Kripke and others on Wittgenstein

by David Bell

Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein. Edited by I. Block. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981. Pp. xii+322. £15.00. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982. Pp. 224.[1] US$22.50.

THE LIST OF contributors to this volume is impressive: Elizabeth Anscombe, Kenneth Blackwell, Frank Cioffi, Michael Dummett, Peter Hacker, Hidé Ishiguro, Anthony Kenny, Saul Kripke, Brian McGuinness, David Pears, D. Z. Phillips, Eric Stenius, Peter Winch, and Paul Ziff. Impressive too, on the whole, is the philosophical quality of their respective contributions, which range over virtually the whole of Wittgenstein's thought, both early and late, and which deal with such diverse topics as the theory of types, the picture theory, the private language argument, Wittgenstein's remarks on aesthetics, anthropology and the philosophy of mind, as well as with his relations with both Russell and Frege. The pieces published here were originally read at the Wittgenstein Colloquium which was held at the University of Western Ontario in 1976—though in the subsequent six years many have undergone revision and expansion. It is unfortunate that not all the papers originally presented to the Colloquium are represented here: in particular the absence of Kreisel's contribution means that, yet again, Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics receives inadequate attention.

As is perhaps inevitable in a collection of this sort, not all the contributions are, in any sense, of equal weight. Kenny's paper on Wittgenstein's early philosophy of mind, for example is a mere seven pages long, while Kripke's on rules and private language is over ten times that length. Ziff's attack on Wittgenstein's aesthetic views, and Stenius' account of the picture theory are largely negligible: Ziff writes in a way which is slick, dogmatic and insensitive, while Stenius spends so much time reminding us of what he said twenty years ago in his book on the *Tractatus* that he leaves no time to say anything new. In contrast, the papers by Blackwell (on Wittgenstein and Russell), Hacker (the picture theory) and Ishiguro (Wittgenstein and the theory of types), for example,

are models of clear, careful, and informative scholarship.

Unfortunately, but obviously, not every article can be discussed or even summarized here. I shall restrict myself, therefore, to an examination of what I take to be the most important single issue raised by a number of different contributors. The issue is a difficult one, but vitally important in that the position we adopt with respect to it will largely determine what in general we make of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a whole. The question is this: Do Wittgenstein's later works contain, explicitly or implicitly, a theory of meaning, a general account, that is, of what it is for an expression to possess a meaning or express a sense? Or, on the contrary, do these works either explicitly or implicitly deny that such an enterprise is in principle feasible?

The question first surfaces in a provocative piece by Dummett entitled "Frege and Wittgenstein", in which Dummett sets out to defend the claim that where Wittgenstein's work builds on, elaborates, or complements that of Frege, Wittgenstein is at his happiest; but when Wittgenstein "fought against the power of Frege's thought ... he was almost always at his worst. [In such cases] Frege was in the right and Wittgenstein in the wrong" (p. 33). Dummett argues his case by showing how profound were the insights embodied in the extensions and generalizations which Wittgenstein made of Fregean doctrines concerning, amongst other things, the need for identity criteria for objects, the non-psychological nature of meaning, and the need for a distinction between what can be said in, as against what gets shown by, a language. On the other hand, when Wittgenstein attacks Frege's doctrine of assertion, say, or his philosophy of mathematics, Dummett finds neither the objections nor the non-Fregean alternatives at all plausible. But perhaps the point of greatest divergence between Wittgenstein and Frege concerns, quite generally, the form which a theory of meaning should take—or, even more generally, whether or not such a theory is in principle possible. It is clear that Wittgenstein rejected as ill-founded the most fundamental distinction in terms of which Frege's entire theory of meaning is articulated, *viz*: the distinction between the *force* with which a sentence is uttered and the *content* which it expresses. Wittgenstein also dismissed Frege's claim that it is ultimately in terms of *truth-conditions* that we are to elucidate the notion of a sentence's content. It is not at all clear, however, what, if anything, Wittgenstein wanted to put in their place. Dummett ends by throwing down this challenge: assuming that Wittgenstein did intend to offer a radically anti-Fregean account of how language functions, then, Dummett says (p. 42), "my difficulty ... is to understand what alternative it was that Wittgenstein had in mind, something that I have never learned either from his writings or from

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[1] Kripke's article is excluded from the American edition. The American rights to the article are held by Harvard University Press, who intended to publish the piece, revised and expanded, as a book in October 1982. This book was also be published by Basil Blackwell at about the same time.

those who acknowledge him as their master."

A number of other authors represented here have in effect taken up Dummett's challenge. Anscombe, for example, devotes her paper to showing that "there is after all no theory of language in Wittgenstein" (p. 158), though she fails to make it clear what philosophically interesting reasons there might be for this omission. Winch, too, says it is misleading to think that Wittgenstein "was offering an alternative theory of meaning" (p. 171). But by far the most interesting treatment of this issue is Kripke's. In broad outline there is little that is new in Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein; but the view he advances has seldom if ever received so clear and forceful a statement or so powerful a defence; and many of the details of Kripke's treatment are both original and exciting.

Taking Wittgenstein's account of rules and of rule-following as fundamental alike to both his philosophy of mathematics and to the considerations constitutive of the so-called "private language argument", Kripke proceeds to reconstruct a sceptical argument to the effect that the intuitive notion of "the meaning of a word" is incoherent: quite simply, our concept of meaning makes no sense. In its most general form, according to Kripke, Wittgenstein's arguments can be taken as showing that, concerning any individual A and any word W, (a) no facts about A's past usage of W, (b) no facts about the circumstances in which A learned to use W, (c) no facts about anything A might have had in mind while using W (i.e. no intentions, experiences, memories, images, or what have you), and (d) no facts concerning any dispositions which A may possess, can possibly determine whether A means one thing or another by W, or even, indeed, whether he means anything at all by the word. But if this is so then, as Kripke says (p. 265), there can be no such thing as meaning something by a word.

This, of course, is an intolerable conclusion, and to escape it we must turn the argument on its head, so to speak, and construe it in effect as a *reductio ad absurdum*: if the conclusion is unacceptable and the reasoning is valid (and Kripke argues most persuasively that it is valid), then there must be something wrong with the assumptions on which it is based. Kripke identifies two assumptions which are implicit in our normal use of the concept of meaning and active in the derivation of the sceptical paradox. First, the notion of *an individual's* meaning something by an expression is taken as a primitive notion: specifically, we take it that A's *meaning such-and-such by W* can properly be considered in isolation from, and as a phenomenon more primitive than, say, *the use to which W is put within a community*. The second tacit premiss which Kripke isolates is this: we assume that if a contingent assertion is true there must be some fact or facts, some determinate and specifiable state of the world in virtue

of which the assertion is true. It is in terms of its correspondence to the facts that we assign a truth-value to a contingent assertion. What Kripke's Wittgenstein has shown is that if we subscribe to either of these natural and plausible assumptions then the notion of meaning becomes unintelligible. They must therefore be given up and, in so far as they are partly constitutive of our intuitive concept of meaning, that too must be jettisoned.

These two assumptions come together most perniciously when in philosophy we turn our attention to assertions of the form: *A understands W* or *A means such-and-such by W*. We naturally take them to express a fact about a particular person, just as we naturally take sentences of the form: *event a caused event b* to express a relationship which holds between two particular events. Hume showed that if we restrict our attention to the particular events themselves there is simply no fact concerning either, or both, in virtue of which the one causes the other. The concept of cause is one which, in its primitive and prior form, relates event-types, not events considered in isolation. Likewise, Wittgenstein proposes, there is no fact concerning a person considered in isolation in virtue of which that person means something by the expressions he uses. The prior and primitive notion of meaning is one in which *essential* reference is made to a community of language users. Moreover, in so far as there is no determinate state of the world in virtue of whose obtaining sentences of the form *A means such-and-such by W* are true, we cannot account for the meaning of these sentences in terms of their truth-conditions. Wittgenstein's elegant solution to the sceptical paradox is thus to substitute for our intuitive and incoherent notion of meaning a more reputable notion in which appeal to truth-conditions is *replaced by* appeal to the practices of a community of language users.

On the basis of this reconstruction Kripke is then able to bring out very clearly the underlying unity shared by a number of different Wittgensteinian themes and doctrines. In particular he demonstrates the close thematic relation between the redundancy theory of truth, the emphasis on assertability-conditions, and the role assigned to such concepts as criteria, agreement, language-games, surveyability, rule-following, and forms of life. Perhaps most usefully of all, Kripke shows that the "private language argument" does not essentially concern a putative language that is characterized in terms of "the mental", "the inner", or "the subjective". For Kripke, surely rightly, a private language is merely a language characterized as spoken by an individual considered in isolation. The impossibility of a language which is "private" in a more restricted sense, that is, of a language "which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand", follows

immediately as a particular application of more general, and more interesting, principles.

This book, then, can be recommended: it is reliable, it is informative and, if only because of Kripke's contribution, it will certainly be influential.

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