

1 Kripke's Wittgenstein's Skepticism about Rules and Meaning

In Defense of the Standard Interpretation^{*}

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1 Introduction

It is agreed on all sides that the skeptic who takes center stage in Chapter 2 of Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* aims for a metaphysical (as opposed to merely epistemological) conclusion: That there is no fact in virtue of which, for example, I mean *addition* by "+," or, more radically still, that I do not mean *addition* by "+." How, then, to account for the overtly epistemological nature of the arguments that take up the bulk of Chapter 2: The arguments, for example, that question my knowledge that I mean *addition* (and not *quaddition*) by the "+" sign, or my claim that I am justified in responding to the query "68 + 57" with "125" (rather than "5")? In the secondary literature, the most common way of reconciling the epistemological argumentation and metaphysical conclusion of the skeptic's ruminations has been to see the epistemological argumentation as merely a "dramatic device" for developing a fundamentally metaphysical argument: The epistemological challenge – to defend your claim that you know that you mean addition and your claim that you are justified in answering "125" – takes place under conditions in which you are granted ideal epistemological access to all of the sorts of fact capable of constituting your meaning addition by "+." An epistemological argument operating under an assumption of ideal access in this way is effectively a metaphysical argument presented in an epistemological "guise," a "guise" which is, therefore, strictly speaking dispensable. In this chapter, I'll refer to this way of viewing the skeptical argument of Chapter 2 as the "standard

^{*} Versions of this chapter were presented at the New Zealand Association of Philosophy conference in Auckland 2019, the Normativity conference at Seoul National University in January 2020, the University of Otago in September 2020, and Victoria University of Wellington in May 2021. For comments and discussion, I'm grateful to the audiences on those occasions and to Rachel Cao, Ramon Das, Florian Demont, Matti Eklund, Hannah Ginsborg, Jinho Kang, Simon Keller, Ed Mares, Charles Pigden, Olivia Sultanesco, and Claudine Verheggen.

interpretation": Variants of it are proposed by, among others, Colin McGinn, Warren Goldfarb, Crispin Wright, and Paul Boghossian. As I will show, the standard interpretation appears to be mandated by a number of passages in Kripke's exegesis of the skeptical argument. Recently, however, the standard interpretation has been challenged in a stimulating and provocative discussion by Hannah Ginsborg. Ginsborg argues that the standard interpretation faces a number of insuperable objections and proposes an alternative interpretation in which the epistemological considerations in Kripke's Chapter 2 amount to more than a mere dispensable device for running a fundamentally metaphysical argument: Rather, according to Ginsborg, they constitute a fundamentally epistemological argument that features as an indispensable sub-argument in an overall argument to a metaphysical conclusion.¹ In this chapter, I will defend the standard interpretation in the face of Ginsborg's attack, and I'll argue that the standard interpretation fits the text of Kripke's Chapter 2 more smoothly than Ginsborg's alternative proposal. Furthermore, in addition to arguing for an unorthodox, more fundamentally epistemological reading of the skeptic's argument, Ginsborg also suggests that the skeptic's argument, construed as she construes it, can be defused via the deployment of a notion of primitive normativity. In Section 10, I will develop some objections to this use of the notion of primitive normativity.

2 The Standard Interpretation

To put the argument in an epistemological guise, we can focus on the justification of semantic judgments about the "+" sign and linguistic responses to particular arithmetical queries involving it.² Recall Kripke's famous example in which we are confronted by a skeptic who challenges us to respond to the query "68 + 57 = ?" and in which we are assumed not to have faced arithmetical queries in the past involving numbers greater than 56. When we answer "125," the skeptic replies that in order to be faithful to our past understanding of the "+" sign we ought rather to have answered "5," since by "+" we in fact meant *quaddition* (\oplus), where this is defined as follows:

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

¹ Ginsborg (2018).

² In what follows, "Kripke's skeptical argument" and "Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptical argument" refer to the argument of the skeptic in chapter 2 of Kripke (1982). (As is well known, Kripke himself does not endorse the argument or the solution outlined in chapter 3 [see 1982: 5], so strictly speaking this is inaccurate, but for ease of exposition, I ignore this complication in what follows.)

We now face the challenge of showing the skeptic that we don't mean quaddition, and the skeptic argues that there are no facts about our mental life, behavioral dispositions, or social history that we can cite in order to do this or in order to justify our answer "125" to the initial query. Speaking about this example, Kripke comments:

We have just summarized the problem in terms of the basis of my present particular response: what tells me that I should say '125' and not '5'? Of course the problem can be put equivalently in terms of the skeptical query regarding my present intent: nothing in my mental history establishes whether I meant plus or quus. So formulated, the problem may appear to be epistemological – how can anyone know which of these I meant? Given, however, that everything in my mental history is compatible both with the conclusion that I meant plus and with the conclusion that I meant quus, it is clear that the skeptical challenge is not really an epistemological one. It purports to show that nothing in my mental history or past behavior – not even what an omniscient God would know – could establish whether I meant plus or quus. But then it appears to follow that there was no *fact* about me that constituted my having meant plus rather than quus. How could there be, if nothing in my internal mental history or external behavior will answer the skeptic who supposes that in fact I meant quus? (Kripke 1982: 21)

We could capture the nerve of the argument here as follows:

(1a) If I mean addition by "+," then unlimited access to the potentially relevant evidence about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, and social history will allow me to justify the claim that I mean *addition* (and not, say, *quaddition*) by "+" and allow me to justify the answer "125" to the query "68 + 57 = ?"

(2a) Unlimited access to the potentially relevant evidence about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, and social history does not allow me to justify the claim that I mean *addition* (and not, say, *quaddition*) by "+" or to justify the answer "125" to the query "68 + 57 = ?"

So,

(3) It is not the case that I mean *addition* by "+."

Here, (1a) and (2a) are framed in terms of what I can and cannot *justify* vis-à-vis what I mean by "+" or how I ought to respond to "68 + 57," but the reference to unlimited access means that this apparently epistemological argument is simply a dramatization of an argument that is fundamentally metaphysical. As Kripke himself puts it:

Wittgenstein's skeptic argues that he knows of no fact about an individual that could constitute his state of meaning plus rather than quus. ... The skeptic does not argue that our own limitations of access to the facts prevent us from knowing something hidden. He claims that an omniscient being, with access to *all* available facts, still would not find any fact that differentiates between the plus and the quus hypotheses. ... Now the reference, in our exposition, to what an

omniscient being could or would know is merely a dramatic device. When the skeptic denies that even God, who knows all the facts, could know whether I meant plus or quus, he is simply giving colorful expression to his denial that there is any fact of the matter as to which I meant. (Kripke 1982: 39, 40–41)

Thus, the argument from (1a) and (2a) to (3) is effectively a dressed-up version of the following argument, in which there is no mention of justification or knowledge:

(1b) If I mean *addition* by “+,” then there is a fact about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, or social history which constitutes my meaning *addition* by “+.”

(2b) No fact about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, or social history constitutes my meaning *addition* by “+.”

So,

(3) It is not the case that I mean *addition* by “+.”

In the argument from (1a) and (2a) to (3), we have an argument in “epistemological guise” for a metaphysical conclusion that we could in principle derive from (1b) and (2b). In particular, the epistemological argumentation surrounding (2a) is simply a dispensable “dramatic device.” This is the core of the standard interpretation of the skeptical argument.^{3,4}

3 Ginsborg's “Epistemological” Interpretation of the Skeptical Argument

We can work toward outlining Ginsborg's alternative to the standard interpretation by outlining her construal of the famous skeptical argument in the first of Descartes' *Meditations*. According to Ginsborg, this goes as follows, where we take my knowledge that I'm currently sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper as the putative best case of a piece of empirical knowledge:

³ I take Wright (1984a) and Boghossian (1989) to be the paradigm proponents of the standard interpretation, but other examples of philosophers who appear to accept the standard interpretation would include McGinn (1984), Goldfarb (1985), Pettit (1990), Millikan (1990), Wilson (1994), Horwich (1995), and Zalabardo (1997). Note that although Wright and Boghossian agree in their view of the overall structure of the skeptic's argument, they disagree about the nature of the constraints that govern responses to it and over how the skeptical argument can best be answered. However, these differences don't concern us here.

⁴ Although the argument from (1a) and (2a) to (3) is formulated in epistemological terms, according to the standard interpretation – and adapting Lewis (1974: 333–334) – it is concerned with how *the facts* about a speaker's mental life, behavioral dispositions, etc. determine *the facts* about what he means by the expressions of his language.

(i) If I don't know that I'm awake (and not dreaming) then I don't know that I'm sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper.

Moreover,

(ii) No evidence that I am in principle capable of obtaining will allow me to justify the claim that I'm awake (and not dreaming).

So,

(iii) I have no justification for the claim that I'm awake (and not dreaming).

So,

(iv) I don't know that I'm awake (and not dreaming).

So,

(v) I don't know that I'm sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper.

So,

(vi) I don't know anything.

Note that the Cartesian skeptic concludes that I don't *know* that I'm sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper, not that it is not the case that I'm sitting by the fire holding a piece of paper.

According to Ginsborg, Kripke's skeptical argument incorporates an analogue of the argument from (i) to (v). This can be set out as follows:

(I) If I don't know that I meant *addition* (and not, say, *quaddition*) by "+," then I don't know that I ought to answer "125" to accord with my previous uses of "+."

Here, the quaddition hypothesis plays the role of the dreaming hypothesis in the *Meditations*, and the claim that I ought to answer "125" is the analogue of the judgment that I'm sitting by the fire, etc.⁵ The argument continues:

(II) No evidence that I am in principle capable of obtaining will allow me to justify the claim that I meant *addition* (and not, say, *quaddition*) by "+."

So,

(III) I have no justification for the claim that I meant *addition* by "+."

So,

(IV) I don't know that I meant *addition* by "+."

⁵ Note, though, that there are dissimilarities between the two. The dreaming hypothesis casts into doubt any belief about the external world (for Descartes operates with the principle that, if I don't know that I am not dreaming that p, I don't know that p), while the *quus* hypothesis doesn't have this generality: It is tailored to the particular use that is at issue in the conversation with the skeptic. (I'm grateful here to Olivia Sultanescu.)

So,

(V) I don't know that I ought to answer "125" to accord with my previous uses of "+."

So far, we have an analogue of the epistemological argument in the first of the *Meditations*, but Ginsborg acknowledges that Kripke's skeptic goes on from this to derive a metaphysical or constitutive conclusion from a claim (VI) about how meaning and knowledge of correct use are related:

(VI) In order to mean something by an expression E, I need to know how I ought to use E to accord with my previous uses.

Given (V) and (VI), we can move to the conclusion,

(VII) I don't mean anything by E.

The argument is still conceived of as an argument for a metaphysical conclusion, but the key respect in which the skeptic's argument, as characterized by Ginsborg, differs from that as characterized by the standard interpretation, is that in Ginsborg's interpretation, the argument contains an indispensable sub-argument (from [I] to [V]) which is a straightforward analogue of the epistemological skeptic's argument in the first *Meditation*.

It might be worthwhile at this point to contrast Ginsborg's epistemological reading of the skeptical argument with instances of the standard interpretation which nevertheless impose epistemological constraints on the selection of putative meaning-constituting facts. Versions of this latter variant of the standard interpretation have been proposed by Crispin Wright (1989b) and José Zalabardo (1997). In Wright's case, the first premise of the argument would be:

(W1) If I mean *addition* by "+," then there is a fact about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, or social history which constitutes my meaning *addition* by "+," and this fact must be consistent with the non-inferential and first-person authoritative nature of self-knowledge of meaning.⁶

The argument then proceeds as before: No fact capable of cohering with the intuitive first-person epistemology of meaning can be found, so that the conclusion once again is that I don't mean addition by "+." In Zalabardo's case, the first premise of the argument would be:

(Z1) If I mean *addition* by "+," then there is a fact about my mental life, behavioral dispositions, or social history which constitutes my meaning *addition* by

⁶ See Section 1.4 for more detail on this.

“+,” with which I can consciously engage in a way capable of justifying my answers to arithmetical queries involving “+.”⁷

And the argument then proceeds as before. In both cases, constraints are imposed which concern epistemological notions like self-knowledge or justification and which serve to narrow down the range of candidate meaning-constituting facts that can be appealed to. But the structure of the argument remains as before. Whereas in Ginsborg’s interpretation, the argument as a whole contains a sub-argument ([I] to [V]) with a purely epistemological interim conclusion ([V]), this is not the case in the versions of the skeptical argument proposed by Wright and Zalabardo.⁸

Ginsborg develops three objections to the standard interpretation. She then argues that although her preferred epistemological version of the skeptic’s argument avoids the objections to the standard interpretation, it can be resisted using a notion of “primitive normativity.” I will defend the standard interpretation against Ginsborg’s objections, raise some objections to her epistemological version, and argue that the notion of “primitive normativity” in fact fails to disable it.

4 Ginsborg’s Central Objection

Ginsborg argues:

[T]he metaphysical reading allows Kripke’s challenge to be too easily answered. It can simply be pointed out that Kripke is operating with an unwarrantedly narrow conception of fact, or that he is refusing to accept that meaning facts could be primitive and irreducible (2018: 153),

and mentions Goldfarb (1985), McGinn (1984), Wright (1989a, 1989b), and Boghossian (1989) as proposing responses along these lines.

Does construing the skeptical argument in the standard metaphysical way make it too easy to respond to? I think not: This would be so only if there were no constraints that the non-reductionist response had to satisfy. On Wright’s reading, in particular, there are such constraints: Wright argues that before the non-reductionist response can be deemed acceptable, it has to be squared with the intuitive epistemology of self-ascriptions of meaning and intention, which, according to Wright, is first-person authoritative and non-inferential. For example, I don’t

⁷ On Zalabardo’s reading, then, there is an internalist constraint on the selection of candidate meaning-constituting facts (see Zalabardo 1997, sections IV and V).

⁸ Ginsborg herself counts both Wright and Zalabardo as proposing versions of the standard interpretation. See Ginsborg (2018: 152) on Wright and Ginsborg (2018: 164 n.30) on Zalabardo.

have to infer that I intend to travel to Moeraki this weekend, and my avowal that I do so intend ordinarily stands as correct by default unless someone produces concrete evidence to the contrary (perhaps evidence that I'm lying, self-deceived, or whatever), and Wright suggests that the intuitive epistemology of self-ascriptions of meaning and understanding is similar.

Ginsborg in fact considers this reply later in her paper and argues that it does not affect her point:

[W]hen the challenge is framed in this metaphysical way [and subject to epistemological constraints], it is all too easy to respond by appealing to the existence of irreducible meaning facts with just the epistemological properties specified: we can say that it is simply in the nature of meaning facts that they are ... first-personally knowable. (2018: 161)⁹

In response, it can be argued that Ginsborg fails to appreciate the depth of the difficulty that Wright is grappling with: the problem is not simply that of accommodating the intuitive first-person epistemology of meaning and intention but doing so in a way that also accommodates what Wright calls their "disposition-like theoreticity" (Wright 2001a: 87):

[How] is it possible to be effortlessly, non-inferentially and generally reliably authoritative about psychological states which have no distinctive occurrent phenomenology *and which have to answer, after the fashion of dispositions, to what one says and does in situations so far unconsidered?* (Wright 1989a: 150, emphasis added)

Rule-following, meaning, and understanding are like character traits such as courage insofar as "the proof of the pudding is in subsequent performance" (Wright 1987: 137). The ascription of courage to me at the start of the war will be deemed to have been false if, in the absence of some suitable explanation why not, at the first sign of the enemy I take to my heels. This meshes with the fact that self-ascriptions of courage do not display the intuitive first-person epistemology of meaning and intention, and, indeed, as Wright observes, "the confident self-ascription, without behavioral grounds, of intelligence, courage, patience or endurance is, so far from being authoritative, a mere conceit" (1987: 136). Likewise, though, the ascription to me of understanding "+" to mean addition will be deemed to have been false if, in the absence of some substantial explanation why not, I begin confidently answering "5" to queries when the numbers involved exceed some specific numerical threshold; and the ascription to me of intending to follow the rule for addition of 2 will be

⁹ Ginsborg also mentions guidance and justification here, but I've dropped this in order to focus on Wright's discussion of first-person authority.

deemed to have been false if, when I reach 1,000, I confidently continue 1,004, 1,008, 1,012 So we require a substantive account of *how*, nonetheless, meaning and intention can have the intuitive first person epistemology that they do, one that is non-inferential and first-person authoritative. Providing this would appear to be far from being “all too easy.”^{10,11}

5 Ginsborg’s Second Objection

Ginsborg picks up on a comment Wright makes in explaining why Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s skeptic is merely an instrument for getting to a metaphysical conclusion:

[T]he overarching thought behind [the skeptical dialectic] is ... that claims of a certain kind cannot be supposed to deal in matters of real fact if someone could know all possible facts which might conceivably constitute the truth of such a claim yet be unable to defeat a skeptic concerning his knowledge of its truth. (Wright 2001a: 82)

She replies:

However, the “overarching thought” might seem questionable to those lacking verificationist sympathies. Why should your inability to justify your belief that you meant addition, even given the knowledge that Kripke’s skeptic allows you, entail that your belief lacks factual content? (2018: 154)¹²

¹⁰ Wright himself (1989b) develops a “judgement-dependent” account of meaning and intention to explore how a non-reductionist might rise to this challenge. Note too that some quietist non-reductionists (e.g. McDowell) might actually welcome the “all-too-easy” claim, since they think that the question at the heart of the skeptical challenge – “How is meaning possible?” – is not even a genuine question (I’m grateful here to Charles Pigden). Either way, with Wright’s anti-realist or McDowell’s quietist realist, the “all-too-easy” objection fails to bite.

¹¹ Another way of putting the point here would be to observe that Ginsborg’s second objection works only if Wright fails to get the better of McGinn in his (1989a). Wright criticizes McGinn on grounds of “philosophical stone-kicking” for failing to appreciate that a non-reductionist response to the skeptic’s argument has to square the first-person epistemology of meaning with its “disposition-like theoreticity.” Note that although Boghossian in his (1989) does not to the same extent emphasize the need to square the first-person epistemology of meaning with its disposition-like theoreticity, he still mentions self-knowledge as a problem the non-reductionist has to contend with and suggests, moreover, that the non-reductionist faces the far from trivial task of according content properties a role in the rationalistic explanation of action in a way that does not imply the essential incompleteness of physics. See Boghossian (1989: 186–187).

¹² Ginsborg goes on immediately after this comment to reiterate her previous point about the reading leaving open the too-readily available non-reductionist response, but my points above about first-person epistemology and disposition-like theoreticity speak to this.

In response, it's not clear to me that anything like a general and objectionable form of verificationism is required to drive the standard reading of Kripke's argument. Wright doesn't need the general idea that if there is a fact of the matter in a particular domain then that fact must be in principle accessible to us if we are granted idealized evidence-acquiring powers. All he needs is the *specific* claim that that is so vis-à-vis facts about meaning (as, arguably, it would be in the case of putatively moral or aesthetic facts). It may be possible to challenge this specific claim in the meaning case, but it doesn't seem to me to depend in any obvious way on any *general* verificationist sympathies.

To put the point another way, the metaphysical reading can proceed via Wright's "overarching thought" only if the relevant facts are guaranteed to be accessible on the basis of unlimited access to the relevant evidence: without this, there will be no license for the move from (2a) to (3) in the "epistemological" variant of the standard interpretation of the skeptical argument as outlined above. In the case of meaning, the idea that there is such a guarantee seems intuitively acceptable: the idea that the truth about meaning might be potentially evidence-transcendent is not an appealing one. The same plausibly holds in the cases of morals and humor, as Wright himself notes:

[I]t might seem implausible to claim that the sense of humour is a faculty which enables us to track independently constituted comic qualities; but it would ascend to a quite different order of implausibility to add that the obtaining of such qualities may altogether transcend, even in principle, our abilities of recognition. A similar point applies to morals. There are, no doubt, kinds of moral realism which do have the consequence that moral reality may transcend all possibility of detection. But it is surely not essential to any view worth regarding as realist about morals that it incorporate a commitment to that idea. (Wright 1992: 8–9)

However, resistance to the idea that truth is potentially evidence-transcendent in the case of morals and comedy needn't commit us to the idea that truth is essentially epistemically constrained across the board; indeed, Wright thinks that it is a distinct advantage of his brand of pluralism about truth that it is able to accommodate this variability (Wright 1992: Chapters 1 and 2).¹³ Of course, a consequence of this is that analogues of the strategy adopted in the epistemological variant of the standard interpretation of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptical argument will not be available in areas where the idea that truth is epistemically constrained is not attractive; this, however, is something that

¹³ See Boghossian (2001: 237), where a similar point is made vis a vis epistemic facts.

proponents of the standard interpretation of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptical argument can happily accept.^{14,15}

6 Ginsborg's Third Objection

Ginsborg writes:

[I]t is hard to believe that, without the skeptic and the quaddition hypothesis, Kripke's challenge would have been able to engage the interest of so many philosophers. Although this is not itself decisive, it seems reasonable to suspect that the skeptical dialectic is not just novel packaging for a familiar product, but corresponds to something philosophically distinctive about Kripke's challenge, something that is lost if we read the challenge in a way which makes the skeptic dispensable. (Ginsborg 2018: 153)

This appears to me to underplay the degree of creativity and ingenuity that can be involved in constructing vivid thought-experiments in order to bring philosophical problems to life, even if the thought-experiments are strictly speaking dispensable and the relevant problems can in principle be formulated without their aid. Philosophy is replete with instances of this: The Cave Dwellers in Book VII of Plato's *Republic*,¹⁶ Putnam's Twin-Earth (Putnam 1975), Burge's Arthritis (Burge 1979), Davidson's Swampman (Davidson 1987), the Beetle-in-the-Box of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* §293, Williams's Jim and the Indians (Williams 1973), and the list could go on.

However, it might be objected that these don't appear to be examples of dispensable *epistemological* vehicles usable in the pursuit of *metaphysical* conclusions and that it is examples of this that are required to speak to Ginsborg's worry. I'm not entirely convinced by this objection, but we can reply to it in any event by citing examples of arguments that do use epistemological vehicles to establish metaphysical conclusions in ways that offer structural parallel's with Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptic's argument as standardly construed.

¹⁴ The exception will be philosophers who advocate the idea that truth is globally epistemically constrained. These are few in number: Wright, for example, does not hold this global view of truth as everywhere epistemically constrained (though the view that it is is sometimes erroneously attributed to him (see e.g. Horgan and Timmons (2006: 277 n.15))).

¹⁵ Note that (1a) in §2 is in fact a little weaker than the principle that Wright proposes at (2001a: 82), insofar as (1a) as explicitly formulated concerns only *truth* while the principle in (2001a: 82) concerns *truth-aptnitude*. For our present purposes, nothing of importance turns on this.

¹⁶ And the corresponding allegory toward the end of *Phaedo* (at 109b) in which humans are unaware of a purer world above them.

A clear example is provided by Frank Jackson's "Knowledge Argument" against physicalism (Jackson 1982, 1986). In these papers, Jackson uses the example of "Black and White Mary" to argue that there are aspects of reality – in particular, facts about the nature of our experiences of colors – that are not explicable in purely physicalistic terms. Now one could frame the anti-physicalist argument in terms of the determination of facts about the relevant characteristics of color experience by the physical facts, without mentioning Black and White Mary or the knowledge she allegedly acquires on stepping out of her seclusion. The fact that thus stated (i.e. without Black and White Mary) the argument would not have generated such widespread interest does not require that the Knowledge Argument featuring Mary is indispensable. Philosophical creativity is often a matter of taking an argument or set of concerns and bringing it (or them) vividly to life by deploying a compelling but in principle dispensable vehicle for doing so, and there are cases of this in which metaphysical conclusions are pursued via epistemological vehicles. The existence of alternative formulations of the anti-physicalist argument that don't deploy something like Black and White Mary and the associated epistemological claims don't deprive Jackson of the philosophical kudos he deserves for coming up with the compelling formulation of the argument in which she appears.

Other examples of philosophers aiming to establish metaphysical or constitutive conclusions via in principle dispensable epistemological vehicles might include: Thomas Nagel's (1974) anti-physicalist argument in "What is it Like to be a Bat?"; John Searle's (1980) "Chinese Room" argument, attempting to establish that "instantiating a computer program is never by itself a sufficient condition of intentionality" (Searle 1980: 417) and to challenge the thesis that "mental processes are computational processes over formally defined elements" (1980: 422); W. V. Quine's (1960) "gavagai" example and discussion of radical translation, arguing that there are no facts about fine-grained meaning or synonymy (beyond Quine's notions of stimulus-meaning and stimulus-synonymy).

Insofar as Kripke's skeptical challenge and the ensuing dialectic concerning the *quus* hypothesis are examples of a relatively familiar philosophical phenomenon – the bringing to life of metaphysical issues and arguments via vivid, though in principle dispensable, epistemological vehicles – Ginsborg's third objection to the standard interpretation appears to be unconvincing.

Overall, then, the standard construal of the skeptic's argument as fundamentally metaphysical can withstand the three objections which Ginsborg raises against it.

7 **An *Ad Hominem* Objection to Ginsborg's "Epistemological" Interpretation**

I will argue that if the standard, metaphysical interpretation of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptic's argument is susceptible to Ginsborg's main objection, then so is Ginsborg's own, fundamentally epistemological reading of the argument.¹⁷

Ginsborg herself provides a lucid formulation of this train of thought:

Now a critic of Kripke who accepted the epistemological-skeptical reading I have offered of the argument might here propose an epistemological variant of the charge of reductionism. Perhaps Kripke is failing to recognize, not just that there can be primitive facts of meaning, but that we have a primitive capacity to know that such facts obtain. In that case you can respond to the skeptic's challenge "How do you know you meant addition?" by saying simply "I just know I meant addition; no explanation or justification necessary." (2018: 158–159)

However, she goes on to argue that it is not compelling:

[T]he availability of this response, unlike the original charge of reductionism, is not a weakness in Kripke's argument specifically but rather a feature of skeptical arguments generally. We might equally well respond to the external-world skeptic's dreaming or brain-in-a-vat hypothesis by saying "I just know I'm awake now" or "I just know I have a body." To respond this way is not to answer the skeptical challenge but to refuse to take it seriously, and it is no objection to Kripke's skeptical argument that it is open to this kind of rejection. (2018: 159)

It is difficult to know what to make of this passage. It surely cannot just be saying that construed in Ginsborg's preferred epistemological fashion the skeptical argument is prone to an objection (that there is an "all too easy" response to it), but that this is an objection to which all forms of epistemological skeptical argument are prone.¹⁸ Depending on how it goes, this may mean that Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptic's argument is open to an objection, but an objection to which all arguments of the same sort are susceptible. This seems weak: an objection directed at one argument of a particular type isn't somehow undermined just because it applies to all other arguments of the same type.

¹⁷ The argument is only *ad hominem* because – as argued immediately above – Ginsborg's argument that the standard interpretation is susceptible to an "all too easy" non-reductionist response is unsuccessful.

¹⁸ A non-reductionist reply to a metaphysical challenge regarding putative facts of type F cites the existence of an F-type fact in reply. The analogue of this in the case of a fundamentally epistemological challenge to knowledge of F-type facts involves in effect a form of non-inferentialism: the citation of knowledge of F-type states of affairs, viewing this as something we have in virtue of a primitive knowledge-acquiring capacity, with no attempt to confer epistemic authority on F-type judgments by viewing them as inferred from some other, independently secure, pieces of knowledge.

Ginsborg's thought seems to be, rather, that whereas a non-reductionist response to a metaphysical challenge is sometimes legitimate, a non-inferentialist response to an epistemological challenge is always simply "to refuse to take it [the challenge] seriously." On the metaphysical interpretation of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptic's argument, then, there is a potentially genuine response ready to hand (non-reductionism), while this is not so on the argument construed as fundamentally epistemological. However, this seems implausible: how plausible is it to see a non-inferentialist response to an epistemological challenge as *always* unacceptable, as not even *potentially* genuine? Indeed, the relevant argument of Wright's here is couched in explicitly epistemological terms. Wright takes the "rules of the game" imposed by the skeptic to require that any response to his questioning of your claim to know that you mean, for example, addition by "+" must proceed by inferring that knowledge from knowledge of states of affairs which can be characterized without recourse to the notion of content, and he writes:

Are not such rules guaranteed to ensure success for a Kripke-style skeptic in any case where a contested subject matter is thought of as known non-inferentially? If the sufficient and adequate ground of my knowledge that P is precisely my non-inferential apprehension of the very fact that P, then it is to be expected that I may fare badly if in discussion with someone who doubts that P I am allowed to proceed only by reference to considerations of a quite different kind, considerations which could in principle at best defeasibly warrant an inference that P. (Wright 2001a: 84)

And again

[I]t cannot always be possible to justify a presumed genre of knowledge "from without" in the way the skeptic is here demanding. At any rate, it is obvious enough that, if we were to allow the propriety quite generally of this skeptical move, the results would be calamitous. Imagine, for example, a skeptic who questions a claim about my former perceptions, say, "Yesterday, I saw it raining." And suppose the ground rules are as for the dialogue with Kripke's skeptic; that is, I am to be permitted to adduce any relevant fact so long as I do not thereby presuppose that there is such a thing as knowledge of what I formerly perceived – since it is of belief in the very existence of that genre of knowledge that the skeptic is demanding justification. So I cannot simply claim to remember what I perceived: my ammunition will be restricted to my present *seeming-memories*, the presently available testimony of others, presently accessible putative traces, like damp ground and meteorological office and newspaper records. It ought to be a straightforward, if tedious, exercise for the skeptic to accommodate all that without granting me the truth of my claim about my perception of yesterday's weather. So I can know "all relevant facts" without knowing anything about what I formerly perceived. So there is no fact of the matter about what I formerly perceived. So, since the arguments will work just as well in the future, when now is "then," there is no fact of the matter about what I

presently perceive. So, since the argument applies to all of us, there is no such thing as perceptual knowledge. “There’s glory for you!” (Wright 1984a: 110)

Wright is here rejecting any constraint that restricts us, in attempting to defeat the skeptic about meaning, to “considerations which could in principle defeasibly warrant an inference” to a semantic claim; and the rejection of this constraint entails that sometimes, at least, a non-inferentialist reply to an epistemological challenge can be genuine. The challenge – which Wright takes McGinn to shirk, and which he attempts to address in his own judgment-dependent account of meaning and intention – is to see *how* a non-inferentialist response to the skeptical challenge can be developed in a way that accommodates their “disposition-like theoreticity.”

Thus, contra Ginsborg, there is no asymmetry of the kind she canvasses between the skeptical argument standardly construed and the skeptical argument construed as she construes it. This completes our *ad hominem* argument against Ginsborg’s interpretation of the skeptical argument.

8 Against the Epistemological Interpretation

Thus far, we have concentrated on defending the standard reading of the skeptical argument against Ginsborg’s objection. Arguably, a case can be made that certain key passages in Kripke’s book fit the standard interpretation much better than Ginsborg’s epistemological alternative. These are passages in which Kripke describes the skepticism as metaphysical rather than epistemological. One such key passage is:

[T]he problem may appear to be epistemological – how can anyone know which of these I meant? Given, however, that everything in my mental history is compatible both with the conclusion that I meant plus and with the conclusion that I meant quus, it is clear that the skeptical challenge is not really an epistemological one. It purports to show that nothing in my mental history or past behavior – not even what an omniscient God would know – could establish whether I meant plus or quus. But then it appears to follow that there was no *fact* about me that constituted my having meant plus rather than quus. (1982: 21)

Ginsborg realizes that this passage has to be explained away, and she writes:

When Kripke explicitly describes the skepticism as metaphysical rather than epistemological (1982: 21; see also 38–39), his aim is to distinguish the metaphysical conclusion that there is no fact of your meaning addition from the epistemological conclusion that you do not know that you meant addition, not to distinguish the metaphysical conclusion from the epistemological conclusion that you do not know that “125” conforms to your previous usage. (2018: 159)

So her claim is that in this passage Kripke is distinguishing the metaphysical *conclusion* of the argument from an epistemological *conclusion*, rather than a metaphysical argument from an indispensable epistemological sub-argument (with the conclusion that I don't know that I ought to answer "125" to conform to my previous usage), so that the passage is consistent with the falsity of the standard interpretation and the truth of Ginsborg's alternative reading. However, this is not borne out by a closer look at the relevant passage. Let's look again at the passage, this time focusing on the phrase emphasized in bold:

[T]he problem may appear to be epistemological – how can anyone know which of these I meant? Given, however, that everything in my mental history is compatible both with the conclusion that I meant plus and with the conclusion that I meant quus, it is clear that the skeptical challenge is not really an epistemological one. It purports to show that nothing in my mental history or past behavior – not even what an omniscient God would know – could establish whether I meant plus or quus. **But then it appears to follow that** there was no *fact* about me that constituted my having meant plus rather than quus. (1982: 21, emphasis in bold added)

The emphasis in bold here makes it clear that the reference to the omniscient God appears as a *premise* in the argument to the conclusion that there is no fact of your meaning addition, not in the conclusion, so it can't simply be reiterating the point that the conclusion is metaphysical. This fits the standard interpretation perfectly, since the invocation of the being with omniscient access to all there is to know about your mental history and past behavior connects straightforwardly to premise (2a) (and hence also premise [2b]) in the standard interpretation. Ginsborg thus fails in her attempt to explain away Kripke's remarks in the relevant passage.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ginsborg goes on to reflect on other passages where epistemological considerations are in play, and argues (i) that these can be accommodated in her epistemological interpretation and (ii) that there are problems in attempting to accommodate them in the standard interpretation (in which the selection of a meaning constituting fact is subject to epistemological constraints). I won't engage with (i) as I think my remark immediately above concerning (1982: 21) is enough to justify the standard interpretation over Ginsborg's alternative, and I won't engage with (ii) since at this point Ginsborg simply refers to her central objection to the standard interpretation which has been dealt with in §4. So the appearance of God in Kripke's text suggests that the standard interpretation is on the mark: Ginsborg's attempt to explain it away is unsuccessful. Perhaps one could try to find a role for God, thought of as a being omniscient with respect to all of the relevant evidence, in the purely epistemological argument from (I) to (V), perhaps with respect to premise (II). However, it is far from obvious how this would go – the argument is meant to concern *our* capacity to secure knowledge, not a being with superior cognitive powers to ours – and the fact that there is no role for God to play in the first of Descartes' *Meditations* (other than to contrast with the "evil genius") suggests that this is not a promising line of defense for Ginsborg.

We might even go further than the defense of the standard interpretation mounted thus far and argue that the boot is altogether on the other foot: given that epistemological skepticism has been subjected to a vast battery of responses of one sort or another since the founding of modern epistemology by Descartes in the seventeenth century, Ginsborg's construal of Kripke's Wittgenstein's skeptical argument as fundamentally epistemological leaves it open to this battery of counter-arguments. It could well be, then, that the standard metaphysical interpretation better captures Kripke's remark that the argument that is given by his skeptic is "the most radical and original skeptical problem that philosophy has seen to date" (Kripke 1982: 60). An argument that could potentially be disabled by responses to the skeptical argument of the first *Meditation* would hardly merit the designation "A new form of skepticism."^{20,21}

9 Ginsborg's Response to the Skeptical Argument

Although Ginsborg argues that her epistemological reading of Kripke's skeptical argument is better placed than the standard reading to recognize its *prima facie* force, she nevertheless holds that there is a way to escape its devastating consequences. This involves the notion of what Ginsborg calls "primitive normativity," "the idea that we can make sense of a notion of conformity to previous use that is independent of conformity to previous meaning – and, more generally, of conformity to a rule grasped in one's previous use" (2018: 162).²² The idea is that a present use of an expression can accord (or fail to accord) with one's previous uses of an expression, in a sense that is independent of any assumptions

²⁰ Indeed, it may well be that these considerations leave Ginsborg's interpretation open to an "all-too-easy" objection of its own: if the argument of the semantic skeptic relies on an notion of justification according to which the mere possibility of doubt undermines knowledge, the argument can be rejected by pointing out how artificial and inflated that notion of justification is. Another question worth asking concerns the relationship between the skeptical argument in Kripke's Wittgenstein and Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of translation. Kripke himself notes the parallels and contrasts at a number of places (see e.g. Kripke 1982: 14–15, 56–57). Does Ginsborg's epistemological reading of Kripke's Wittgenstein carry over to Quine?

²¹ Another question for Ginsborg's interpretation concerns the "skeptical solution" to the skeptical argument that Kripke expounds in Chapter 3. Defenders of the standard interpretation usually take this to involve a kind of non-factualism about ascriptions of meaning, and it is relatively straightforward to see how this might block the skeptical argument as standardly conceived (see Miller 2010a). How exactly, for Ginsborg, does the skeptical solution outlined in chapter 3 of Kripke (1982) connect with the skeptical argument as she understands it? And what becomes of the argument against private (or solitary) language? I'm grateful to Ed Mares for raising these issues.

²² See also Ginsborg (2010), (2011a), (2011b), (2012), (2020), (2022), and in particular §4 of Ginsborg (2020).

about what anyone understood that expression to mean in the past. In application to the case that takes center stage in Kripke's presentation:

It is possible for you to hold that "125" is the appropriate response to " $68 + 57$ " in the light of your previous history of responding to "+" questions irrespective of what, if anything, you meant when you used the expression previously. So you can concede to the skeptic that you meant quaddition, and hence that, in saying "125," you are failing to accord with what you meant in the past, and still maintain that "125" accords with your previous uses of "+." Regardless of what you meant when you used the "+" sign in the past, the appropriate way to go on from the sequence of your past responses to "+" questions is to respond to " $68 + 57$ " with "125" and not "5." (Ginsborg 2018: 161–162)

Recall that the first premise in the skeptic's argument, as construed by Ginsborg was:

(I) If I don't know that I meant *addition* (and not, say, *quaddition*) by "+," then I don't know that I ought to answer "125" to accord with my previous uses of "+."

Ginsborg uses the notion of primitive normativity to deny this:

Kripke is wrong to assume that, in order to be confident that "125" is "metalinguistically correct"—that it conforms to your previous uses of "+"—you must know that you meant addition rather than quaddition in those previous uses. (2018: 161)

In other words, one could use the notion of primitive normativity to concede that the antecedent of the skeptic's (I) might be true while rejecting the consequent as false.

Ginsborg's idea is that the knowledge of how one ought to use an expression in order to use it meaningfully, is knowledge of how to use it to accord with one's previous uses, where, since the relevant previous uses are to be characterized independently of any assumptions about what you formerly meant, the notion of "accord" in play is primitive, and not a notion of accord with meaning.²³

I will argue that Ginsborg's response to the skeptical argument, thus read, is unsuccessful because it mischaracterizes the type of knowledge of normative accord that is necessary for one's uses of linguistic expressions to count as meaningful.

In Kripke's example, in order to mean what I do by, for example, "+" I need to know that I ought to respond to the " $68 + 57$ " query with

²³ This is especially clear in the discussion of the adult at (2011b: 240): "That an adult counting by twos conceives of herself as following the add-two rule, and takes '42' to accord with that rule, does not exclude her taking '42' to fit the preceding series *simpliciter*, in a way which does not depend on the assumption that she was following the add-two rule rather than a quadd-like variant."

“125” rather than “5” to accord with my previous uses of “+.” Note, first, that by “previous usage” here, Ginsborg means “not just your own utterances of and responses to linguistic expressions, but all uses that you have observed, including those of your parents and teachers” (2018: 157). This immediately raises the question whether the kind of knowledge – of how to use expressions in order to accord with past usage – is even possible to the extent required by Ginsborg. For one thing, it would only make sense to ascribe it to a speaker if they knew what their past use, described independently of meaning, actually was. Try it yourself: can you give me such an account of your previous use of “+”? Even in the past 24 hours? A negative answer here is all the more likely given the broadening of the notion to include not only your own uses but also those that you have observed! Indeed, even putting the issue of knowledge of past use to one side, it seems far-fetched even to ascribe to speakers *beliefs* about their past uses of “+.” But if speakers don’t have beliefs about their past use of a sign, it makes little sense to ascribe to them knowledge of how to use expressions to accord with their – and their parents and teachers – past use. On the other hand, matters stand differently when we lift the restriction prohibiting the use of the notion of meaning in characterizing past usage (or what it is that my current use ought to accord with). I certainly do have a belief (and possibly knowledge) of my past usage of “+”: as I used it in the past I meant addition, as, I assume, did my parents and teachers.

A further problem stems from the fact that even competent speakers of the same language are unlikely to have the same history when it comes to past usage of expressions of their language, construed in accordance with Ginsborg’s restriction. Take Smith and Jones to be ordinary speakers of English, imagine them in the scenario that takes center stage in Kripke where they face the query “ $68 + 57 = ?$,” and consider:

- (a) Both Smith and Jones ought to answer “125.”
- (b) The answer that they each ought to give is determined by what primitively accords with their past use of “+.”
- (c) Their past use is different: they have different histories of past use of “+.”

The third proposition is arguably true, and Ginsborg holds that (a) and (b) are true too, but how is it possible for (a), (b), and (c) to be true simultaneously? How can it be that how they ought to use “+” in the primitive sense is the same, when this is a matter of primitive accord with past use and their histories of past use are different (perhaps even radically different)? The fact that speakers’ histories of use – characterized without recourse to the notion of meaning – are different is masked

by the fact that in the examples Ginsborg uses to explain the notion of primitive normativity, the uses with which a speaker's current response primitively accords turns out to instantiate the rule grasp of which is eventually attributed to the speaker. For example, in the case discussed in (2011b: 233–235) – that of a child who does not yet mean add 2 by “+2”²⁴ – it is assumed that the child's previous history of use in expanding the series is

2, 4, 6, 8, ..., 40

that is, de facto in accord with the rule “Add 2!” as ordinarily understood. In a real life case, however, the child's previous use is just as likely to be more like

2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, ..., 40

Are we to hold that in this latter case “42” is the continuation of the series that primitively accords with the previous use? This seems unlikely given that we want “42” to be the continuation that primitively accords with the previous use in the former case. On the other hand, though, if the latter case is discounted because it contains a “mistake” – insofar as one element (“15”) in the series fails to accord with “Add 2!” as ordinarily understood – we seem to have retreated from primitive normativity back toward to a notion of normative accord with meaning.

Ginsborg's response to the skeptical argument, construed as she construes it, thus faces the following three problems. First, that speakers won't generally be able to remember more than a small fragment of their history of previous uses (when this is characterized without recourse to the notion of meaning). Second, that no two speakers are likely to have the same histories of previous use. Third, that a speaker's history of previous use is likely to contain “mistakes” (by the lights of the understanding of the expression that we want to attribute to them). Clearly, the way out of the impasse is to cut down the multiplicity of histories of previous use by focusing on a history of use in which the relevant expression is used

²⁴ There's no suggestion in Ginsborg's description of the example that the child eventually means anything other than what “+2” means as ordinarily understood (i.e. add 2). Likewise in the example featuring “green” which follows immediately after: the child in the example “is not *yet* obviously in command of colour concepts” and “has not *yet* mastered use of the word ‘green’” (Ginsborg 2011b: 235, emphasis added), and there is no suggestion that the concept the child will eventually be deemed to grasp is anything other than the concept *green* or that she will mean anything other than green by “green.” (Likewise the adult on (2011b: 240) is assumed to be following the add 2 rule.)

in accord with its meaning, knowledge of which (or at least beliefs about which) will be attributable to the speakers concerned. This, though, is not available to Ginsborg given her requirement that “previous use” be characterized independently of the notion of meaning. So, if we construe the skeptical argument in the epistemological fashion advocated by Ginsborg, her notion of primitive normativity will not be able to yield a plausible response to it. Since the worries I have raised about primitive normativity are not specific to its deployment in responding to the epistemological reading of Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s skeptic’s argument, we can conclude that it cannot be invoked to respond to the skeptical argument when this is interpreted, in the standard way, as fundamentally metaphysical or constitutive.²⁵

10 Conclusion

Overall, then, we can conclude that Ginsborg’s objections to the standard “metaphysical” interpretation of Kripke’s Wittgenstein’s skeptic’s argument miss their mark, and that the standard interpretation is in fact a much better fit for Kripke’s text than Ginsborg’s alternative. In addition, matters of interpretation aside, there are problems for Ginsborg’s notion of primitive normativity that render it an unlikely candidate for responding to Kripke’s skeptic’s argument, whether or not that argument is to be conceived of as fundamentally epistemological, or, as I have argued in this chapter, fundamentally metaphysical.

²⁵ For further worries about Ginsborg’s reply to Kripke’s Wittgenstein, see Miller (2018: Chapter 6, Section 9), Miller (2019), Verheggen (2015), and Sultanescu (2021).