

The Private Language Argument and the Analogy between Rules and Grounds

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Abstract. I identify one neglected source of support for a Kripkean reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: the analogy between rules and epistemic grounds and the existence of a Kripkean anti-privacy argument about epistemic grounds in *On Certainty*. This latter argument supports Kripke's claims that the basic anti-privacy argument in the *Investigations* (a) poses a question about the distinguishability of certain first-person attributions with identical assertability conditions, (b) concludes that distinguishability is provided by third-person evaluability, and (c) is a general argument, not one about a specific kind of alleged rules.

My purpose is to identify one neglected source of support for a broadly Kripkean interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*: the analogy between rules and epistemic grounds and the existence of a Kripkean anti-privacy argument about epistemic grounds in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty (OC)*.

Recall that Kripke, in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language (WRPL)*, sees in *PI* an argument for the “non-factuality” of attributions like ‘I am following a rule (in doing such and such)’ and ‘Jones is following a rule (in doing such and such)’. The basic Kripkean assumption is that, if the fact that I am following a rule (in doing such and such) exists, it must consist in part of an item that is non-conjecturally, “directly accessible” to me (*WRPL*, 40) and that “shows how I am justified” (*WRPL*, 11) (in doing such and such). A “mental expression” of the rule is “multiply interpretable” and cannot by itself be such an item, unless it consists of other “mental expressions” in whose employment I am following corresponding

rules (*WRPL*, 15-17). These may in turn consist of other “mental expressions”, but at some point this chain must end and I must find some expressions that guide my applications of the initial rule, either by themselves, which is impossible on account of their “multiple interpretability”, or through some other associated items.

However, a search through “directly accessible” candidates like sensations, impressions, etc. yields the result that there is no item that justifies me in my applications of a rule in new cases. Kripke concludes that rule-following attributions do not describe facts.

They do have assertability conditions, however. Simplifying a lot,

(R) I am following a rule (in doing *a*)

is assertable by me when I think I am following a rule (in doing *a*), and ‘Jones is following a rule (in doing *a*)’ is assertable by Smith when Smith sees Jones behaving in some way that seems rule-guided to Smith. According to Kripke, all these elements are already in place by the famous *PI* 202. In this section Wittgenstein simply claims that (R) and

(R*) I think I am following a rule (in doing *a*)

cannot be distinguished unless one postulates that my use of (R) is not “private”, i.e., that it can be evaluated by others in such a way that they can in principle disagree with my assertion (R). (R) and (R*) have the same assertability conditions, and in view of the non-factualist argument, they cannot be distinguished by pointing to two different facts they stand for. (R) and (R*) can be distinguished, however, when one observes that they have different third-person evaluation conditions.

There is at least one use of 'to know' under which it is a basic intuitive requisite on my knowing that p that I have an (epistemic) ground for believing that p . This use is singled out by Wittgenstein when he says that "One says "I know" when one is ready to give compelling grounds. "I know" relates to a possibility of demonstrating the truth" (OC 243). The attributions (R) and

(K) I know that p

share the feature that part of their intuitive content is given by an existential claim: 'There is a ground I have (for believing that p)' in the epistemic case, and 'There is a rule I follow (in doing a)' in the rule case. Further, in both cases we speak intuitively of the relation between ground and believing and the relation between rule and application as relations of "justification", understanding this term in a demanding epistemic way in the former case and in a broad way in the latter case.

In both cases my consideration of candidate justificatory items requires and involves a regress of justifications, but "justifications come to an end somewhere". In the epistemic case this means that, although the justificatory power of items such as the propositions that allegedly ground my belief that p depends intuitively on their being themselves justified by other grounds, in fact I must reach a point where the ensuing regress is stopped; at that point I will be faced with a groundless proposition or similar item. These items that are intuitively taken to be grounds (propositions, arguments, etc.) do not have justificatory power in themselves (without grounds for them). Nor have any such power other items that are not even grounds from an intuitive point of view, and that seem justificatorily

inert also from a philosophical point of view (such as sensations, “impressions”, etc.). Given all this, my belief that p is revealed as ultimately “blind”.

In the rules case Wittgenstein and Kripke note that, although the justificatory power of items such as the “mental expressions” of rules depends intuitively on my having other items by means of which I can justify my applications of them, in fact I must reach a point where the regress is stopped; at that point I will be faced with an item in the application of which I am not further guided by any other item. Given that these items are essentially like sensations or “impressions”, etc., that they do not have any justificatory power by themselves, my “application” of any of them will ultimately be “blind”. Wittgenstein himself points out that the rules case is analogous to the epistemic case in this regard (see *OC* 510-511, 111, 307).

These “end of justifications” arguments raise two analogous questions. When I perform a certain action a that is really blind even if it would intuitively be described as an application of a rule, (Q1) why am I following a rule by performing a , and not simply acting in what should apparently be described as a blind way, merely thinking that I am following a rule? When I accept a certain proposition p that is really accepted blindly by me even if it would intuitively be described as known or justifiably believed by me, (Q2) why do I know that p , and not merely embrace p with a simple sureness that should apparently be described as blind, merely thinking with sufficient certainty that I know that p ? These questions have counterparts in questions about attributions: (Q1') how, in the first case, does my assertion (R) substantively differ from my assertion (R*)? (Q2') how, in the second case, does my assertion (K) substantively differ from my assertion (K*)?

(K*) I am certain that *p*.

Kripke's Wittgenstein's answer to (Q1') is that (R) and (R*) do not differ in their describing different facts; and they don't differ in assertability conditions either.

They differ in that others could in principle disagree with my assertion (R) (but not with my assertion (R*)); if they agree with (R), this together with the fact that they could have disagreed implies that, even when they are both assertable, (R) and (R*) differ substantively. If this interpretation is correct, one might expect

Wittgenstein's answer to (Q2') to be that (K) and (K*) differ in that others can in principle disagree with my assertion (K) (but not with my assertion (K*)); if they agree with it, this together with the fact that they could have disagreed implies that, even when they are both assertable, (K) and (K*) differ substantively.

Wittgenstein's answer to (Q2') in *OC* seems to be the one that we might expect from the Kripkean analogy:

245. To whom does anyone say that he knows something? To himself, or to someone else. If he says it to himself, how is it distinguished from the assertion that he is *sure* that things are like that? There is no subjective sureness that I know something. The certainty is subjective, but not the knowledge. So if I say "I know that I have two hands", and that is not supposed to express just my subjective certainty, I must be able to satisfy myself that I am right. But I can't do that, for my having two hands is not less certain before I have looked at them than afterwards. (...) 250. My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it. That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hand as evidence for it. 251. Doesn't this mean: I shall proceed according to this belief unconditionally, and not let anything confuse me? 252. But it isn't just that / believe in this way that I have two hands, but that every reasonable person does. 253. At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded. 254. Any 'reasonable' person behaves like *this*.

This is significant in several respects. First, Wittgenstein implicates that the difference does not lie at the level of assertability conditions. In fact, he seems to infer from the “end of justifications” argument condensed in OC 245 (the proposition that I have two hands is for me a groundless proposition) that (K) and (K*) have essentially the same assertability conditions. And the fact that Wittgenstein poses the interesting distinguishability question in the form of (Q2’), and does not answer it straightforwardly by pointing to two different facts that (K) and (K*) stand for, of course strongly suggests that he presupposes a non-factualist view of epistemic attributions.

Second, Wittgenstein clearly points to the difference lying in what happens when what I say is not said ‘to myself’, i.e., in what happens when it is said to *others*. And he states that the difference lies in that others agree with me as to the acceptability of the relevant groundless proposition; of course, since this would be no difference unless they could in principle disagree, it is implied that it is these two circumstances together that distinguish (K) from (K*).

Third, Wittgenstein’s anti-privacy argument in OC is a completely general argument (“to whom does anyone say that he knows *something?*”), not one about a specific kind of propositions or of intuitive epistemic grounds (much less one about a specific kind of regularities in my behavior of accepting propositions). This supports the Kripkean view that the basic anti-privacy argument in *PI* is general, and not one about the specific kind of alleged justificatory items called ‘private ostensive definitions’.