: *past use*, *further statements of rules*, *dispositions*, and *irreducible, qualitative mental states*. None of these proposals are successful. Past use can’t determine what you mean by ‘+’ in the present case, because both the hypothesis that you have meant *quus* and the hypothesis that you have meant *plus* all along are compatible with your past use of ‘+’.

Further statements of rules just push the problem back one step. You may try to justify your answer ‘125’ by referring to the rule: “suppose we wish to add x and y .

⁵Kripke 1982, pp. 8-9.

Take a huge bunch of marbles. First count out x marbles in one heap. Then count out y marbles in another. Put the two heaps together and count out the number of marbles in the union thus formed. The result is $x+y$.⁶ But similar worries arise about past applications of *this* rule. What fact makes it the case that previous applications of the ‘count’ rule were not cases of ‘quounting’, where “to ‘quount’ a heap is to count in the ordinary sense, unless the heap was formed as the union of two heaps, one of which has 57 or more items, in which case one must automatically give the answer ‘5’”?⁷ Both the count rule and the quount rule are compatible with your past purportedly-*counting* behavior. So you need to find a fact that rules out the skeptical hypothesis about the past usage of “count” just as you needed to find a fact that ruled out the skeptical hypothesis about your past usage of ‘+’. So this response gets us nowhere.

Dispositions are no help either. It might be thought that even though you have only performed a finite number of arithmetical operations in the past, you are disposed to calculate the sum of any two numbers when suitably prompted:

To mean addition by ‘+’ is to be disposed, when asked for any sum ‘ $x+y$ ’ to give the sum of x and y as the answer (in particular, to say ‘125’ when queried about ‘68+57’); to mean quus is to be disposed when queried about any arguments, to respond with their *quum* (in particular to answer ‘5’ when queried about ‘68+57’). . . . To say that in fact I meant plus in the past is to say — as surely was the case! — that had I been queried about ‘68+57’, I *would* have answered ‘125’. By hypothesis I was not in fact asked, but the disposition was present none the less.⁸

Kripke raises several objections to this proposal. First, it is possible for people to make mistakes when they are attempting to add two numbers together. Someone might, for example, forget to carry the one when calculating the answer to ‘68+57’,

⁶Kripke 1982, p. 15

⁷Kripke 1982, p. 16. Jason Bridges has questioned whether this move in the skeptical argument is legitimate. Jason claims that in the explanation of the rule that makes it the case that you meant plus in your previous uses of ‘+’, no mention is made of any *words* at all. But in Kripke’s skeptical response, he raises a question about interpretations of the word “count”. So the response looks like a non-sequitor.

⁸Kripke 1982, pp. 22-23.

generating ‘115’ instead of ‘125’. Such a person is disposed to make a mistake, to produce an answer other than the one he meant.⁹ According to the advocate of the dispositional account of meaning, however, “the function someone means is to be *read off* from his dispositions; it cannot be presupposed in advance which function is meant”.¹⁰ So the dispositionalist can’t represent a situation in which someone is following a rule but makes a mistake. Call this the “problem of error”. Second, the *plus* rule determines an infinite number of correct responses to queries of the form ‘ $x+y$ ’. But, as a finite creature, “my dispositions extend to only finitely many cases”.¹¹ So a dispositional account cannot capture the infinite content of the rule for addition. Call this the “problem of finiteness”. Finally, Kripke says that the problem with the dispositionalist account that underlies its other difficulties (the problem of error and the problem of finiteness) is the fact that the dispositionalist only *describes* how we *would* respond to the query ‘68+57’ in counterfactual cases, not how we *should* respond in those cases, if we want to add correctly:

The dispositionalist gives a *descriptive* account... : if ‘+’ meant addition, then I *will* answer ‘125’. But this is not the proper 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’. Computational error, finiteness of my capacity, and other disturbing factors may lead me not to be *disposed* to respond as I *should*, but if so, I have not acted in accordance with my intentions. The relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*.

You may intend to follow the plus rule, but fail for any number of reasons. You may even be disposed to misapply the rule. But that shouldn’t affect the meaning of ‘+’. So the dispositionalist response to the skeptic does not give an account of the meaning of ‘plus’.¹²

⁹Kripke 1982, p. 30.

¹⁰Kripke 1982, pp. 29-30.

¹¹Kripke 1982, p. 28.

¹²The basic dispositionalist response to the rule-following paradox can be refined in various ways. See, for example, Forbes 2002. For an assessment of the various refinements to the basic dispositionalist position, see Boghossian 1989.

Kripke also considers a proposal that puts forward the claim that meaning is “irreducibly qualitative”, like a headache or the experience of seeing yellow. The fact that meaning is irreducible might be the reason that the skeptic’s challenge can’t be met: there is no fact beyond the meaning fact itself that can be cited as an explanation of what makes it the case that I meant plus rather than quus in my past operations with ‘+’.¹³ But, Kripke argues, meaning plus by ‘+’ doesn’t have any identifiable experiential quality¹⁴, and, more importantly, the “qualitative” feature that meaning is supposed to have according to this proposal cannot help resolve the basic skeptical challenge. What could an experience of meaning’s irreducible quality do to rule out the answer ‘5’ to the query ‘68+57’? There is nothing in an experience like a headache or a sensation of yellow that is incompatible with one answer or another. (About this proposal, Wittgenstein might say “Whatever *feels* right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’”.)

Once he has rejected all of the possible accounts of what it is that makes it the case that you meant plus in the past rather than quus, Kripke concludes that since there is no fact that rules out the possibility that you meant quus in the past rather than plus, there is no fact of the matter about what rule you were following in the past. Assuming that the present is like the past, then there is no fact that makes it the case that you’re following one rule rather than another in the present, either.¹⁵ Because there is no fact of the matter about what rule you were following in the past or are following now, any answer that you give to the query ‘68+57’ will be as good as any other—“a leap in the dark”. So there are no correctness conditions for the rule of *addition*. And since the argument can be applied to any rule or other item that purports to possess conditions of correct application, it follows that, as Kripke

¹³Kripke 1982, p. 41.

¹⁴Kripke 1982, pp. 44-45.

¹⁵Kripke 1982, p. 13.

puts it, that “There can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word”.¹⁶

Neither Kripke nor Wittgenstein accepts this skeptical conclusion. There *is* such a thing as meaning something by a word. Kripke responds to the paradox (on behalf of Wittgenstein) by proposing a “skeptical solution”. A skeptical solution “conced[es] that the skeptic’s negative assertions are unanswerable”, but tries to show that “our ordinary practice or belief is justified because—contrary appearances notwithstanding—it need not require the justification the skeptic has shown to be untenable”.¹⁷ How to characterize Kripke’s skeptical solution has become a major exegetical project in its own right.¹⁸ In rough outline, Kripke’s proposal is that claims about whether someone is following a rule are correct just in case the person is judged to be “in agreement” with how the community would respond to the rule.¹⁹ But there is a “straight” solution to the rule-following paradox that aims to stop the argument for the paradox before it gets started.²⁰ When the skeptic says, “there must be some fact about my past usage that can be cited to refute” the skeptical hypothesis that I meant quus in the past rather than plus, one might simply reply with the following, “flat-footed”²¹ account of that fact:

Flat-footed response: The fact about my past calculations involving the sign ‘+’ that refutes the skeptical hypothesis that I meant quus rather than plus is *the fact that I meant plus by ‘+’*.²²

¹⁶Kripke 1982, p. 55.

¹⁷Kripke 1982, p. 66.

¹⁸For a sample of the dispute, see Wilson 1998 and Kremer 2000, and Finkelstein 2000, p. 70, n. 8.

¹⁹Kripke 1982, pp. 90-95.

²⁰Kripke 1982, p. 66: “Call a proposed solution to a skeptical philosophical problem a *straight* solution if it shows that on closer examination the skepticism proves to be unwarranted. . .”.

²¹Wright 2001b, p. 177.

²²See, for example McGinn 2002, p. 81: “The kind of reply that is being implicitly judged illicit [by Kripke’s skeptic] is one that simply uses semantic concepts, as follows: what it consists in to mean/refer to addition by ‘+’ is for the speaker to *mean/refer to* addition by ‘+’—*this* is the sort of ‘fact’ meaning consists in”; Wright 2001a, p. 113: “In order, then, to rebut the skeptical argument, it would have sufficed, at the point where the skeptic challenged you to adduce some

Kripke's skeptical argument seems to rely on the assumption that the fact that rules out the skeptical hypothesis has to be something *other* than the fact that you meant plus by '+'. That looks tantamount to an assumption that meaning facts must be *reducible* to facts of some other kind.²³ If this assumption that meaning facts must be reduced to facts of some other kind is rejected, then the skeptical paradox seems to dissolve.

Kripke anticipates this kind of "flat-footed" response to his paradox, but dismisses it, in the following way:

Perhaps [meaning addition by 'plus' or '+'] is simply a primitive state . . . a state of a unique kind of its own.

Such a move may in a sense be irrefutable, and if it is taken in an appropriate way Wittgenstein may even accept it. But it seems desperate: it leaves the nature of this postulated primitive state—the primitive state of 'meaning addition by "plus"'—completely mysterious. It is not supposed to be an introspectible state, yet we supposedly are aware of it with some fair degree of certainty whenever it occurs. For how else can each of us be confident that he *does*, at present, mean addition by 'plus'? Even more important is the logical difficulty implicit in Wittgenstein's skeptical argument. I think that Wittgenstein argues, not merely as we have said hitherto, that introspection shows that the alleged 'qualitative' state of understanding is a chimera, but also that it is logically impossible (or at least that there is a considerable logical difficulty) for there to be a state of 'meaning addition by "plus"' at all.²⁴

There seem to be two worries about the "flat-footed" response raised by Kripke in the passage just quoted. The first is epistemological: if meaning plus by '+' is a basic, irreducible fact about you, how can you know it "with a fair degree of certainty"? The second "logical" worry is generated by two contradictory demands that a meaning fact must satisfy:

Such a state [of 'meaning addition by "plus"'] would have to be a finite object, contained in our finite minds. . . . Yet (§195) "in a *queer* way" each such case [each case in

recalled mental fact in order to discount the grue-interpretations, to recall precisely your former intention with respect to the use of 'green'".

²³Wright 2001b, p. 176: ". . . there is an explicit and unacceptable reductionism involved at the stage at which the skeptic challenges his interlocutor to recall some aspect of his former mental life which might constitute his, for example, having meant addition by 'plus'. It is not acceptable, apparently, if the interlocutor claims to recall precisely that".

²⁴Kripke 1982, pp. 51-52.

the infinite addition table] already is present”.²⁵

The logical difficulty is that a state of meaning or rule-following would have to both (a) instruct us how to respond to an infinite number of cases, and (b) be “in some sense present” in a finite state of a finite mind. But it is hard to see how something that could be present in a finite state of a finite mind could instruct us how to respond to an infinite number of cases:

... when I concentrate on what is in my mind, what instructions can be found there? How can I be said to be acting on the basis of these instructions when I act in the future? The infinitely many cases of the table are not in my mind for my future self to consult.²⁶

Some find Kripke’s rejoinder to the “flat-footed” response to be question-begging. They maintain that the idea of a finite mental state that has an infinite number of applications is simply equivalent to the idea of a mental state with *content* (correctness conditions), so merely to point this out does not raise any additional problems for someone who accepts the existence of such a state:

Kripke’s second objection to the anti-reductionist suggestion is that it is utterly mysterious how there could be a finite state, realized in a finite mind, that nevertheless contains information about the correct applicability of a of a sign in literally no end of distinct situations. But, again, this amounts merely to insisting that we find the idea of a contentful state problematic, without adducing any independent reason why we should. We *know* that mental states with general contents are states with infinitary normative characters; it is precisely with that observation that the entire discussion began. What Kripke needs, if he is to pull off an argument from queerness, is some substantive argument ... why we should not countenance such states. But this he does not provide.²⁷

It is true, of course, that the meaning of any word will have ‘indefinitely many’ consequences for use in future and counterfactual situations, and that the primitive state of

²⁵Kripke 1982, p. 52. Note that Kripke doesn’t quote the second half of §195, where Wittgenstein seems to say that the only thing wrong with the idea of an infinite number of applications of the rule being “in some sense present” in a mental state is that it is present in a *queer* way—suggesting that Wittgenstein thinks that there is a non-queer sense of those applications being contained in our finite minds. I’ll return to this issue at the end of this chapter.

²⁶Kripke 1982, p. 22.

²⁷Boghossian 1989, p. 542.

meaning something by the word (or referring to something) will have in some way to ‘generate’ these consequences; but I cannot see that this raises any irresolvable ‘logical difficulty’—at least none that could justify abandoning the notion of meaning altogether. . . . [M]eaning . . . *interacts* with the circumstances in which it is present in such a way as to determine a range of effects of certain kinds; we do not have to suppose that in some ‘queer way’ these effects are already present in the state in some shadowy form.²⁸

Both Wright and Travis give substantive arguments that are meant to show why we should not countenance the idea that in grasping a rule, all of its requirements are “realized in a finite mind”. I’ll discuss those arguments in the next two sections.

3 Wright’s Attempted Resolution of the Conflict Between the Rule-Following Considerations and the Central Project

Like Kripke, Wright thinks that the “flat-footed” response does not adequately address the “real problem posed by [Kripke’s] Skeptical Argument”, which is “acute”. The “real problem”, according to Wright, is not just a feature of grasping a rule, but a feature of a genus of mental phenomena Wittgenstein discusses, including wanting to play chess, knowing the meaning of a word, meaning to continue a series, and remembering how a tune goes.²⁹ In each of these cases a subject can rightly be said to be in a certain state with a certain content, a content that has correct applications that the subject has not considered (or, in the case of an infinite series, could not consider in their entirety).³⁰ One might think that in these cases, a subject is in

²⁸McGinn 2002, pp. 88-89.

²⁹Wright 2001a, pp. 128-134.

³⁰Wittgenstein 1958, §184: “I want to remember a tune and it escapes me; suddenly I say ‘Now I know it’ and I sing it. What was it like to suddenly know it? Surely it couldn’t have occurred to me *in its entirety* at that moment!—Perhaps you will say: ‘It’s a particular feeling, as if it were *there*’—but *is* it there? Suppose I now begin to sing it and get stuck?—But may I not have been *certain* at that moment that I knew it? So in some sense or other it was *there* after all!—But in what sense?”

a state with a certain content in virtue of a special cognitive relation (knowledge, for example) with something objective: the rules of chess, the meaning of a word (a function from circumstances of evaluation to an extension), a series of numbers, or the series of notes that constitute a particular tune. Wright takes Wittgenstein to reject the idea that subjects stand in a special cognitive relation to an objective set of requirements:

[Summarizing Wittgenstein:] It might be preferable, in describing our most basic rule-governed responses, to think of them not as informed by an *intuition* (of the requirements of the rule) but as a kind of *decision*.

The point of the contrast between “intuition” and “decision” is that the former implies and repudiates the suggestion that . . . rule-following is a cognitive accomplishment, success in tracking an independently constituted requirement. “Intuition” suggests an unarticulated *ur-cognition*, a form of knowledge too basic to admit of any further account.³¹

Wright argues that the “intuitional epistemology” is not “really intelligible”, because

We have no accountable idea of what would constitute the direction taken by the rule off its own bat, as it were, if the deliverances of our intuitive faculties were to take us collectively off track. . . and that is just to say that we have no model of what constitutes the direction taken by a rule, period—once the direction is conceived, after the fashion of Platonism, as determined autonomously . . .³²

I take it that Wright’s thought here can be understood in the following way: If everyone comes to think that “livid” is correctly applied only to red things, then it doesn’t make sense to suppose that everyone could be mistaken about that. In such a situation, the meaning of “livid” would just become such that it would be correctly applied only to red things. That suggests that the meaning of expressions is partly constituted by how they are in fact applied. If the meaning of an expression is understood as completely autonomous of how subjects actually understand it, it would make sense to say that everyone could be mistaken about the correct application of

³¹Wright 2001a, p. 161.

³²Wright 2001a, p. 161.

an expression. But since that doesn't make sense, the meaning of an expression can't be completely autonomous from how it is actually applied.

Once Wright rejects the “intuitional epistemology” of how subjects grasp rules, what does he put in its place? Wright's proposal is to treat judgments about the content of a rule as more like *decisions* about how to go on rather than intuitions that track the the rule. He spells out what he means by a “decision” in terms of an *extension-determining* judgment. An extension-determining judgment is one according to which it is *a priori* true that a concept has a certain extension (or a sentence a certain truth value) when we judge, under certain appropriate conditions (C-conditions), that it does.³³ Or, put in terms of rules, a response is in accord with a rule when we judge, under appropriate conditions, that it is.

As an example of C-conditions, Wright offers the conditions that have to obtain for one's judgment that an object has a certain color to be extension-determining:

... the surface should be in full view and in good light, relatively stationary, and not too far away; and the thinker must know which object is in question, must observe it attentively, must be possessed of normal visual equipment and be otherwise cognitively lucid, and must be competent with the [relevant color concept].³⁴

If these conditions obtain, then the observer's judgment that the object is blue *determines* whether the object is blue. There is no independent measure of blueness beyond judgments made in C-conditions. Note that those conditions do not include, on pain of circularity, any condition to the effect that the object must *be blue*.

When the appropriate conditions obtain, and we judge that, for example, '125' is the correct answer to the query '68+57', then the correctness of the response is *constituted* by our judgment. Knowing what the rule requires is then just a matter of knowing (in suitable circumstances) what one judges the correct answer to be. That

³³Wright 2001b, p. 193. Compare Travis 1989, p. 48: “for an item to have a semantic property *P* is for it to be so that a reasonable (informed) judge would take it to have *P*”.

³⁴Wright 2001b, pp. 192-193

is, the rule is extended into novel circumstances by actual judgments, not, as it were *before* those judgments are made. There is no autonomous standard of correctness that settles whether a novel application of the rule is correct or incorrect. So there is no epistemological problem about how we grasp the requirements of a rule, because the rule *doesn't* autonomously reach into the future. To know what the rule requires, a subject only needs to know that it is his present judgment that '125' is the correct response to '68+57' (as long as the judgment takes place in appropriate conditions).

To return to the question that started this paper, is this account of Wittgenstein's discussions of rule-following at odds with the Central Project? Wright considers his judgment-dependent account of content to be compatible with a (suitably revised) conception of the Central Project:

If [Wright's view] can be sustained, then the cognitive-psychological project [The Central Project] is properly seen as directed not at the description of the conditions for a certain kind of tracking accomplishment—that conception has to fall with Platonism—but at the detailed elaboration of the C-conditions whose realization ensures that a subject's judgment of the content of a particular novel utterance will be *best*. The Central Project is thus *prima facie* compatible with Wittgenstein's thought about rules, if the upshot of the latter is indeed (at least compatible with the claim) that judgments of content, and of the requirements of rules in general, are extension-determining.³⁵

According to Wright, the rules employed in the Central Project can be seen as specifying the conditions the obtaining of which makes a judgment about content extension-determining. So the Central Project, and Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations (properly understood) should not be in conflict. But it's hard to see how the rules employed by the Central Project *could* leave room for an extension-determining judgment. Say we have an (enormously simplified) semantic theory that contains the following rules:

The basic grammatical categories of the language are NPs, VPs, sentences, and
sentential connectives.

³⁵Wright 2001b, p. 212.

The NPs are: “Jim”, “John”

The VPs are: “runs”, “jumps”

The sentential connective is “and”

A simple sentence can be formed by combining a NP and a VP, with the NP occurring first.

A complex sentence can be formed by conjoining two sentences with a sentential connective

Nothing else is a sentence

The reference of “Jim” is Jim

The reference of “John” is John

An object satisfies “runs” if and only if it runs

An object satisfies “jumps” if and only if it jumps

A simple sentence S is true if and only if the reference of the NP satisfies the VP

A complex sentence S is true if and only if all conjuncts are true.

From those rules, we can derive an infinite number of sentences of the language: “Jim runs”, “Jim jumps”, “John runs”, “John jumps”, “Jim runs and John jumps”, “Jim jumps and John jumps”, etc. Those rules determine an infinite number of grammatical sentences and semantic contents. We can easily derive the truth conditions for the sentences of the language:

“John runs” is true if and only if John runs.

“John jumps” is true if and only if John jumps.

“John jumps and Jim runs” is true if and only if John jumps and Jim runs.

etc.

The rules and definitions employed by this simple theory are not just the conditions that have to obtain for a judgment of grammaticalness or content to be extension-determining, they *determine the extension* of grammaticalness, and *specify the content* of any sentence of the language. There is no additional work for an extension-determining judgment to do in determining whether a sentence is grammatical or not, or what the content of a sentence is. The rules of a sentence reach ahead of any particular judgment of grammaticalness or content that a subject may make. Judgments that subjects make about grammaticality and content will either be in accord with, or fail to be in accord with, the consequences of the theory. Judgments will not determine the extension of grammaticality or what content sentences have.

There is a disanalogy between thinking of linguistic rules as C-conditions and the other examples of C-conditions that Wright offers. For example, recall the C-conditions Wright gives for a judgment of color:

... the surface should be in full view and in good light, relatively stationary, and not too far away; and the thinker must know which object is in question, must observe it attentively, must be possessed of normal visual equipment and be otherwise cognitively lucid, and must be competent with the [relevant color concept].³⁶

As mentioned above, those conditions do not include, on pain of circularity, any condition to the effect that the object must *be blue*. But, in contrast, the rules of the linguistic theory are rules that specify what is to count as a well-formed sentence, or what the content of a sentence is. There is no gap between the rules and the grammaticalness or content of sentences left for a judgement to fill.

³⁶Wright 2001b, pp. 192-193

If the judgments of grammaticality and content were *not* superfluous, but essential to determining grammaticalness and content (as Wright claims), then the Central Project would have to change radically. Suppose that the rules and definitions that a speaker tacitly knows (according to the linguistic theory) do not determine “autonomously” what sentences are grammatical or what content those sentences have. Instead, each time a subject encounters a new sentence, his judgment as to the sentence’s grammaticality and content settles what content the sentence has and whether or not the sentence *is* grammatical. Knowledge of the rules would serve only as a necessary background condition against which the real explanation, in terms of a subject’s judgment, would take place. Without an extension-determining judgment, a sentence would be neither grammatical nor ungrammatical, and have no content. Knowledge of background conditions (the rules of the syntactic and semantic theory for the language) would therefore not suffice to explain how speakers are able to know whether novel sentences are grammatical and what content (if any) they have. That would deflate the explanatory goal of the Central Project.

So the Central Project turns out to be at odds with Wright’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s discussions of rule-following. Wright’s attempt to make the two compatible fails. The central point of conflict concerns speakers’ knowledge of the rules that are supposed to explain their linguistic competence: their ability to know, of novel sentences, whether or not they are grammatical and what their content is. If Wright’s version of the rule-following considerations is correct, there is no coherent account of how speakers are able to grasp or otherwise have in mind a rule that determines, in advance of encountering particular situations in which the rule is to be applied, how the rule should be applied.

4 Travis on Rules

Charles Travis reads Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations in a way similar to Wright. But, unlike Wright, he draws the conclusion that the rule-following considerations *do* raise problems for an essential component of the Central Project. Travis targets a picture of the content of representations (whether sentences or mental representations) that treats them as functions from circumstances of evaluation (worlds and times, say) to truth-values. Like the rule for addition, the content of a sentence (a proposition) determines an indefinite number of true applications—those pairs of worlds and times at which the sentence is true. Travis argues that the idea of specifying the content of a representation in terms of such a function, like specifying the addition rule in terms of a function from pairs of numbers to their sum, is not something a subject could grasp. Instead of formulating the problem for the functional picture of content in terms of a worry about how a finite mind could grasp a rule with infinite applications (like Kripke), Travis substitutes a worry about the impossibility of a subject grasping a rule that determines how it is correctly applied in circumstances that the subject has not yet encountered.

Travis’s argument goes as follows. There are certain thoughts that are only available to us only “given suitable acquaintance with our environment”.³⁷ As an example of this kind of thought, Travis cites thoughts about Frege available only after 1848 (when Frege was born). Just as there are singular thoughts about individuals like Frege, there are singular thoughts about states of affairs. If Sid says “Pia’s shoes are under the bed”, then I can determine whether what he said is true by inspecting the bed and seeing whether Pia’s shoes are under it. When I look at Pia’s shoes and their position with respect to the bed, I can determine whether *that* way things are arranged is the way Sid said them to be. The thought, *this is how Sid said things*

³⁷Travis 2006, p. 130.

were (or *this isn't how Sid said things were*) is not a thought that I can have prior to encountering Pia's shoes and their relation to the bed, just as I can't have a singular thought about Frege prior to 1848.³⁸

The thought that I can have only after becoming acquainted with the way Pia's shoes and the bed are arranged is, in Travis's terminology, a *novel understanding* of Sid's words. An understanding of what someone said is *novel* (for a subject, at a time) just in case the subject isn't yet acquainted with the particular way things were said to be. So prior to viewing Pia's shoes and their relation to the bed, the thought *that is the way Sid said things were* is a novel understanding of Sid's words (for me). A *prior* understanding of Sid's words is the understanding of them that I can have prior to being acquainted with the particular situation that would make them true.³⁹

The standard picture of content individuates the content of a sentence, like "Pia's shoes are under the bed", in terms of the circumstances in which the sentence is true. Those circumstances will inevitably include *novel* circumstances (for an agent, at the time he grasps the content). That means that according to the standard picture, in order to grasp the content of a sentence, I have to think about circumstances that I

³⁸Travis 2006, pp. 129-130:

Sid tells Pia that her shoes are under the bed. Pia understands Sid's words in a certain way. . . . Now she enters the room. She encounters things being relevantly as they are . . . She learns something, perhaps enough, of the conditions (circumstances) which then obtain. Three understandings of Sid's words now become available. There is an understanding of them on which things being that way just is their being as Sid said. There is one on which it just is not. And there may be a third on which that much leaves the issue undecided. . . .

Some thoughts are only available to us given suitable acquaintance with our environment. And so it is with those understandings of Sid's words I just mentioned. Pia's shoes are positioned as they are with respect to the bed. There is then this understanding of Sid's words: what they say is such that things being *that way* is things being as they said. Someone may thus understand them. One may only *so* understand them if one is suitably acquainted with things being as they then were. It is to things so being that one must be responding in having that understanding.

³⁹Travis 2006, p. 130.

cannot yet think about.⁴⁰ A subject who managed to grasp the content of a sentence specified as a function from circumstances of evaluation to truth-values would be in the incoherent position of both being able to think about those situations (in virtue of grasping the representation) and not being able to do so (in virtue of not yet being acquainted with them). Travis says of this incoherent position that it is “resistant to making sense”.⁴¹

In place of the picture of grasping a rule that is “resistant to making sense”, which treats the rule as a “synopsis”⁴² or “compendium”⁴³ of all possible correct applications of the rule paired with their status, Travis offers an account on which rules do not determine correct applications in advance of subjects applying, or “understanding” them in particular ways. The alternative view that Travis advocates (which he attributes to Wittgenstein) develops out of his reading of the following passage in the *Investigations*:

§85. A rule stands there like a sign-post.—Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?—and if there were, not a single sign-post, but a chain of adjacent ones or of chalk marks on the ground—is there only *one* way of interpreting them?—So I can say, the sign post does after all leave no room for doubt. Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one.

He begins his reading of this passage by imagining a signpost: “On the highway’s edge is a blue sign with an arrow pointing right, and the legend ‘Colmar’”.⁴⁴ What does this signpost instruct one to do? Travis says that the blue sign indicates a motorway and the arrow indicates that one turn right to get on it. Then he imagines

⁴⁰Travis 2006, p. 139: “Thinking what we now *can* think would require thinking what we now cannot so much as entertain. That is an incoherent idea”.

⁴¹Travis 2006, p. 138.

⁴²Travis 2006, p. 124.

⁴³Travis 2006, p. 126.

⁴⁴Travis 2006, p. 114.

several possible courses of action that one might take the sign to be instructing one to do (if one wants to go to Colmar):

... should I turn right immediately, plowing through a fence, and then a field? Or should I go on to the next little service road and then turn right? Should I turn right and then reverse direction? Or should I wait for one of those recognizable motorway entrances, veer onto it (no sharp turns), and carry on?⁴⁵

Which of the actions that are possible interpretations of the sign is the *correct* one? The answer is, according to Travis, that *it depends*. It depends not just on the sign itself, but on the kind of institution of which the sign is a part (here, a system of motorways, onramps, signs indicating where to turn to get to certain destinations, and so on), and on the expectations, about signs of this sort, of those who participate in, and are familiar with, that institution:

[What a rule says] depends on the circumstances in which the rule is called upon to tell us something. . . It also depends on the natural perceptions, responses, of those for whom the rule is to serve as a rule—the French, or so I concede, in the [case of the sign indicating the way to Colmar].⁴⁶

... for a rule to count as saying to do *this* (identified by doing it) is for it to say that on a certain parochial understanding of it; to do so on a given thinker's way of understanding it (on what *they* are prepared to recognize as the right way). There is no other thing it can be for a rule to say to do *this*.⁴⁷

The italicized “*thises*” in Travis's statement are meant to pick out *particular* (token) actions (he says they are identified by *doing it*—not by any general description), and not some *kind* of action. A rule only instructs one to do some particular action (token) if the rule-follower *understands* the rule as requiring that particular action. Otherwise the rule is left making only *general* requirements on what actions would satisfy it (turning right, for example), that don't determine which particular actions satisfy it.

⁴⁵Travis 2006, p. 114.

⁴⁶Travis 2006, p. 115.

⁴⁷Travis 2006, p. 115.

One might think that a more specific formulation of the rule, something like “To get to Colmar, veer onto the next clearly marked motorway onramp”, to replace the more general “To get to Colmar, turn right”. That more specific formulation would rule out those incorrect interpretations of the rule Travis considers (such as: turn right and then reverse direction, immediately turn right, and so on), so it looks like it would help narrow down the range of possible actions that would count as following the rule. While true, that response does not appreciate the fully general point that Travis is trying to make. Even a more specific rule is still essentially general, in the sense that there is a range of possible *particular* actions (singled out not in general terms, but only with a singular term, like *this*) that would count as satisfying the (more specific) rule. And, Travis contends, the rule, being general, can’t specify which of those particular circumstances count as satisfying it (and which don’t).⁴⁸ Only an *understanding* of the rule can bridge the gap between a (general) representation or rule and the (particular) circumstances that satisfy it.

On Travis’s picture of grasping a rule, the rule does not, and cannot, determine which future applications of it are correct. Only the rule *understood* in a particular way by a subject determines what a correct application of it is. That avoids the incoherent picture of a subject who grasps a rule being able to pair particular circumstances he is not yet acquainted with, and so cannot think about, with truth-values. It also threatens the Central Project. Recall that the Central Project aims to explain our ability to “recognize of infinitely many unencountered strings [of a language] both whether they constitute well-formed sentences and what, if anything, they could be used in a particular context to say”. The explanation of our ability to recognize what well-formed sentences could be used to say (our ability to know the content of novel sentences) relies on the claim that we grasp a finite set of rules:

⁴⁸See Travis 2000, p. 212 for further discussion of the generality of rules.

lexical rules that treat the meaning of expressions of the language as functions of various kinds, and composition rules, that indicate how the meaning of parts of a sentence can be combined. If grasping a rule doesn't determine correct applications of the rule in advance of particular "understandings" of the rule, then knowledge of lexical and compositional rules wouldn't suffice to explain the ability to know the content of novel sentences. Two subjects might grasp the same set of lexical and composition rules and yet "understand" them differently, producing different, yet (possibly) *correct* applications of the same rule.⁴⁹ Travis's well-known examples of truth-conditional variation are meant to showcase this basic idea about what rules (fail to) determine: two subjects can grasp the same word meanings, combine them in the same way, and yet *understand* the resulting sentence meaning differently, as having different truth conditions. For example, one subject can understand the sentence "The leaves are green" as truly describing leaves that have been painted green; in a different context, another subject understands the sentence as falsely describing the same leaves. Both understandings can be, according to Travis, correct.⁵⁰

The Central Project aims to explain a linguistic ability that subjects have: the ability to know, of novel sentences, whether or not they are grammatical, and what (if any) content they have. It attempts to explain that ability in terms of knowledge of a finite set of rules (or principles and parameters). If it turned out that knowledge of those rules did not suffice to explain subjects' ability to know of novel sentences whether or not they are grammatical and what (if any) content they have, that any knowledge of rules had to be supplemented by judgment or "understanding" before it would determine what content novel sentences have, then the Central Project would not get off the ground.

⁴⁹Travis 1989, p. 70.

⁵⁰See, for example, Travis 1997, p. 89.

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