

Wittgenstein's Account of Rule-Following and Its Implications

ABSTRACT: In this paper I present an interpretation of Wittgenstein's account of rule-following, including what implications he suggests this account has for philosophy. The account suggests that neither one's interpretation nor the rule itself are criteria by which we may conclude a rule was followed correctly or not. Rather it is through training, regularity, habit and social expectation—in short, by the consequences of action—that an action is considered in accord with a rule. I argue that even if we accept Wittgenstein's account of rule-following, certain philosophically important implications follow.



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In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that an interpretation of a rule can not justify the claim that one is correctly following that rule, and that correctly following of a rule does not imply that the intended rule is being followed.¹ Rather, to follow a rule is to act or make a decision in accordance with communal practice and is established as such by training and regularity of use. Wittgenstein wants to argue that rule-following is customary. He also argues that this has implications for the nature of meaning in language, for language is a rule-governed behavior. In what follows, I will present Wittgenstein's view of the nature of rule-following and explain how he thinks this changes the way that we should view linguistic meaning. Wittgenstein argues that this change of view ultimately results in a therapeutic dissolution of philosophical problems that rest upon an incorrect understanding of the nature of meaning. In contrast, I will argue that even if we accept Wittgenstein's claims regarding rule-following, we are still left with the traditional, albeit modified, problems of philosophy.

I would like to begin by presenting most of section 185 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

Judged by the usual criteria—the pupil has mastered the series of natural numbers. Next we teach him to write down other series of cardinal numbers and get him to the point of writing down series of the form

$0, n, 2n, 3n, \text{ etc.}$

at an order of the form “+n”; so at the order “+1” he writes down the series of natural numbers.—Let us suppose we have done exercises and given him tests up to 1000. Now we get the pupil to continue the series (say +2) beyond 1000—and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: “look what you've done!”—he doesn't understand. We say: “You were meant to add two: look how you

began the series!”—He answers: “Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I was meant to do it.”—Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: “But I went on in the same way.”—It would now be no use to say: “But can't you see...?”—and repeat the old examples and explanations.—In such a case we might say, perhaps: It comes natural to this person to understand our order with our explanations as we should understand the order: “Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on.”

Such a case would present similarities with one in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip.

This section shows that rules themselves do not determine how they are to be followed. There is nothing, for example, inherent in an arrow that shows us which way it is pointing or directing us to go.² Similarly, as the above quote shows, there is no means by which it can be known with complete certainty that, in following the arithmetical sequence $0, n, 2n, 3n, 4n, \dots$ in line with the order “+1,” a person is following the intended rule, for he or she may be following an alternative rule that is compatible with the intended rule up to a certain point. There must be something in addition to the rule that directs us in a particular manner and indicates to us that we proceed accordingly.

The argument Wittgenstein is making in Section 185 is dependent upon the fact that a rule, in order to be a rule, must be able to be broken. There must be correct and incorrect applications of a rule. The question that arises here is: What determines correct and incorrect application of a rule? Or, what justifies following a rule correctly?

If a rule in itself does not show us how we are to follow it, then our interpretation of a rule must also not determine correct use. If interpretation was what determined correct use, there would be no incorrect application of a rule. This is the case because any interpretation can be seen to be in accordance with a rule. As section 185 points out, if there is nothing inherent in a rule that determines a correct interpretation of that rule then, for example, my interpretation of a pointing hand as pointing in the direction of finger-tip to wrist is perfectly compatible with the gesture of the pointing hand. There is nothing in the hand that says it is pointing in one direction rather than another. Therefore, solely in relation to the rule, any interpretation can be justified.

Wittgenstein argues that in addition to interpretation not determining correct application of a rule, the idea of correct application is itself problematic.³ The problem with using correct application as the criteria by which we determine if someone is following a particular rule or not is that there may be any number of rules that produce actions that give evidence of correct application. Crispin Wright presents the problem most concisely: “Any rule which we set someone to follow may be applied by him at some stage in a manner both consistent with his past application of it and other than that which we intended.”⁴ This is similar to the problem with interpretation. But whereas with interpretation the problem lies in the fact that any interpretation can be seen to be in accordance with the rule, with correct application as criteria an indefinite number of rules can be followed and still produce the intended action or result. This problem has been famously introduced by Kripke's “quus” example in his book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.⁵ In

2. This example is very similar to Wittgenstein's example of a signpost (Wittgenstein, §85).

3. Wittgenstein, see in particular §145 where Wittgenstein shows there is no finite number of applications that present sufficient proof that one has “mastered the system.”

4. Crispin Wright, *Rails to Infinity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001): 11.

5. Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. (New York: MacMillan Company 1953).

this example, Kripke shows that in the act of completing addition problems there is no evidence to support the claim that someone is following the “plus” rule and not the “quus” rule up to a certain point (where “quus” is defined as $x \text{ quus } y = x + y$, if $x, y < 57$; otherwise, $x \text{ quus } y = 5$). Countless other examples could be posited to apply this same idea to any rule-governed activity.

In section 186 Wittgenstein says, “It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage.” This is to say that it is not that a person intuitively grasps a rule and can then proceed indefinitely. Rather, what matters in rule-following is that we make a decision that produces an expected result, but this result does not necessitate that we are following a particular rule. Wittgenstein does not deny the existence of an active mental faculty, of interpretation or intuition.⁶ He only denies mental states as having any explanatory role in determining correct rule-following.⁷

One further question of importance concerning rule-following is how it is possible that a rule, which is finite, is seemingly able to yield an infinite variety of applications. What is it that enables the indefinite application of a finite rule? This question applies to many circumstances, which may seem completely different from each other, where it can be said that we are following a rule. I will give two examples that are from complete opposite ends of the spectrum of rule-following activities: driving on the right side of the road and doing arithmetic. Wittgenstein wants to say that in both these activities what enables the apparent infinite application is the same. He addresses this issue in sections 189-190 of *Philosophical Investigations*. In these paragraphs, he shows that to ask if the steps taken in following a rule are determined by the rule is a mistake. It is not the rule itself, or any grasping thereof, but rather the repetition of an expected action and the education (by either example or authority) that induces such action that creates the apparent infinite application of a rule.⁸ A particular application or use of a rule is correct only in so far as it is used continually in the same way.⁹ Wittgenstein argues that it is habit or custom that produces the appearance that a rule can be continued indefinitely.¹⁰ In doing so, he is arguing against the idea of rules having an objective nature. The rules of arithmetic, just as the rule for driving on the right side of the road, are contingently dependent upon our continuing to act in a certain way that is in agreement within a given community, i.e. a habit or custom—a norm. This is obvious in the case of driving on the right side of the road but much more controversial in regards to doing arithmetic. The reason for this is a difference in degree, not in kind. It is by this fact that the rules of mathematics are much more rigorously defined in formal structure. But, Wittgenstein wants to say, the numeric signs manipulated by mathematicians are of the same nature as the custom of driving on the right side of the road. In both cases, what justifies correct application is agreement with established expectations.

To aid in clarifying what Wittgenstein is saying, I will present a few short quotations from the *Philosophical Investigations* in conjunction with elaborations of my own. These quotations are aiming at an account of how it is that we follow rules, as this applies to language, and what constitutes meaning and understanding.

“A person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom.”¹¹ We learn to act in certain ways by training and regularity of use. What is important is that we act in

accordance with how we are trained and we learn to do so by habit, by regular use. What creates a habit is the repetition of action in accordance with the expectation of a community. “And hence also ‘obeying a rule’ is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule.”¹² Over time and in the context of a society, repetition of action becomes a custom, instituted as communal regularity. Rules and rule-following are only possible in the context of a community because what constitutes correct application is determined by agreement. “The word ‘agreement’ and the word ‘rule’ are *related* to one another, they are cousins.”¹³ The justification for correctly following a rule is found in agreement and practice, by acting in such a way that appears in accordance with what is expected (and such agreement may be reached by either consensus, force or authority). What mental processes occur in an act have no explanatory value in justifying correct rule-following.

It was shown in Wittgenstein’s critique of what constitutes correct rule-following that it is possible to follow any number of rules and still act in accordance with expectation, and this may be exactly what we do.¹⁴ In this sense: “I (we) obey the rule *blindly*,” for it is never known, beyond the recognition of agreement and acceptance of action, whether or not we adhere to some strict, set-in-stone, definitive rule; for there is no such thing.¹⁵ Rules are placeholders for an expected path of action. We “catch on” to what is expected because by continued approval of a specific action given a specific rule, we reach the belief that such an action is right or correct.

Language is a practice with correct and incorrect usage. Therefore, it is a rule-governed behavior. Prior to Wittgenstein, most philosophers believed that meaning is what justifies correct language use and that it is something which stands outside of actual practice as arbiter of that practice. For example, Platonists argue that the meaning of words such as “justice,” “good,” and “truth” are defined by some standard independent of experience, by some form “projected,” as it were, into the world of experience. The philosopher need only discover the form of justice, good or truth in order to determine whether use of these terms is correct or not. But Wittgenstein argues language is a tool, an instrument (like a hammer or money), which enables us to get things done.¹⁶ And it is only in what we do with words, how they are used as tools, that we can get a sense of what they mean. The rules that allow effective use of language have been shown to consist of the customary and habitual nature of practice itself. If meaning is said to be what justifies correct language use, then meaning is grounded in practice.

Wittgenstein calls attempts to locate meaning in some antecedent, prescriptive formulation “entanglement[s] in our rules.”¹⁷ Such attempts mistake the nature of meaning. Wittgenstein wants to show that philosophical problems rest on this mistaken assumption of the nature of meaning. The error of philosophers, says Wittgenstein, is in their belief that some words such as “truth,” “reality,” “justice” and the “good” have a meaning beyond their use in practice.¹⁸ By pointing out this mistake, Wittgenstein wants to cure philosophers of the belief that there are purely philosophical problems. Traditional philosophic questions such as “What is the nature of truth?” or “What is

6. Wittgenstein, § 306-07

7. Wittgenstein, § 209-213

8. Wittgenstein, § 190 “What is the criterion for the way the formula is meant? It is, for example, the kind of way we always use it, the way we are taught to use it.”

9. Wittgenstein, § 189

10. Wittgenstein, § 190, see also §99-100

11. Wittgenstein, § 198.

12. Wittgenstein, § 202.

13. Wittgenstein, § 224.

14. Wittgenstein, § 85, § 185

15. Wittgenstein, § 219.

16. Wittgenstein, § 23, “If you were unable to say the word ‘till’ could be both a verb and a conjunction...you would not be able to manage simple schoolroom exercises.”

17. Wittgenstein, § 125.

18. Wittgenstein, § 81

the good?" etc., cannot be given an answer resting on anything outside of the practices in which these words are used. There is nothing outside of use that can justify correct use. The task of philosophy, says Wittgenstein, should turn to investigating how language is used in everyday life, and in this investigation it should be descriptive, not prescriptive.¹⁹ Philosophers have hitherto been entangled in a misunderstanding of the nature of rules by looking for some prescriptive theory with which to compare the use of language in practice—but there is nothing beyond the practice. If philosophers wish to locate the meaning of language, says Wittgenstein, they can only describe the variety of practices in which language is used.²⁰ "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"²¹

Although, if we accept Wittgenstein's argument, philosophical questions cannot be grounded on the assumption that language acts as a mirror reflecting something outside of experience, it does not follow that philosophy necessarily lacks a ground with which to articulate philosophical problems. What I would like to argue is that Wittgenstein's conclusion regarding the nature of rule-following does not imply an end to philosophical problems, but rather a relocation of their origins. It changes the questions that articulate what constitutes a philosophical problem from pertaining to eternal principles to that of human interaction in the world. It follows from Wittgenstein's account of meaning that philosophy should look at the application and results of language in experience to understand the nature of meaning. It suggests an approach akin to what William James says of pragmatism in calling for an "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."²² What is meant, for example, by "truth" is simply the various results or consequences the use of the word "truth" has in the discourse of life. Again, this suggests that language acts as a tool for getting along in the world.

In viewing the nature of language in such a manner, I see two direct implications for the nature of philosophy. The first implication is derived by conjoining the fact that language functions like a tool and that the role of philosophy is to be descriptive. It follows that philosophy should use language as a descriptive tool to discuss other language uses and practices. But there are many ways a particular practice can be described, and different descriptions will yield different ways of understanding that which is being described. Therefore, philosophy becomes a comparative analysis of different ways of looking at and describing the world. Although these comparative analyses could not seek justification in some antecedent, transcendent principle, they can be justified by what they do, namely, by their ability to offer new ways of looking at the practices of humanity. Here we see a change from asking questions such as what is justice or truth, etc., to asking questions concerning the variety of ways such words are used and in what manner we should describe such uses—resting both kinds of questions on the more fundamental question of "And to what end?" This question, the question of why it is that we would want to compare various uses and consequences of language and seek some descriptive comparisons rather than others, leads to the second implication for philosophy I see in Wittgenstein's conclusions regarding rule-following.

The second implication is based on the fact that the consequences of language use are deciding factors of the social relations between individuals in a society. And some forms of use may hinder

rather than help materialize the ideals of humanity (just as some purported ideals may, in fact, obstruct genuine ideals). As Jurgen Habermas has extensively noted, communication can be distorted. This distortion can occur either haphazardly, which results in confusion, or systematically, with an intention to manipulate.²³ One example of systematic distortion is the use of the word "freedom" as a justification for implementing political policies having nothing to do with freedom. Distorted forms of communication are composed of rules which establish agreements having a different purpose than those made explicit in the agreement. In the description of language use, philosophy has not only the corrective role of clarifying linguistic confusions, but also the normative task of exposing systematically produced distortions of communications. We must ask why certain rules, in both linguistic and other practices, are implemented rather than others. This involves asking what power relations are produced out of the implemented rules. This is less an issue concerning, say, the rules of arithmetic or driving, and more an issue of, for example, what the consequences of particular beliefs do for the individual and society as a whole. This implies an ethical role for the philosopher—to expose the use of language as a means of domination and freedom.

What these two implications suggest is that the problems of philosophy will take the form of questions concerning the empirical consequences of certain linguistic practices and of evaluating in what way language uses serve as functions of society. In doing so, the philosopher will have to make normative claims regarding what uses of language help and hinder humanity's strive towards emancipation from forms of domination, be it by nature or humanity itself. This requires continued philosophical debate regarding the nature of self, freedom, power and how language relates to each of these issues in terms of human nature. We may be unable to compare beliefs and actions to some ideal form outside of experience, but we may look at the actual use of belief and action in practice. And in so doing we can ascertain what interests are being represented and the extent to which these interests represent the interests of all members of a community. Wittgenstein's account of rule-following leads to a humanistic philosophy whose questions must center around the consequences of individual and social action rather than abstract principles. The problems of philosophy are not dissolved, but rather recognized as the problems of humankind. ■

19. Wittgenstein, § 124-28

20. Wittgenstein, § 124

21. Wittgenstein, § 217

22. William James, *Pragmatism*. (New York: Meridian Books, 1955): 47.

23. See, for example, Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (USA: Beacon Press, 1975)