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Rule following, meaning and constructivism

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INTRODUCTION

John McDowell writes:[1]

> We find it natural to think of meaning and understanding in, as it were, contractual terms. Our idea is that to learn the meaning of a word is to acquire an understanding that obliges us subsequently – if we have occasion to deploy the concept in question – to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped; that we are 'committed to certain patterns of linguistic usage by the meanings we attach to expressions'.[2] According to Crispin Wright, the burden of Wittgenstein's reflections on following a rule, in his later work, is that these natural ideas lack the substance we are inclined to credit them with:

This chapter expands some of the material which I presented at the conference on 'The psychological content of logic' at the University of Tilburg in October 1982, and at the Thyssen conference on 'Constructivism' at Lyme Regis in March 1983. I am grateful to the participants on those occasions for their helpful comments; to the audiences at seminars held at the Universities of Manchester, Belfast, Pennsylvania, Harvard and Stirling at which I presented ancestors of this essay; and to Leslie Stevenson, John Skorupski and Charles Travis for criticisms of an earlier draft.

1 John McDowell, 'Following a rule', *Synthese* 58 (1984), p. 325.

2 C. Wright, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Duckworth, London, 1981), chapter 2, p. 21.

'There is in our understanding of a concept no rigid, advance determination of what is to count as its correct application.'[3]

If Wittgenstein's conclusion, as Wright interprets it, is allowed to stand, the most striking casualty is a familiar intuitive notion of objectivity. The idea at risk is the idea of things being thus and so anyway, whether or not we choose to investigate the matter in question, and whatever be the outcome of any such investigation. That idea requires the conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway – whatever, if anything, we in fact go on to say about the matter; and this notion of correctness can only be the notion of how the pattern of application that we grasp, when we come to understand the concept in question, extends, independently of the actual outcome of any investigation, to the relevant case. So if the notion of investigation-independent patterns of application is to be discarded, then so is the idea that things are, at least sometimes, thus and so anyway, independently of our ratifying the judgement that this is how they are. It seems fair to describe this extremely radical consequence as a kind of idealism.

My purpose in this chapter is not to try to meet McDowell's criticisms of this interpretation of Wittgenstein, but to attempt to provide a fuller perspective upon the kind of considerations[4] which suggest the 'extremely radical consequence'. Whether Wittgenstein actually ever had exactly these, or similar, considerations in mind is a question of much less interest than what force attaches to them. The exegetical issue between myself and McDowell is, I suggest, best viewed as concerning whether Wittgenstein, as McDowell interprets him, has any proper recourse to the constructivist imagery which is so prominent in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. I reserve pursuit of that issue to another occasion.

3 Ibid.

4 The account suggested here differs from *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics* primarily in dissociating the argument from reliance on general 'anti-realist' premises. It is important, I think, to recognize that, as was argued in chapters 11 and 12 of that book, the sort of anti-realism about meaning developed by Dummett does command suspicion of the contractual conception of understanding illustrated by the above quotation from McDowell; but equally important that grounds exist for discontent with the contractual conception which depend not upon general anti-realist sympathies but only on principles which could hope to pass as platitudes.

PRELIMINARIES

Three preliminary sets of remarks may assist the evaluation of what follows.

First, 'idealism' does not entirely happily characterize the adjustment required if the argument to be presented is sustained. Idealism has traditionally involved the view that human consciousness in some way creates the world; that material objects, for instance, exist only for the mind. The present target, however, is a thesis about meaning. We ordinarily think of the truth value of a statement, whether assessed or not, as depending only upon a *semantic component*, its content, and a *worldly component*, the state of those aspects of the world which it is about. This conception has, indeed, the status of a platitude and is not under challenge in what follows. What is under challenge is a certain idea of determinacy in the first component: the idea that we can, by appropriately rigorous explanations and sufficiently distinctive paradigms, lay down so specific a content for a statement that its truth value is settled, in the manner described by the platitude, quite independently of the result of any investigations which we may carry out to settle it; and any correspondence between the truth value and our findings about it, if we bother to investigate, is utterly contingent on our capacity to keep track of our antecedent semantic obligations. The target – what I shall call *objectivity of meaning* – is the conception that the meaning of an expression stands to the unfolding tapestry of the way it is used in our linguistic practices as a person's character, according to a certain misconception of it, stands to his or her unfolding behaviour. The misconception would have it that character is, as it were, a finished design for a person's life which they usually act out, but which their behaviour may, at any particular stage, somehow betray. This has at least the virtue of explaining, but goes far beyond what is necessary to explain, the use we make of the idea that a person can act 'out of character'. But it is obvious enough that we also conceive of character as determined by behaviour: there are, we would like to say, *conceptual* limits to the extent and variety of ways in which a person can act out of character. A proper account

of the relations between character and behaviour would have to display both how the nature of someone's character is a conceptual construct from what is said and done, and how it is nevertheless intelligible and fruitful to allow for the sort of contrast which we describe as 'acting out of character'.

The conclusion of this chapter will be that there is a structurally parallel problem posed by the concepts of meaning and use: that, whatever the proper interpretation of the *normativity* of meaning, and of what it is to use an expression in a way which fails to fit its meaning, it cannot issue from the picture of a semantic contract to which McDowell referred. Rather, the proper interpretation of these notions has to be compatible with the capacity of ongoing use to determine meaning. Our collective ability to misuse an expression – to use it in a way out of accordance with its meaning – is conceptually limited in the same sort of way as is the individual's ability to act out of a character. For the believer in objectivity of meaning, there can be no such limitation.

Idealism, it seems to me, implies that there is, in advance of appropriate human activity, an indeterminacy in the second, worldly component out of which the platitude manufactures truth value. The present thesis, however, entirely concerns the first component. It is that while, in accordance with the platitude, we may regard the truth values of uninvestigated statements as settled by their contents and relevant worldly aspects, we should not also think of those contents as fully settled by over-and-done-with behavioural and intellectual episodes. The positive task, if we accept this negative conclusion, will be to explain exactly how the content of a statement, and hence its truth value, must be seen as shaped by features of our ongoing linguistic behaviour. But that task will not be broached here. We shall be fully occupied with the attempt to articulate one set of grounds for the negative conclusion.

We are now in a position – the second preliminary – to see a contrast between the intended target of the argument with which we shall be concerned and that of a proponent of Kripke's 'sceptical argument', vividly expounded in his *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.[5] Fundamental to Hume's philo-

5 S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982).

sophical opinions concerning ethics, and causation, is a distinction between genuinely descriptive statements – our assent to which may mark cognition of a real state of affairs – and sentences which, while possessed of the syntax of genuine statements, serve rather to *project* emotions and attitudes of ours on to the world. Now, the conclusion of the 'sceptical argument' which Kripke finds in Wittgenstein is exactly that all talk of meaning and understanding is, in essentially this sense, *projective*: there are no substantial facts concerning meaning and understanding, *a fortiori* none to serve as possible objects of cognition. The route to this conclusion is of no importance to us here. What is clear is that it is a yet more radical contention than any involved in a rejection of objectivity of meaning in the above sense. To be sure, Wittgenstein is not represented by Kripke as recommending, like Quine in places, that we should jettison the concepts of meaning and understanding altogether; projective discourse may, after all, have some socially valid role. (That, in effect, is the tenet of Kripke's attempted 'sceptical solution'.) But there is a grave doubt whether Wittgenstein, as so represented, can be saying anything coherent. The trouble is the platitude above. If the truth value of a statement is a function of its meaning and relevant aspects of the world, then if meaning is nothing *factual*, how can truth value be? (A rough parallel: if whether it is worth going to see a certain show is a function of, *inter alia*, how funny the leading act is, and if we think that judgements about what is funny are projective, *ergo* non-factual, then that non-factuality is going to infect the judgement whether the show is worth seeing.) The result would seem to be that *every* judgement of the truth of a statement, so every statement, becomes non-factual. How then is the contrast between factual and projective statements to be drawn, in terms of which Wittgenstein's position on meaning, as interpreted by Kripke, is to be explained?

Kripke's sceptic must, of course, repudiate objectivity of meaning: if there are no genuine facts about meaning at all, there cannot be facts about what meanings require of us on new occasions. But, at the risk of leaning too heavily upon the analogy, a rejection of the objectivity of meaning should no more entail that there are literally no true statements to be made about meaning than the avoidance of the misconception about character outlined above

entails that there are no true statements to be made about somebody's character. This opinion is, of course, quite consistent with holding that the argument which Kripke finds in the *Investigations* is of great independent interest. I merely record my suspicion that nobody can coherently accept its conclusion; that, accordingly, its power can only be that of a paradox. The contrast with my present argument is that the latter, if sustained, can have the status of a result.

Let me indicate, finally, something of the structure of the ensuing argument. There is a certain basic class of judgements which, it is plausible to suppose, are crucially involved in all the judgements we make. It will be argued that the supposition that these *basic* judgements possess objectivity of meaning is at odds with one aspect of standard criteria for their appraisal as correct. Then the manner of the involvement of these judgements in *all* judgement will be argued to impose upon us a choice between abandoning the objectivity of meaning quite generally and falling prey to global scepticism.

BASIC JUDGEMENTS

The concluding remark of what is usually regarded as the 'chapter' on rule following in the *Investigations* is famous: Wittgenstein wrote that not merely agreement in definitions but also agreement in *judgements* is a precondition of the possibility of our language serving for communication.[6] But which judgements precisely? Not, evidently, judgements concerning economic theory, or molecular biology, or the existence of a tenth planet; or any judgements concerning matters theoretical or controversial. Nevertheless Wittgenstein's remark will bear interpretation, I suggest, as concerning a specific class of judgements: those which we make responsively, without articulated reasons, under the causal impact of those aspects of our environment which we can most directly perceive. For it is indeed a plausible precondition of our reciprocal intelligibility that we share a network of certain

6 L. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §242.

basic concepts, by which we exercise perceptual recognition and in whose application to novel cases we concur (by and large) without collusion and without statable grounds to fall back on if disagreement should arise. The most natural examples would be attributive and relational concepts of form, pattern, colour, loudness, pitch, texture, taste, smell, warmth and cold, temporal precedence, etc. Only, it seems, if we do indeed share such a system of basic concepts, furnishing corresponding basic judgements, will our attempts to negotiate disagreement about judgements of a more sophisticated kind be fruitful. The basis of this insight of Wittgenstein's is the thought, on which we shall dwell below, that basic perceptual judgements are involved in all judgement: that there could not be a common conception of the conditions of justified assent to (and dissent from) judgements of any sort unless certain relevant basic concepts were also held in common. This is not to say that any *particular* basic concepts are necessary, but only that if we do succeed in understanding each other, we will share some basic concepts. Nor are we committed to supposing that any basic concepts have that status absolutely; which concepts are basic for us will be a function of our sensory capabilities, and concepts may be envisaged as shifting their status according as we imagine those capabilities enlarged or restricted in relevant ways. (A judgement of the rough similarity, for example, in the geometrical sense, of a pair of drawn triangles, which the normally sighted are able to make at a glance, may be available to those with extreme 'tunnel vision' only on the basis of a series of measurements and inferences.)

A fuller account is desirable of the nature of concepts of this sort, but providing one is not entirely straightforward. We are concerned with concepts which are characteristically introduced by ostensive means, incapable of definitional paraphrase, and whose applications in at least a large class of cases are directly recognitional. Yet if the intention is to pick out the sort of concepts listed above, more needs to be said. Let us call a *recognition statement* any statement composed purely of demonstratives, predicates, and relations of arbitrary degree, of which a competent use standardly presupposes no more than normal sensory capacities and ostensive teaching. 'That is red', 'That is

deeper than that' (said of sounds), 'That is salty', etc., all qualify. So, however, may recognition statements concerning cedar trees, pineapples, Geiger counters, cathode ray tubes, and telephones. We confront the familiar range of difficulties besetting the attempt to elucidate a worthwhile notion of *observation statement*, difficulties which have been the despair of so many foundationalistically inclined epistemologists and philosophers of science. So, whether or not it will involve a contribution to *that* issue, there is more to be said for our present purpose.[7] Let us stipulate that a predicate *F*, or a relation *R*, is *basic* just in case it satisfies all the following conditions:

1 *F*, or *R*, is capable of featuring in recognition statements.
2 Nobody counts as understanding *F*, or *R*, who lacks the capacity – even when perceiving normally in normal circumstances – competently to appraise recognition statements which contain them.

This condition excludes expressions like 'Geiger counter' and 'cathode ray tube'. For their instances, while sensorily recognizable, could in principle take any of indefinitely many various overt forms. It is thus no essential part of understanding such predicates to have the capacity to handle recognition statements involving them; you can know exactly what Geiger counters are without knowing the gross form they conventionally assume.

The corresponding claim about 'pineapple', 'cedar tree', and indeed a whole host of natural kind terms is, however, much less plausible. Intuitively no one fully understands 'pineapple' who has no inkling of the distinctive appearance of pineapples. Here appropriate recognitional capacities do seem necessary for understanding; what distinguishes these expressions from those in the class we seek to characterize is that such capacities are not *sufficient*. We therefore stipulate:

7 The following proposals were conceived with the benefit of discussion with Christopher Peacocke and bear analogies to material which he has since published as chapter 4 of his *Sense and Content* (OUP, Oxford, 1983).

3 It is not possible coherently to regard someone both as able to pass all reasonable tests for the ability to recognize demonstrative presentations of *F*s, or *R*-relata, *and* as lacking a full understanding of *F*, or *R*.

Conditions 2 and 3 determine that the recognitional capacities which bestow competence with recognition statements involving *F*, or *R*, are to be constitutive of an understanding of those expressions. There is to be no possibility of understanding of what it is for such statements to be true without possessing the appropriate recognitional capacities; and no possibility of possessing the appropriate recognitional capacities without understanding what it is for such statements to be true (so no possibility of 'fools' *F*s').[8] Finally

4 *F*, or *R*, has no analysis in terms of other predicates, or relations, meeting requirements 1, 2 and 3.

The intention of condition 4 is – perhaps unimportantly – to reflect the feeling that the sought-for characterization should be of a class of concepts which are *primitive*.

Some commentary on this characterization is called for. To begin with, it is worth drawing a distinction between basic *statements* and basic *judgements*. A basic judgement is any judgement which could be expressed by a recognition statement involving only basic concepts, and which is made by exercising appropriate recognitional capacities. But the content of a statement which expresses such a judgement does not, obviously, preclude that the very same statement should be made not on the basis of exercise of the appropriate recognitional capacities but as the conclusion, for example, of a chain of inferences. There are thus no sentences which are apt *only* for the expression of basic judgements. We shall understand a *basic statement* to be a particular *historic utterance* of a recognition statement which involves only basic concepts and which, in context, expresses an exercise of the relevant recognitional capacities. In what follows, I shall work with the fiction

8 Ibid., pp. 92–3.

that we have the means to coin basic statements apt for expression of any basic judgements which we are actually able to make. This is presumably a substantial idealization: we share a tremendous number of basic concepts, as evinced in various discriminatory abilities which we have, for which we have no direct (non-comparative) means of expression. But the idealization is perfectly in order in the present context: if it can cogently be argued that the vocabulary of English, enriched only by the addition of a fuller range of expressions for basic concepts, cannot serve to construct sentences with objectivity of meaning, then it is quite unclear how English as we presently have it – a fragment of that language – could somehow fare better. The point of the idealization, as the reader will anticipate, is that we shall thereby be enabled to apply our reflections concerning the objectivity of meaning to basic judgements as a class, without the need to attempt to construct some analogous concept which might characterize, or fail to characterize, basic judgements for which we happen to have no means of expression.

Second, on the notion of an *observation statement*. The notion traditional in the philosophy of science – that which Carnap intended by *Protocolsatz*, for example – is that of a statement possessed of a special epistemic security and free of theoretical presupposition. Whether basic statements, as characterized above, have either of these features is a matter for further investigation. *Prima facie*, at least, it is not obvious that they do: the recognitional capacity constitutive of an understanding of a particular basic concept may well, typically will, be a *fallible* capacity; and our conception of some of the conditions under which its fallibility will emerge may well be a 'theoretically conditioned' one. Enough has been said, perhaps, to make it clear that those philosophers who have thought that there is no interesting distinction between theoretical statements and records of observation may be mistaken; but whether the notion of a basic statement gives us the germ of a distinction which will subserve the traditional purposes of foundationalism in epistemology and the philosophy of science will not further be considered here.

There is a further concept of some importance, to be introduced before we tackle the main argument that basic statements lack

objectivity of meaning. The most fundamental notion of objectivity is (what I propose to call) the *objectivity of judgement*. To think of a class of statements as apt to express objective judgements is to conceive of them as having a real subject matter, as dealing in genuine matters of fact, as apt to be correct or incorrect in virtue of how matters stand in certain objective states of affairs which may be the objects of human cognition. This is the notion which divides genuine statements from the sort of projective impostors postulated by Hume, and from *quasi-assertions*[9] of other sorts. Clarification of this notion of objectivity is a matter of great importance: there is a long history of philosophical disputes – about morals, aesthetics, theoretical statements in science, pure mathematical statements, etc. – all of which are precisely disputes about whether these types of statements qualify for objectivity of judgement.

What, though, is the hallmark of the genuinely factual? How should we set about deciding whether a given class of statements really do have this kind of objectivity? No doubt the disputes just alluded to would not have been so long lived if there were an easy answer. But one important initial consideration is the following. Cognition is *relational*: it is a matter of arriving at true opinions in a manner *sensitive* to states of affairs whose obtaining is somehow independent of one's so arriving. Moreover, such sensitivity must be conceived as essentially fallible; whatever the details are of the process which induces in a subject a belief that *P*, it must be conceivable – at least with the simple empirical judgements which basic statements serve to express – that the process should on occasion misfire, that the appropriate sensitivity should be missing. These two considerations – the independence of the objects of knowledge and the fallibility of cognitive capacities – suggest as at least a necessary condition for a class of statements to have a genuinely cognizable, *ergo* factual, subject matter that sense can be made of the possibility of a subject's or a group of subjects' *ignorance* or *error* concerning their truth status.[10]

9 M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, 2nd edn (Duckworth, 1981), pp. 353–60.

10 This thought underlies the doubt about 'private language' voiced by Wittgenstein in *Investigations* §258 (see pp. 295–7 below).

I do not believe that a full account of objectivity of judgement can be anything so simple, only that it must build on the foregoing thought. If a class of statements are to be credited with objectivity of judgement, then, for arbitrarily chosen P in that class, there has to be an appropriate contrast in content between:

(a) X believes that P is true; and
(b) P is true.

Only if (a) may conceivably be denied while (b) may be asserted have we made sense of the possibility of X being ignorant of the status of P; only if (a) may conceivably be asserted while (b) may be denied have we made sense of the possibility of X being mistaken.

Now 'X' may, of course, be taken to range not merely over a single individual but also over groups of individuals including, as a limiting case, an entire community. Even so, there seems no reason to doubt that basic statements can legitimately aspire to meet the condition. Individuals can, of course, be ignorant of or mistaken about the truth status of a basic statement. And most of the explanations why – bad lighting, poor eyesight, tone deafness, not noticing, absence at the relevant time, etc. – would in principle serve equally well for whole communities. Accordingly, to have grounds for thinking that a communal consensus on some basic statement is, or was, mistaken is a remote but real possibility (systematic sorts of misperception, for example, may be induced by disease). Conversely, most of the basic judgements which each of us makes, with perfect justification, are made not merely in ignorance of any communal consensus that there may be about their status but with a strong presupposition that most members of our community will never consider them. So we certainly cannot affirm, even with basic statements, that 'whatever seems right to the community is right', or anything of that sort. At least, we cannot do so without betraying a class of distinctions which, as we think, we are ordinarily able to draw soundly.

At this point, it may seem that we must either sustain the objectivity of meaning of basic statements, thereby entitling ourselves to the sorts of distinction just sketched; or we must

embrace some sort of crude 'consensusism' about those statements, forgoing our rights to practise the distinctions in question. Wittgenstein himself rejects the second alternative.[11] The dilemma is, however, a false one. The capacity of a class of statements to satisfy the indicated necessary condition for objectivity of judgement does not depend upon the legitimacy of accrediting them with objectivity of meaning; and the reason why not is best brought out by considering why the latter is in doubt – to which task I now turn.

BASIC STATEMENTS AND OBJECTIVITY OF MEANING AND JUDGEMENT

Let ϕ be some basic concept, and consider a large series of basic statements involving ϕ, about which there is, as it happens, a near universal consensus. If we are to believe in the objectivity of meaning of these statements, there has to be a possibility that this consensus is, in any particular case, misplaced: for belief in objectivity of meaning is exactly the belief that what determines the truth values of these statements is wholly independent of human assessment of them and, at best, contingently correspondent with it. Now there is, of course, a distinction between the claims:

1 For each statement in question, it is possible that our verdict and the truth status diverge.
2 It is possible that, for each statement in question, our verdict and the truth status diverge.

The question is what, if any, reason the believer in objectivity of meaning can give for accepting claim 1 but refusing to accept claim 2. Generally speaking, the transition from $(x) \Diamond : Fx$ to $\Diamond : (x)Fx$ fails just in case F is a predicate the conditions of whose application to any particular individual in the range of quantification are a

11 *Investigations* §241; cf. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (3rd edn), VII, 40.

function of relevant characteristics of other members of the range. Thus, familiarly, the transition fails, for example, for Fx = 'x is below average height.' More strikingly for our present purposes, it fails, letting 'x' range over episodes of Jones's behaviour, for Fx = 'x is totally out of character.' The only apparent way of resisting the transition from claim 1 to claim 2 would be to insist that our consensus over so large a class of cases must be regarded as playing some sort of *constitutive* role in determining what counts as correct use of ϕ, just as Jones's behaviour over a sufficiently large class of cases plays a constitutive role in determining his character. But that is exactly the parallel which the believer in objectivity of meaning must resist. Letting 'x' range over the basic statements in question, and Fx = 'the community's assessment of x is out of accord with the requirements of the meaning of ϕ', the believer in ϕ's objective meaning ought to hold that the considerations which determine whether or not ϕ applies in any particular case will concern nothing other than the relevant facts about it (the 'worldly component' referred to above) and those episodes in the linguistic and intellectual history of the community which constituted the determination of the ('objective') meaning of ϕ. What is crucial is that we may think of those episodes as having entirely *antedated* the series of statements in question. And in that case, what determines whether or not ϕ applies in any of the relevant cases is quite independent of the communal response in other cases in that range. We should conclude that believers in objectivity of meaning have no satisfactory ground why, having accepted claim 1, they should not also accept claim 2.

What has been said is already enough to suggest how it is that one who rejected objectivity of meaning for a given class of statements might nevertheless quite consistently reserve the right to endorse objectivity of judgement for them (or at least, to endorse their capacity to pass the test on which, I suggested above, a full account of objectivity of judgement should build). Actually, it is not clear whether belief in objectivity of judgement for a given class of statements really does require that we give sense to the possibility of massive communal *error* about their status (whether it would not be enough to give sense, for example, merely to the possibility of massive communal *ignorance*). But if it does, no

more is required, at any rate, than that we substantiate claim 1 above. Belief in objectivity of meaning, in contrast, requires – if the foregoing is correct – that we additionally substantiate claim 2. And crude consensusism would reject both.

Now, what is supposed to be the difficulty with claim 2? What is wrong with the idea that as a bare and no doubt very remote possibility, all or almost all the members of a linguistic community might collectively, but non-collusively, go right off track in their applications of some basic predicate, that the paths of truth and shared opinion over a protracted series of basic statements might radically diverge? The immediate worry has to be, of course, whether the alleged possibility is really intelligible. What would it be to have satisfactory grounds for thinking that it actually obtained? Naturally, no one can be considered competent to criticize a range of statements accepted by others unless there is a reason to think that the critic and the criticized share an understanding of those statements. But with basic concepts, the criterion for such a shared understanding is precisely the disposition to agree in basic judgements involving those concepts. How then, if somebody finds himself out of line with the verdict of his community in a protracted series of cases, can we or anyone else retain the right to think of him as a competent critic? Why is the position not rather that it has emerged that he never succeeded in understanding or no longer understands the basic concepts in question? It would seem to follow that there is no such thing as being in a position reasonably to criticize a sufficiently protracted non-collusive consensus on basic statements; so no such thing as having reason to think that a 'radical divergence' had taken place. 'Anti-realist' constraints would accordingly enjoin that there is no such genuine possibility.

This in essentials was the argument of chapter XI of *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*. However, the conclusion is, at this stage, too swiftly drawn, since it overlooks the possibility that the critic is able to support his charge by evidence that something is interfering with the (physiological basis) of the capacities of his community. Certain sorts of environmental contaminant may, for example, be known adversely to affect people's capacity to apply certain basic concepts, but to do so in a uniform way so that the

disposition to consensus is not disrupted. So could there not, in appropriately fantastic circumstances, be reason to think that *everyone* had, perhaps irreversibly, gone astray in their application of certain basic concepts? Yet a little reflection renders it doubtful whether this thought really meets the issue. There seem to be three sorts of basis on which it might be claimed that such a contaminant, or other factor, had produced an episode of radical divergence. First, and most simply, the contaminant might be associated with overt damage to its victims so gross – near-total deafness, for example – that nothing would have to be known about the detailed character of their suspect judgements in order reasonably to hold them in suspicion. Second, the judgements in question might be found to betray an established correlation with some associated physical parameter: measured temperature, for instance, or the frequency of sound waves. Or, third, the contaminant might previously have been recognized to have induced disruption in the relevant recognitional capacities of a previously affected subpopulation – disruption, that is, as evinced by discord with the responses of an unaffected majority. Now, the second and third types of case both turn on the assumed reliability of certain basic judgements outwith the putative episode of radical divergence – those, respectively, by reference to which the association with the relevant physical parameter and the adverse effect of the contaminant on the subpopulation were established. No doubt that might be perfectly reasonable: the judgements in question will be assumed reliable because no consideration of the three kinds adumbrated, or any other, are on hand to call them into question. But can the theorist who accepts objectivity of meaning *explain* why that is a reasonable assumption?

The real difficulty for the theorist is to keep the tiger in the cage – to disclose any reason why the range of possibilities for radical divergence is appropriately constrained by the criteria on which we should actually rely in order to affirm that such a possibility had been realized. Why shouldn't our belief in the reliability of some associated physical parameter itself have been the product of an extended bout of radical divergence? Why shouldn't those communal judgements with which the responses of the contaminated subpopulation were compared themselves have been haywire?

These seem foolish questions. And the reason they seem so, I surmise, goes deep. Suppose a subject sincerely assents to a statement *S* in circumstances *C* in which we have adequate reason to believe that each of the following holds:

1 The subject has had a normal teaching in the concepts involved in *S* and has given every indication of a normal understanding of them.
2 The subject is functioning normally in *C* – is unaffected by drugs, disease, etc.
3 The perceptual conditions obtaining in *C* are normal – no funny lighting, tricky mirrors, etc.

Obviously enough, adequate reason to believe the conjunction of 1 – 3 cannot in general constitute adequate reason to believe *S*, since the current normality of the subject and the perceptual conditions is no special asset if *S* does not concern what the subject is currently in position to perceive. But if *S* is a *basic* statement, the position is different: precisely because 2 and 3 constitute conditions which are optimal for the subject's exercise of the relevant recognitional capacities, and because 1 suggests that it is indeed those capacities which the subject is attempting to exercise, adequate reason to believe each of 1 – 3 must be, it appears, adequate reason to believe *S*.

This conclusion in fact needs a supplementary assumption:

4 *S* expresses a basic statement *for* the subject, that is his assent to it is based entirely on an exercise of recognitional capacities.

(Otherwise it will be easy to conjure up counter-examples involving the subject's recourse, for whatever reason, to an unreliable secondary source, for example, or a problematic chain of inferences.) But granted that assumption, it is, I suggest, not merely true but *necessarily* true that sufficient reason for each of 1 – 4 confers a (defeasible) warrant to believe *S*. More specifically, it is impossible to understand how a recipient of adequate grounds for each of 1 – 4 could reasonably doubt *S* if he possessed no other relevant information.

Intuitively, the case for *S* is stronger if what is involved is a widespread non-collusive *consensus* of subjects about its truth. That, I surmise, is because the fact of such a consensus would *eo ipso* be grounds against supposing that misunderstanding, or abnormal function – usually an idiosyncratic matter – or certain sorts of tricky perceptual circumstances (misleading perspectival effects, for example) were materially involved. That is, consensus, of that sort, enhances the likelihood, though it does not make it certain, that 1, 2 and 3 hold for each of the participants. Whether or not that is quite the right reason, the following principle has an exceedingly powerful intuitive appeal.

P: If, without any form of collusion occurring, there is widespread agreement about the truth of an *S* which is basic for each of the judges; and if someone has adequate grounds for supposing that 1, 2 and 3 each hold of each of the judges, but no other relevant information, then he has excellent grounds for regarding *S* as true.

The appeal of *P* is, I suggest again, owing to its being analytic of the notion of a basic statement. The salient question, however, is how the principle can so much as hold, let alone how it can hold in necessitated form, if objectivity of meaning is accepted for basic statements. For in that case, what determines the truth or falsity of any *S* is constituted quite independently and in advance of the judges' response to it. To hold to the principle *P* (in necessitated form) would then be, accordingly, to hold that there is (necessarily) reason to think that those responses tend by and large to keep in step with the objective pattern of correct use of the concepts involved in *S*. Presumably, then, we can produce a reason for discounting as a possibility the suggestion that we may be prone, without any external interference either with us or with the conditions of observation, simply to swing collectively away, without any sense of disquiet, from the paths laid down by objective meanings and the wordly facts. If some sceptic suggests that human beings may just be rather bad, in very similar ways, at internalizing the requirements of objective meanings, we presumably have ready to hand a consideration to confound him. What is it?

The proper response, it seems to me, to this train of thought is to reject objectivity of meaning for basic statements. *P* holds good not because objective meanings, in their and our very nature, somehow exert a tug on the responses of people who satisfy its antecedent clauses, but because the relation, for the case of basic statements, between correctness and human response – however difficult to do justice to in detail – is such as to render the principle analytic. It follows that the fantasy of a collective 'radical divergence' over a series of basic statements, where no standard grounds exist for suspicion, is incoherent.

The effect of supposing that *P* can be false is that satisfaction of the conditions expressed in its antecedent need provide no adequate case for regarding the relevant statement as true. Yet the fact is that – at least when the judges include ourselves – we have not the slightest idea what it would be to increase the strength of the case. The result will be that the truth, or falsity, of such statements comes to transcend our strongest standard grounds for affirming them to be one or the other. That is an extreme and unappealing form of realism: it reduces our belief in our competence to use our own language correctly to a matter of faith. There is, however, no need to assail it with the familiar anti-realist arguments of full generality. Anyone who recognizes the fidelity of the principle *P* to their intuitive concept of reasonable belief already has decisive grounds for rejecting it.

To reject objectivity of meaning for basic statements is to come to regard their content, and so their truth status, as ever open to ongoing determination by our linguistic behaviour. The competent use of basic vocabulary, with whatever degree of confidence, should not be viewed as reflecting cognition of the requirements of objective meanings. Rather, we should view it as an expression of certain basic reactive propensities, primitive classificatory dispositions – a common human (or at least cultural) heritage without which our language would fail. We must endeavour to see the content of basic statements as plastic in response to speakers' continuing performance with the basic vocabulary which they involve. Such metaphors are, of course, unsatisfactory and are no substitute for a sharp account of the sort of supervenience relation which we now seem obliged to decry. But it is at least clear that we

can no longer think of the truth conditions of basic statements as fixed quite independently of responses of ours, yet to be elicited from us, involving the relevant basic concepts. It is this *openness* in the content of basic statements which is critical in what follows.

THE UBIQUITY OF BASIC JUDGEMENT

There is no immediate generalization of these considerations to non-basic statements since, as noted, *P* holds only for basic statements. Nevertheless, the argument ought to generalize. The suggestive thought is that exercise of basic concepts seems to be involved in the formation of judgements of all kinds. Think, for example, of the judgements of shape and colour which may be involved in recognizing a cedar tree outside the window; the judgements of temporal precedence involved in competently running a scientific experiment; or the judgements of congruity of pattern involved in recognizing a formal proof. But the mode of involvement is not usually, or even often, inferential. Basic judgements appear to form a foundation for judgement in general, not in the sense that they supply premises from which other judgements are derived, but in the sense that getting them right is a necessary condition, in context, for arriving at any other judgement *soundly*, for having a well-founded reason for thinking that judgement true. One's warrant to make a judgement of any kind, however sophisticated the context, will, it seems, always be *defeasible* by considerations which suggest that one misapplied certain basic concepts in coming to that judgement.

Let us try to amplify this claim a little. Defeasibility comes in several kinds. One way of defeating evidence for a particular belief is to bring to bear other evidence, stronger or equally strong, that the belief is false. Another is to show that there is an alternative equally plausible account of why the original evidence is available. A third mode of defeat is to fault the *pedigree* of the evidence in some way, to call attention to some feature of the evidence gathering (or gatherer) which disqualifies it. Examples would be the disclosure of pressure leaks in the apparatus, drunkenness in the observer, or a powerful magnetic field which may have affected

the gauges. Defeat of either of the first two sorts admits the data but disputes their capacity to warrant the belief in question; defeat of the third sort undermines the validity of the data. I shall say that a case for a particular belief is *impeccable* if it is immune to defeat of the third sort; and that it constitutes a *genuine warrant* for that belief if it is both impeccable and will not be defeated in either of the first two ways no matter what the additions to our knowledge. To have a genuine warrant is thus to have a case for a particular belief which both possesses a faultless pedigree and will retain its supportive character through arbitrarily extensive improvements in our state of information.

One way of expressing the involvement of basic judgements in all judgement is now to say that in order to possess a genuine warrant for a particular belief, it is necessary that a large class of relevant basic judgements, pertaining to the process whereby the belief was acquired, be true; failing their truth, the process will lack the requisite impeccability. This is not to say that the relevant basic judgements need actually have been consciously entertained by a subject in the course of his arriving at the belief; but rather that if, having arrived at that belief, the subject were to be persuaded that any of them were false, he would be rationally constrained to consider the belief unjustified. In the presence of our earlier assumption that the language contain means for the expression of all the basic judgements which its practitioners can make, we may summarize the proposal as follows:

T: For any context *C*, agent *X*, and statement *S*: if *X* acquires the belief that *S* in *C*, then there will be certain basic statements relating to the circumstances and process whereby *X*'s belief was acquired such that (1) if he did not actually do so, *X could* have assessed any of these statements in the course of arriving at his belief that *S*; and (2) *X* has acquired impeccable, *a fortiori* genuine warrant for his belief that *S* only if each such statement is true.

I don't know how to support this principle beyond inviting a reader who is sceptical about it to try to come up with a counter-example: a case, in effect, of reasonable belief, acquired via some process with which no basic statements are so associated

that evidence of their falsity would constitute defeat of the third kind. In any event, there seems no reason to doubt that *T* holds in a very wide class of cases. A reader sceptical whether it holds universally may simply restrict the scope of the argument which follows to the cases where it does hold.

NON-BASIC STATEMENTS AND OBJECTIVITY OF MEANING

We now introduce a further seemingly platitudinous principle:

*P**: Necessarily: if *X* has acquired, in context *C*, a genuine warrant for believing *S*, then it is reasonable for *X* to believe *S* to be true.

At any rate, this principle ought to seem platitudinous since a genuine warrant is *more* than is required for reasonable belief: beliefs may reasonably be held on what are, in fact, defeasible grounds. However, if we try to retain, along with the lemma that basic statements lack objective meaning and thesis *T*, the view that the truth and falsity of non-basic statements *is* subject to determination by objective meanings, then it becomes unclear whether, so far from being platitudinous, *P** has so much as a plausible claim to truth. This is the crux of the argument.

Let *S* be a non-basic statement and consider:

1 We have, in context *C*, genuine warrant for believing *S*; and
2 *S* is true.

If objectivity of meaning continues to be assumed for non-basic statements, an asymmetry now emerges in the types of states of affairs apt to confer truth on 1 and 2 respectively. The question of whether 2 is true is a *closed* question: it is settled by the state of the world in relevant respects and the objective meaning of *S*, which in turn is settled by past episodes in the linguistic and intellectual life of the community. But the question of whether 1 is true is, in the sense canvassed on pages 289–90, *open*. For a necessary condition for

the truth of 1 will be – given *T* – that certain basic statements are true; and the truth of those statements, in so far as it depends upon their content, has to be conceived – in the presence of the lemma – as a function of, *inter alia*, future and counterfactual responses, involving the relevant basic concepts, of members of the linguistic community. Rejection of objectivity of meaning for basic statements led us to the view that what it is true to say about the meaning of any basic expression, and hence the nature of that meaning, is indefinitely open to further determination by ongoing responses of members of the linguistic community, rather as what it is true to say about someone's character, and hence the nature of his character, is indefinitely open to further determination by what he says and does. In the presence of *T*, this feature of basic statements flows upwards, as it were, to affect all judgements of the sort typified by 1: their truth depends on the truth of basic statements; which depends on their content; which depends on things we have not but would have done, or will or would do.

Why does this consideration pose a threat to *P**? Because in order for *P** to hold, it is necessary that the sorts of circumstance which go to make up a genuine warrant for *S* be a *reliable indication* of the sorts of circumstance which constitute *S*'s truth; that pursuit of the policy, as it were, of aiming at genuine warrants for one's beliefs will enhance the chances of selecting true beliefs. For the believer in objectivity of meaning, however, the claim that *S* is true is a claim about the deliverance of objective meanings. The result is that, in view of the noted asymmetry, the question of the reliability of genuine warrants for statements in *S*'s class becomes imponderable. For to believe in their reliability is to believe that the obtaining of the ingredients involved in a genuine warrant, including certain non-actual but elicitable primitive linguistic responses involving basic vocabulary *which may not even feature in the non-basic statement at issue*, is a reliable indication of that statement's truth. And that demands reason to believe in what seems to be a most mysterious *felicity* in our basic conceptual responses. In order for genuine warrants and truth to tend to go in step, it has to have been contrived that our primitive dispositions with basic vocabulary somehow follow suit after the requirements of the objective meanings of non-basic vocabulary, engineering a

sufficient measure of covariance, among statements in general, between truth and the availability of genuine warrants to give point to the practice of trying to secure genuine warrants as, wherever practicable, a precondition of belief. The asymmetry thus brings it about that P^*, so far from having the status of a platitude, emerges in the role of postulate of an odd sort of pre-established harmony.

Naturally it is quite unclear how it could be *necessary* that such harmony obtained. The attractiveness of P^* is merely that of a principle that is analytic of our ordinary concepts of truth and evidence. But in that case, the only way of retaining a belief in objectivity of meaning for non-basic statements while acknowledging the force of the above argument is to see it as a demonstration that the conditions for reasonable belief in the truth of non-basic statements are never satisfied. The best we can aim at is genuine warrant; and the probability that we shall thereby tend to believe more truths is inscrutable. Perhaps this outcome is only to be expected. The penalty which we risk by endorsing the kind of semantic autonomy with which objective meanings would infuse our language is that we shall find ourselves hard pressed to explain with what right we consider ourselves in any way sensitive to the course taken by the semantic tracks thereby laid down. The burden of the argument has been that, first at the level of basic statements and then with all the rest, this penalty cannot be avoided. The price of objective meaning is an absolute conception of truth: a conception absolved from all practical controls. This is not the notion we actually have, if P^* is true. It is not a notion we should want, if our cognitive endeavours are to fare better than cannon-fodder for the sceptic's artillery.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

It was suggested earlier that 'idealism' was not a happy label for the view which repudiates objectivity of meaning. The label of 'constructivism' is another matter. There really is a point, if the argument of this chapter is sustained, in seeing ourselves as the perennial creators of our concepts, not in the style of conscious architects but just by doing what comes naturally. Thereby we

contribute towards the creation not of extra-linguistic facts, but of true sentences. It is, however, another question whether this shift in perspective must engender revision in the classical 'non-constructive' techniques and concepts of mathematics and logic against which the twentieth-century schools of constructivism in the philosophies of logic and mathematics have rebelled. Certainly from one point of view it seems that radical methodological revisions may have to be involved. If, for example, the mathematical intuitionists' willingness to accept the law of the excluded middle for all quantifier-free statements in number theory had to be taken as evincing a belief in the validity of the principle of bivalence for those statements, then it is hard to see that that practice could now be justified. What could sustain the idea that finitely decidable, but in practice hopelessly undecidable, number-theoretic statements are in every case *determinately* true or false, except the conception that they have objective meanings capable of settling their truth values without any further contribution from us? It is, however, unobvious that the intuitionists' willingness to accept excluded middle in such cases has to be interpreted in that light.[12] And the issue is, in any case, overshadowed by very delicate and unresolved questions concerning revisionism in the philosophy of logic – including, in particular, the question of what can be made of the notion of *conservativeness* of a set of principles of inference among statements for which objectivity of meaning has been rejected – which cannot be broached here.

Finally, if we take it that the target of Wittgenstein's reflections on following a rule *is* objectivity of meaning quite generally (whatever the relation of the preceding argument to the detail of his own thought), where does that leave the relation between the 'rule-following considerations' and the polemic against 'private language' which, *pace* Kripke, begins at *Investigations* §243? In §258 Wittgenstein urges, famously, that the would-be private linguist ought to be disquieted by his inability to make anything of the distinction between uses of his private language which seem right to him and uses which really are. (Those of Cartesian sympathies are apt to see no force at all in the consideration,

12 Wright, *Wittgenstein*, chapter 11, §§4 – 6.

precisely because they aspire to regard one's impressions of one's own mental contents as especially sure. They entirely miss Wittgenstein's point.) Now one thing which is clear is that if expressions in a private language could have objective meaning, then there would *be* a distinction between what seemed right to a practitioner and what was right, even if he could not apply the distinction; that is, what *determined* the rightness of any particular description of his sensations, or whatever the private material was supposed to be, would be independent of the way in which the subject was inclined to describe them. Hence, a general attack on objective meaning would pre-empt one effective rejoinder to Wittgenstein's apparent train of thought at this point. So an extensive discussion of rule following, with objectivity of meaning as its general target, would certainly be intelligible as a *preparation* for the argument against private language. But quite other interpretations of the relations between the two 'chapters' are possible; someone who took the view, for example, that the material on rule following is not directed against objectivity of meaning, could essay to see Wittgenstein's remarks about private ostensive definition as expressing the view that, in contrast to a situation in a public language, the private linguist cannot establish any objective meanings for himself. Fare that approach as it may, it is evident that a quite general assault on objectivity of meaning cannot of itself establish any *special* problem for private language.

The rule-following considerations have been fairly intensively discussed in philosophical circles for a number of years now and the impression is, I think, prevalent that while Wittgenstein may have achieved certain destructive insights into widespread lay-philosophical notions of meaning, confusion has overtaken him when he thinks that private language somehow fares especially badly.[13] (Admittedly a Cartesian, if confronted with the issue in these terms, might well wish to invest his private language with objective meanings; so Wittgenstein could still be credited with an anti-Cartesian point.) The truth seems to me to be different. Wittgenstein does have a special query to raise about private

13 See especially Simon Blackburn's 'The individual strikes back', *Synthese* 58 (1984), pp. 281–301.

language, even if we suppose that a successful general attack has been mounted against objectivity of meaning. The query is, precisely, whether the would-be statements of the private linguist can have *objectivity of judgement*, whether they can be so much as factual. But corroboration of that claim I must defer to another occasion.[14]

14 C. Wright, 'Does *Investigations* §§258 – 60 suggest a cogent argument against private language', in *Subject, Thought and Context*, eds J. McDowell and P. Pettit (Oxford, 1986).