

DISCUSSION

Kripke's Treatment of Investigations §50

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In §50 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein says that there is one object whose length cannot be described in metric terms; viz., the standard metre.¹ Kripke makes three objections to this. The first is a little argument: If the standard metre is 39.37 inches long, then it is one metre long; the standard metre is 39.37 inches long; therefore, it is one metre long.² The second (deriving impetus from the first) is that the standard metre *can* be described in metric terms, thus: 'The standard metre is one metre long'. The third (building upon the second), is that the standard metre is not *necessarily* one metre long.³

The first premise of the little argument is an instance of the generalization that if something is 39.37 inches long, then it is one metre long. But something's being 39.37 inches long entails that it is one metre long only because if something is 39.37 inches long, it is as long as the standard metre. Thus, to hold that the standard metre is one metre long because it is 39.37 inches long is to hold that it is one metre long because it is as long as itself.

Now, Kripke seems to have gained his second point (i.e., that the standard metre can be described in metric terms), but he hasn't. When Wittgenstein says that we can't say of the standard metre either that it is or is not one metre long, he means that we can't say any such thing *informatively* or *depictingly* or *descriptively*. For Wittgenstein, to say that the standard metre is *necessarily* one metre

1. Prior to 1960, one metre was defined as the length of a certain platinum-iridium bar kept in Paris (and later at Sèvres). In 1960 it was redefined as the length of 1,650,763.73 wavelengths *in vacuo* of the radiation emitted by a certain isotope of krypton. I owe this observation to Dr. W. E. Kennick, who also introduced me to Kripke's treatment of *Philosophical Investigations* §50. In the text, I assume a pre-1960 state-of-affairs.

2. S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, p. 54.

3. For the second and third objections, see *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 54–57.

long is, in a deep sense, not to say anything. Kripke is thrown off by Wittgenstein's admittedly unorthodox use of the verb, 'to say'. In more popular philosophical terms, Wittgenstein's point is that the standard metre is necessarily one metre long.⁴

Now, given that Wittgenstein's claim is that the standard metre is necessarily one metre long, Kripke hasn't refuted it thus far. If anything, he has defended it with his argument. But he goes on to argue that the standard metre is *not* necessarily one metre long.

His argument goes like this: the standard metre is a particular stick in Paris – call it 'S'. S is one metre long. Now, S might have been longer or shorter than it in fact is. But in that case, S would have been longer or shorter than one metre, and therefore S might not have been one metre long.⁵

There are two things going on in this argument. First of all, Kripke assumes that when we say that one metre = the length of the standard metre, we do not mean that one metre = the length of the standard metre *whatever the length of the standard metre happens to be*. According to him, when we say that one metre equals the length of the standard metre we are not 'giving the meaning' but rather 'fixing the reference' of the term 'one metre'; we are 'picking out' the metric unit of length as the length that is had accidentally by a particular stick in Paris. This distinction between fixing a reference and giving a meaning (or, between picking out a referent and knowing or giving its essence) pervades Kripke's writings. Whatever its merits elsewhere, I do not think the distinction serves him well in the present case. This is because it leaves us without any account of what it is to be one metre long. If by 'one metre = the length of the standard metre' we mean that one metre is the length had accidentally by the standard metre, then we can ask what it means to say that the standard metre is one metre long. We can't answer by saying that it is one metre long because it is as long as a certain standard: that amounts either to a concession that the standard metre is necessarily

4. Wittgenstein has very good reasons for saying things his way and not the way I've restated what he says. He means to draw a deep distinction between necessary and contingent truth. Since I couldn't begin to explain his reasons without writing far more than I want to here, I'll just offer a quote in support of my claim that in ordinary philosophical *parlance*, Wittgenstein's idea that one can't say of the standard metre either that it is or that it isn't a metre long would be expressed by saying that the standard metre is necessarily one metre long: "This body has extension." To this we might reply: "Nonsense!" – but are inclined to reply "Of course!" – Why is this?" (*Philosophical Investigations* §252).

5. See, e.g., S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, pp. 54–56 and pp. 75–76.

one metre long (i.e., if the standard appealed to is S itself), or to a vicious regress (i.e., if the standard appealed to is some other object). So on Kripke's account, to be one metre long is to be something besides being as long as any particular (in any 'possible world'). This view might seem to be recommended by the fact that we can speak of a possible world in which the metric system does not exist – or even one in which no extended or spatial things exist – in metric terms. But the fact that we can say truly, e.g., that things might have been such that nothing had length does not imply that the unit of length, one metre, exists independently of any lengthy paradigm.⁶ Kripke says that 'for such an abstract thing as a unit of length, the notion of reference may be unclear'; coupled with his rejection of Wittgenstein's analysis of the metric system, this remark seems to point to a dark doctrine – call it 'metric realism' – according to which the one-metre unit of length is something like a Platonic form; whereas Wittgenstein provides a clear and consistent account of what it is to be a metre long. Presumably Kripke's assumption as to what we mean (or rather, what we do *not* mean) by saying that one metre equals the length of the standard metre is motivated by the apparent ridiculousness of an imagined situation wherein the standard metre happens to be no longer than a chopstick or as long as a city block. But I think that when we say that one metre = the length of the standard metre, we mean precisely that one metre = the length of the standard metre, whatever that length may be. Indeed, that is why we keep the thing vaulted up in a hermetically

6. Perhaps Kripke's position commands more intuitive plausibility if formulated in terms of the *property* of being a metre long instead of in terms of a *particular* unit of length (the metre); e.g., if we say that the *property* of being one metre long exists independently of anything that has length. But if this reformulation has a ring of plausibility, I think it is borrowed from other examples that do have genuine intuitive appeal. For example: while as far as I can see, there is nothing problematic – and certainly nothing contradictory – about the claim that something is one metre long if and only if it is as long as the standard metre, there *do* seem to be insurmountable difficulties with filling in the blanks in the following sentence: 'Something has length if and only if it is as _____ as _____.' What, for instance, could we put in the first blank? Certainly not 'long!' Supposing we insert the name of a certain run-of-the-mill stick in the second blank (say, 'S'), it might be suggested that we say something like this: 'Something has length if and only if it has S's most prominent feature' – but there are obviously problems with this (e.g.: how do we analyse 'prominence'?).

As a matter of fact, the instantiation of most of the properties that we commonly have occasion to deal with is not determined by reference to a paradigm; the quality of being a metre long is an exception.

sealed canister. As for the ridiculousness of the counterfactual situations I've supposed Kripke to have in mind: if some metrological terrorist were to break into the vault in Paris and stretch out the ill-guarded stick to twice its original length, we would undoubtedly (but not perforce) stop using it as the standard metre. But in that case, either (1) we would choose a new object to be the standard metre, or (2) we would not choose a new standard metre. If (1), then the desecrated platinum-iridium bar would indeed no longer be one metre long, but neither would it be the standard metre.⁷ If (2), then nothing would be one metre long, since the unit of length, one metre, would cease to exist (it would become undefined).⁸

The second thing going on in Kripke's argument is an equivocation. He says, 'Let's call the stick that is the standard metre "S"; now, couldn't S have been other than one metre long?' And the answer to this, of course, is, 'Yes'. But the supposition that S is not one metre long is the supposition that it is not the standard metre. It is a 'contingent fact'⁹ that this particular Parisian stick, S, is one metre long; but that is simply to say that it is a contingent fact that S is the standard metre. So, the fact that S might not have been one metre long does not entail that the standard metre might not have been one metre long, but only that S might not have been the standard metre: the standard metre *must* be one metre long, but S needn't have been the standard metre. This equivocal use of 'S' also creates problems for Kripke's broader goal in discussing this example; viz., that of giving an example of a contingent *a priori* truth. The argument goes like this: (1) We know *a priori* that S is one metre long; (2) S might not have been one metre long; therefore, (3) 'S is one metre long' is a contingent *a priori* truth. But if by 'S' we mean a particular stick, independently of whether or not it is used as the standard metre (i.e., a stick that has *being the standard*

7. Unless, of course, the stretched-out stick was as long as the new paradigm, in which case it would be one metre long, as a matter of (contingent) fact. (This is no doubt a needless qualification, because in that case why wouldn't we just continue to use the stretched-out bar as our paradigm? When doing analytic philosophy it's easy to cross the line separating thoroughness from nitpickery.)

8. Let me be perfectly explicit about one point: I am saying that it is possible for the unit of length, one metre, to vary. A less improbable eventuality than any I've given in the text would be if over the eons some kind of molecular erosion were to take its toll on that hermetically sealed bar, shortening it a bit. Then we could say truly that one metre isn't as long as it used to be. This would be inconvenient, perhaps, but not contradictory (and not necessarily inconvenient).

9. Wittgenstein would consider this expression to be pleonastic.

metre as an accidental property), then we don't know *a priori* that S is one metre long any more than we know *a priori* that it is the standard metre, or that it makes its home in Paris, and so in that case (1) is false. But if by 'S' we mean the standard metre (and not just some stick independently of its role as the standard metre), then (by the foregoing argument), S is one metre long necessarily, and (2) is false. So the case at hand does not provide an example of contingent *a priori* truth.

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